

“I am delighted to release the book, “The Struggle for Police Reforms in India” written by Shri Prakash Singh ji, who had served the country with distinction as a police officer and has been consistently championing the cause of police reforms in the country since his retirement.

Police reforms is a highly important and sensitive subject that has been engaging the attention of successive governments and policymakers for the past several years. Although, there have been attempts to introduce reforms over the years, we all agree that there is so much more to be done. We should now give a renewed thrust to implementing reforms in the police force.

Police reforms as a phrase is an umbrella expression with a number of critical aspects. In brief, police reforms aim to transform the values, culture, policies and practices of police organizations. It deals with interface of the police with the public with a sense of accountability while being transparently sensitive to the rule of law, democratic values and human rights.

I need to hardly emphasise that policing is very important to prevent and detect crime and to maintain law and order. In the wake of the Revolt of 1857, the British enacted the Police Act of 1861 with the prime aim of having an agency which would uphold their imperial interests. Therefore, they raised a police force subservient to their interests, and one which would carry out all their orders, right or wrong, sparing no thought to ethics or morality. During the freedom struggle, the police was mainly used to suppress and oppress our freedom fighters and revolutionaries.

After independence, the role of the police had to be redefined and the police training and orientation had to be radically different.

Over the years following Independence, there were instances where the police force was perceived to be politicised with erosion in the values, objectives and practices of police organisations across the country. There seems to have been some gap in the overall objectives of the force and the way laws were enforced.

Of course, the abuse and misuse of the police force reached its peak during the infamous Emergency when it was used with impunity to suppress human rights and imprison thousands of people, including all the political opponents of the ruling dispensation.

Subsequently, a need was felt for introducing reforms in the police force. This led to the setting up of a National Police Commission in 1977, the first national commission after Independence, marking a key step aiming to change India’s large police organisation. The Commission had then submitted reports with detailed proposals for police reforms. Taken together, these reports constituted the first thorough study and review of the police system in India.

Ranging from registering FIRs and jurisdictional issues, to addressing complaints against police officials especially those related to custodial deaths, rape, torture and injuries, to providing necessary protection from injustice and exploitation to people of weaker sections, to enactment of regulatory laws and having necessary guidelines in place for police forces, to name only a few, the reports of the National Police Commission covered extensive ground in this domain.

We need to work on these suggestions and usher in reforms in our police forces at individual and institutional level.

Sporadic cases of custodial deaths, fake police encounters, corruption, absence of neutrality, disregard of human rights and the rule of law have not only severely dented the image of police, but have made it a daunting task for the common man to visit a police station and lodge a complaint. We have to make policing more people-friendly and the law enforcement processes easily understood and accessible.

Listening to the learned speakers before me, I know there is some disappointment over the non-implementation of Supreme Court's directions on Police Reforms of 2006. However, we have to remember that policing is a state subject and it is the states that have to lead this drive towards police reforms. I hope all the states and the Centre would come together in the true spirit of 'Team India' to implement the much-needed police reforms in the country. The Supreme Court has also given a number of directions showing us the way forward.

I am happy that the Government of India has recently taken a number of initiatives in this regard, including a project to decriminalize minor offences and violations under different laws.

The Government is also in the process of enacting The Criminal Procedure (Identification) Bill, 2022. It seeks to update the Identification of the Prisoners Act, 1920, a legislation passed more than a 100 years ago. While the existing act covers finger prints, foot prints and photographs, the latest Act would also authorize iris and retina scan, handwriting or any other examination referred to, in relevant sections of the Cr.P.C. of convicts.

In April 2016, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi called for making the police a SMART force—standing for a force which is Strict and Sensitive, Modern and Mobile, Alert and Accountable, Reliable and Responsive, Tech-savvy and Trained. I am happy to note that a number of measures have been initiated in this direction.

Today, society is facing a multitude of crimes in new domains such as cybercrimes, economic offences and online frauds which require special investigative expertise due to their sophisticated and often transboundary nature. We need to skill and upgrade our police forces to tackle these 21st century crimes. It is heartening to note that the government is also giving very high priority to greater use of technology in the day-to-day working of police.

I am happy to learn that the Indian Police Foundation has been making efforts to realise the vision of a SMART Indian Police, especially by bringing internal reforms, technology adaptation, digital transformation and training to improve the professional and ethical standards of the police.

Two issues that need to be addressed on a war footing are filling up of the huge number of vacancies in police departments and strengthening the police infrastructure in tune with the requirements of the modern age policing. Housing of police personnel also calls for improvement.

There is also a need for senior police officers to lead by example and ensure that the behaviour of policemen towards the common man is courteous and friendly. A visit to a police station should be a hassle-free experience for a person who goes there seeking help.

Before concluding, let me pay my respects to policemen who died in the line of duty and who laid down their lives battling terrorists, extremists, separatists, secessionists, mafia and all shades of lawless elements in different parts of the country.

I have gone through the book authored by Shri Prakash Singh. It is a remarkable account of what an individual officer can achieve through his single-handed efforts.

After an illustrious career, Shri Singh devoted his post-retirement period to taking up public causes. A petition filed by him in the Supreme Court for structural changes in the police led to a landmark judgment for police reforms in 2006.

As Shri Singh himself said, it is going to be a long haul. I am, however, confident that we will, in course of time, be able to build a people-friendly police force in the country, which would give the highest importance to upholding the rule of law. A progressive, modern India must have a police force which meets the democratic aspirations of the people.

Thank you!

Jai Hind!”
