

A Good Police Story

/ O P SINGH /

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms,' said Muriel Rukeyser, an American writer and political activist. It rings true. Is it not story of compassion and valour in the middle of a frightening pandemic that has got police in India, for a change, public adoration?

Epidemiologists were warning about the imminence of a pandemic for quite some time. Global warming is making the planet more hospitable to virus and bacteria, they said. Clearing forests for land and wild animals for food will bring us in contact with virus and bacteria for which we have no immunity, they foretold. Some of the movie producers went to the extent of enacting last few days of human race wiped out by some virulent pandemic. But only by February 2020, when coronavirus completed its world tour, people acknowledged that men-in-white were right and the threat was real. When it looked like that it had hit Indian shores too, the government reacted first by putting a cap on the size of public gathering. Self-imposed day long curfew followed. Then came the lockdown, bringing life of 1.3 billion people to a grinding halt. Aim was to prevent the infected from spreading the virus.

Anyone who is even remotely aware of police subculture in India, he would know that failure is not only unacceptable but also dishonourable for these folks. Since 1947, it has sacrificed close to 36,000 of its men and officers on the altar of duty. So, the moment government ordered people off-street, it went after loiterers hammer and tongue. Amusing memes and videos of its old schoolmaster tactics flooded the social media. But very soon the game changed. Spooked migrant workers embarked impromptu on long marches to their home states. Overwhelmed, police changed gears and took to relief work – providing shelter, food and succour – for the marooned with gusto. Social media was once again abuzz. This time with heartwarming tales



of its humanitarian work. The Indian prime minister spoke feelingly about police showing compassion in a trying time, leading to favourable change in its popular perception. Truly, a moment of pride for police!

The question is whether this change will outlive the pandemic? The answer is yes, provided police eases its singular obsession with crime fighting and devotes time and resource to crime prevention, problem-solving and citizen care also. Robert Peel, the father of modern policing, had this insight when he founded London Metropolitan Police in 1829. Calling police 'citizens in uniform', he urged them to work in close collaboration with the community and focus on crime prevention. In early twentieth century, Los Angeles police, too, thought on the same line. Worried about dwindling influence of family, schools and religious institutions on youth, its chiefs egged on policemen to act as their guide. But succeeding chiefs, under the influence of detective novels, fast cars, communication gadgets and increasing suburbanisation, devised 'professional crime fighting model'. It focused on three R's - random preventive patrols, rapid response to calls for help and reactive criminal investigation. It reduced the role of citizens in crime prevention

from collaborators to victims in need of help. Increasing motorisation of police patrols isolated it further from the communities. Police interacted with citizens primarily on scenes of crime, not the best of places to start a conversation. Cut off from people, it grew increasingly inflexible and more concerned with its own needs.

India inherited a militaristic and repressive police from its colonial masters. Change in dispensation, however, didn't have much impact on the way police approached its work. It continued to treat people with suspicion. It kept waging a secretive, closed-door war against criminals and subversives. The central government did initiate modernisation of police force scheme in early 1970s. But instead of switching to problem-solving and community policing strategies and bringing people in the crime reduction matrix, it kept investing in the old model of random patrolling, rapid response and reactive investigation. In the process, it perpetuated hero-killing-villain model of crime annihilation.

Perplexing though it is but there are reasons for crime fighting model flourishing despite its below par track record. People get saviour with a name-plate. Young boys and girls joining police get an extended run of

their personal successes - take down handful of goons and get labelled as one of popular movie character by a drama-starved media and hero-hunting readers. It suits even the government of the day as it provides a quick-fix solution to people's anger over crime - sack the failed saviour. Making and unmaking heroes is a favourite middle class game. Every time a crime is committed, it roars in unison - what was the police doing? The promised land of eternal peace when the saviour has killed the last of tormentors and won the battle for people decisively never materialises. Heroes fell by the wayside in heaps but nobody complains about the model. It is a paradox that academia needs to examine at length.

The way forward for police is to save people from victimisation through proactive measures. With criminogenic factors - population size, youthful demography, income inequality, mobility, urbanisation, technological change - aggravating, number of reported crimes will soar in coming years. Police needs to learn from healthcare sector. Hospitalised treatment is a small part of the story of a good health standard. Proactive measures like good diet, active lifestyle and immunisation keep hospitals from getting overrun by sick. A stitch in time is even more important for police. We live in an interconnected and borderless digital world where we are only as safe as our password and the tormentor can just be from anywhere.

It is foregone conclusion that people just don't like being deceived and injured. To render them less vulnerable, police needs to on-board them as allies and encourage them to be resilient. For this, it needs to partner with the other sectors of governance like education, panchayat, social justice, women and child development, public relation and sports and youth affairs. By clinging to crime fighting model and operating in stand alone mode, it risks relegating its story to Tom & Jerry cartoon show.

(The writer is a senior IPS officer in Haryana. The views expressed are his personal.)