

## **Facets of Police Response to the Pandemic related Crisis in India**

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The Indian Police as a frontline agency is striving at multiple levels of service delivery, living up to an ever expanding list of job roles as the health related crisis due to COVID 19 spreads across the country. The enforcement of lockdowns have been one of the most challenging of the responsibilities the police and the other governmental agencies face in this most populated democracy of the world where the fear of the spread of the Pandemic amongst its 1.3 billion population compelled the government to impose the first phase of the country wide lockdowns, initially for three weeks starting from the last week of march 2020.

The Pandemic related job role of the police extends to the utilization of the police domain experience of crowd control, public order management, investigation of criminal acts, deterrence of the law breaking behaviours and intelligence collection of anti-social activities. The acts of not obeying quarantine requirements, defying home stay or hospital stay rules and concealing the contact history of those who catch the infection, have invoked essentially public health measures which require actions related to the domain of police expertise. The activities of enforcing a rule-compliant behaviour and contact tracing of infected people are activities which are related to skill sets in which police has a domain experience. As the lockdowns progressed, the role of the police in the Pandemic extended to another huge area of state responsibility and that is, assistance of the crisis stricken vulnerable, the poor and the helpless who required urgent help in transportation to hospitals, supply of essential commodities, food and relief resources. This even involved in some cases, ferrying of dead bodies and facilitating the last rites, if no one was available to claim the dead body.

The police now stands at the center stage of this health related crisis, placing the police staff next only to the health workers as important agents to render services for mitigating crisis amidst high levels of expectation from them in the wake of widespread fear and insecurity in the society. The role of the police could be explained through the following four major interfaces police is having to the management of the pandemic, namely; Enforcing the lockdown through movement restriction, Assistance to the Vulnerable during the Crisis, Contact Tracing and the Use of

Investigation and Intelligence Skill and the First Responder Interface and Personal Risks involved during the pandemic.

### **Enforcement of the lockdown and maintenance of Public Order**

Imposition of lockdowns is proving to be a difficult job across the globe, as it amounts to bringing lifestyle change mechanism into effect as the police struggles to find out ways and means to implement such changes. The police in India got involved into the enforcement of the lockdown with great sense of passion and duty from the first day of the lockdown on March 24<sup>th</sup>, to restrict the spread of the virus across the country. The movement restrictions become difficult to implement because the social ethic of closely knit community life, along with the street cultures of everyday life expressions, the informal lifestyles and vocations, the climatic adjustment to a hot and humid climate where access to open spaces becomes a basic necessity, the economic compulsions of poor who work on daily waged survival options and the panic of the closing down of essential services lead to large crowds on the streets and public avenues despite orders of the restrictions on the movement and stay at home orders. This brought tremendous pressure of work on the police to effect the restrictions as some started following the rules and others remain defiant. The police soon realized that the entire responsibility of effecting the quarantining measures in India were placed on its shoulders for all practical purposes. Taking measures for imposing the lockdown, police personnel were deployed across the nation in patrolling vans, foot patrols and picket points from the day one of the lockdown. The restrictions in most of India were effected through the Law, by the use of the relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code, making it imperative for the law enforcement to come in the frontline, a challenge which the Indian police took with enthusiasm and a sense of commitment. These pressures sometime resulted in coercive practices witnessed in certain places which brought the police bad press. However a majority of police services achieved success in effecting the lockdown through strict access control and movement restrictions without the use of coercive force.

Public Order and Control functions have been an integral part of the police work in India as the police personnel right from their start of a police carrier get socialized into a policing job role where public order management and crowd control functions are taken in as the most essential

skills in policing. Managing High population densities in limited spaces with priority given to safety and peaceful public order, gets ingrained into police practices. This kind of public order and public movement controls become a challenge for the police for delivering an incident free, stampede free, safe and secure public events, congregations requiring skills of public order management, challenging large crowds, restricting the access and controlling movements of the public within their basic skill set and prioritized job role. The police recruit learns very early in carrier that such situations are unacceptable and are a result of bad policing, which they must avoid. The experience of crowd control and skills in public order management have come to use in the present case of pandemic related lockdown.

The norms of the police duty to control crowds and restrict movements, when required by law to do so in the larger interest of the society; probably worked in case of restrictions and lockdown in case of COVID 19 Pandemic. The 'larger good of the society' for the safe quarantine and bringing compliance from the society played heavily among those street level police functionaries who were seen using physical force or giving punishment's to those who were found disobeying the lockdown orders. However these trends were more visible during the first week of the lockdown. Although this trend was not visible in the entire country and most of the states didn't experience it, but at those places where it happened the press and public criticism brought it down. The police leadership realized the wrong direction this enthusiasm for order and control as a built in mechanism of the police which is used to dealing with criminals, offenders and law breakers had to be checked as the poor and the vulnerable became targets of this kind of police action. Although, denounced, prohibited and penalized by all police leaders, this aberration needs further professional standard settings, behavioral and ethical norm mainstreaming and training inputs.

### **Assistance to the Vulnerable during the Crisis**

The police job role however started experiencing changes due to many other factors at play making the police more oriented for compassion and service while understanding its call for duty and the roles and responsibilities the Pandemic has brought on them. As police started effectively restricting normal life and movements for pushing the lockdown in, the increased presence of police on the streets led to police coming at the interface with misery, vulnerability and poverty much more than any other professional group apart from the health functionaries. This interface

also happened with the poor urban migrant workers who started returning to their rural base on foot and the distress of those who survive on daily wages had no recourse left for food or other survival needs. The interface with this misery was direct and the restricted presence of any other actors on the field lead to the police to take this responsibility to address this vulnerability. By the second week of the lockdown, most of the police forces started some kind of feeding programs for the poor by either becoming a bridge between the community kitchens run by the governments and charities in distribution networks or at many places opening a personal or organizational drive by the police personnel themselves in feeding the poor on the sidelines of their job to effect movement restrictions of the lockdown. The Police has become involved in partnering with other government and non-governmental agencies in relief work as more and more charities and public donations approached the police to distribute or effectively engage with feeding programs or essential supplies dissemination programs. The trust that police would deliver and reach out, became stronger as public started seeing the police interface with the relief work, their service orientation and their connect with those who needed help.

The capacity of the police to empathize and connect with the poor and vulnerable communities has come out very strongly through the police response to the health crisis gripping the country and its combination with the lockdown. Although this capacity has not been covered and commented by commentators on the police in India. The socialization of the Indian police into community orientation and its exposure to the enforcement of laws related to social justice and anti-discrimination has over the years brought a pro poor norm setting in its orientation and practice. This has also to do with a very representative recruitment systems in inducting civilian police constabulary, large proportion of which comes from a rural base representative of various castes and communities along with social and economic disadvantages. This representative nature of the constabulary has the capacity to empathize with vulnerabilities visible during these distressing times as they have a relatable advantage in understanding vulnerabilities due to the social and economic compulsions. This empathetic constabulary gets a favorable direction from a sensitive leadership which has been working tirelessly in improving community orientation and emphasizing law enforcement related to the protection of the vulnerable sections of the society has led to an inclusion of a public service ethic and pro vulnerability norm in police capacity building. This leadership which remains accountable to a human rights friendly constitution, has been

working on mainstreaming a pro-poor ethic through a cautious inclusion of social justice and human security and human rights issues in police training. This also gets supplemented by the content of social justice laws taught to them and the inclusion of soft skills training science past two decades in the police curricula.

### **Use of Police Skill Sets for Public Health Outcomes**

Another important areas of police interface with the Pandemic management is in the utilization of the police skill sets in investigations and intelligence. Police domain experience in investigation and forensics have been in demand for contact tracing; an epidemiological area of practice. The contact tracing requirements to contain the pandemic needs an urgent support during these times of rapid spread of the infective virus as health sector struggles to manage its resources and reach. The police services everywhere in India have proactively contributed to these efforts at contact tracing; to draw backward and forward linkages of the affected people, to decipher the pattern of catching the infection and identifying those coming in contact with the affected persons. The basic investigation skills of the police, coupled with the increased capacity of the Indian police in cybercrime investigation nurtured over last two decades of practice, has proved a valuable resource in investigation of contact tracing of the COVID 19 affected persons. The CDR Analysis related to the Call Detail Records of the mobile phones of the affected people, along with other cyber forensic tools have been used by the police to trace the contacts from affected persons in Bhilwara in Rajasthan, to Dharavi in Mumbai, to Kasargode in Kerala, to Lucknow and Noida in UP, to Tablighi Jamat in Delhi and their spread across the nation, to affected population in Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh, to travelers travelling from abroad to Punjab or to Bangalore or Hyderabad; the list goes on from state to state. It is the cyber police wings, district police setups and other specialized police investigation units which are working along with the health professionals in understanding the travel history and the mingling behaviours of the affected or potentially affected people to decipher contact histories and draw models of spread. The police across India is using their increased capacity to investigate and use cyber forensic tools and digital investigation skills to help contact tracing.

This work doesn't stop at contact tracing by identifying these individuals. The police role extends to physically tracing these individuals and accompanying the health staff to reach out and support them to convince the identified persons to be essentially tested, hospitalized or quarantined as per the health protocols. The kind of stigma attached to the infection creates numerous scenarios where

the health staff along with the front lining police staff has to face the wrath of the identified affected persons and their families who have resorted to violent attacks on the health and police staff. These trends have further created safety needs for frontline staff and importance of police presence during the testing, contact tracing and quarantining protocols and practices. The police skills in convincing emotionally charged mobs, patience in dealing with abusive behaviours and firmly dealing with situations to effect order and compliance are at test. They have to take care of their own safety along with ensuring the safety of the vulnerable health and municipal staff. Most of these incidents have been dealt with patience and without violent retaliation by the police, showing rare sense of grit in the face of adversity and chaos, even at the cost of personal safety. Police on their part has come up to face this challenge with patience, dedication and service orientation, very much visible by number of success stories of police officers contributing to this task in local press, social media and electronic media across the country.

### **First Responder Interface and Personal Risks**

The personal risk faced by the police in managing the crisis has come up through the physical assaults on them and through the exposure to the virus during the course of their exposure to the affected people. These personal risks can be classified in four major patterns; firstly the physical attacks numerous police teams and individuals have faced recently while attempting to enforce movement restrictions. In many instances the police personnel have been attacked by dangerous weapons, hurled abuse and stoned at number of places. The second site of the risk police is facing is during the contact tracing and quarantining efforts where the police has faced wrath of those who do not want to be hospitalized or quarantined as per the health protocol and have retaliated in violent manner.

The third site of the risk is the police interface with the affected people during checking and having an interface with potentially affected people; while accompanying health staff for testing drives, for quarantine order distribution, quarantine related transportation, dealing with defiant people who are affected by the virus but do not obey quarantine rules and other similar first responder duties. The lack of first responder gear and protocols applied to police work and the expectation from their job role increases their interface with the infection. These trends reveal the vulnerability of the police job to the risk of getting affected. This risk is further heightened due to the nature of

police work in teams where social distancing is very difficult to achieve. The fourth avenue of the risk extends to the families of the police personnel involved in the pandemic management. The police personnel's exposure to the virus has increased the vulnerability of the families of police personnel as many police services have reported about the incidence of the spread of the virus among the police family members.

The frontline staff either in the health sector or in the police are great resources for our fight against the pandemic. Realization of their value and worth and making rapid provisions for their safety and motivations is the pressing and urgent needs of the time .These are risk factors which need to be framed into policy of how to maximize police efficiency to get benefit from their role in pandemic management and at the same time keeping the police service and its personnel safe and motivated.

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