National Seminar on 'Policing A Diverse India' (18-19 April 2016)

Concept Note:

India is a diverse and rapidly modernizing society. Significant aspects of socio-cultural diversity in the country intersect on several axes. It goes without saying that while this contributes immensely towards the richness of social interaction; it also creates an environment fraught with possibilities of friction. There do also, nevertheless, exist viable means of reconciliation and conflict resolution within the constitutional framework. For the most part a functional balance has been generally maintained. This is not to deny, however, that there have been several occasions when deeply entrenched social biases have influenced the functioning of the police 17 and other security agencies. The exhibition of such bias by public agencies not only aggravates an already conflictual situation: in a larger sense it essentially diminishes the idea of India as an accommodating, multicultural nation.

According to the 2011 census the population of India stood at 1,210,193,422. This billion plus population of India consists of Indians who practice all the major religions of the world such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism and a unique gift from the Persia of yore – Zoroastrianism. A myriad of indigenous cults, practices and religious beliefs are followed by numerous sects and sub-sects in different parts of the country.

The astonishing linguistic diversity of India is all too evident. Grierson's (1903-28) survey of the Indian languages had listed 179 languages and 544 dialects in India. Having recognized eleven major languages initially, the Constitution of India has been amended four times to add eleven more languages thereby doubling the list of official languages. Furthermore, nearly half a dozen more linguistic groups continue to strive for obtaining a constitutional status for their language.

The 'People of India' project of the Anthropological Survey of India that generated comprehensive data on the socio-cultural diversity of the country between 1985 and 2000 identified 4,694 communities in its forty-three volume work. The project prepared a database of 17,129 entries, of which 8,530 refer to castes/communities and remaining 8,566 relate to sub-groups (3,123), surnames (2,729) and the names of deities, places and titles. It identified 2,619 castes, nearly 4,599 languages and dialects in twelve language families and some twenty-four scripts (Singh 1996). Diversity of kinship, marriage rites and customs, inheritance, modes of living, community life, forms of land tenure, agricultural operations and so on, abound in India.

Policing such a diverse society is a challenge of a quotidian nature. The police need to be aware not only of the different communities inhabiting an area, but also of the interstices and overlapping spaces where inter-community relations are rather sensitive and liable to turn volatile. Communal conflagrations are triggered by minor misunderstandings because of the inability of persons in authority to appreciate crucial elements of diversity around which community identities are constructed. It is important that these contentious social and physical spaces be sensitively identifiedpolice officials made cognizant of the role these play in maintaining communal harmony. All too often, the social bias of the police and security tends to become a matter of heated discussion whenever and wherever communal conflict occurs.

Yet another aspect of India's iniquitous social order is the caste system that insidiously permeates almost every social section and aspect of life. Notwithstanding higher expectations from the police, its professional vulnerability often becomes quite explicit when complaints regarding atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis have to be dealt with. Equally inept is the manner in which matters pertaining to women are handled by a force that has very evidently failed to keep pace with the growing demand to swiftly alter gender relations in a highly globalized world.

Special policing is a major area where not only the police, but also the paramilitary and armed forces are involved in policing. Special policing seeks to address major public security issues arising from terrorism and insurgency. Political movements that gravitate in some measure towards secessionism (for example in some parts, and amongst some social sections, of the north east and Jammu and Kashmir) have thrown up challenges of terrorism and insurgency. As a first line of defence in public security, the police are the first to confront such situations. Indeed, India's diversity creates challenges for the security agencies here as well. North eastern India and Jammu and Kashmir are clearly distinct socio-cultural regions. They also represent rather different dimensions and manifestations of policing problems. Special legal instruments such as the AFSPA are often seen by the state and security forces as indispensable enabling provisions. They have, however, also engendered great distrust and serious contention between the government and its agencies on one hand and the affected people and human rights groups on the other.

The Maoist movement is today, perhaps, the most significant kind of unrest that has found roots in the Indian heartland, and draws strength from the inequities of an economic system that has allowed millions to be left behind. Known in government parlance as Left Wing Extremism (LWE), it is often viewed as a revolutionary movement that shares the characteristics of an insurgency. Given its close connection with rural and tribal people, the police and paramilitary forces dealing with LWE have been repeatedly accused of avoidable brutality even as they occasionally become victims of an escalating circle of violence. The fact that tribals and Dalits constitute the foot-soldiers of the LWE groups makes this movement a matter of considerable concern, and one that deserves urgent and detailed interrogation.

National seminar seeked to address issues pertaining to the enormous challenges confronting organizations tasked with policing such a diverse country as India. Participants were welcomed to work on a topic that they consider to be relevant and important, but within the larger vision of the seminar as summarized in the concept note.

A national seminar on 'Policing A Diverse India' was organized during 18-19 April 2016 at IIAS in collaboration with Himachal Pradesh Police (Raising Day Celebration). Dr. Ajay K. Mehra, Director (Honorary), Centre for Public Affairs, Noida, UP and Mr. Zahur H. Zaidi, Inspector General (Administration), Himachal Pradesh Police, Shimla were the Conveners of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Chetan Singh, Director, IIAS. Dr. Ajay K. Mehra and Mr. Zahur Zaidi, Conveners of the seminar gave introductory remarks.

PARTICIPANTS

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- Professor Ashwani Kumar, Pro-Chancellor, APG University, Shimla

- Dr. Sudhanshu Sarangi, Additional Director General of Police, State Police Headquarters, Odisha

- Ms. Maja Daruwala, Director, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, New Delhi

- Ms. Sreya Dutt, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

- Shri Pradip Phanjoubam, Imphal Free Press, Manipur

- Mr. Sanjay Vashishtha, Centre for Criminology, Faculty of Law, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

- Mr. P. K. H. Tharakan, The kkanatt Parayil Komana, Olavipe, Kerala.

- Mr. Akbar Chawdhary, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

- Mr. Dhruv Pande, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

- Mr. Basant Rath, Police Headquarters, Jammu

- Dr Manisha Sethi, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

- Mr. Pupul Dutta Prasad, National Human Rights Commission, New Delhi

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