

# Licensed to beat, abuse and kill

Police brutality, a colonial legacy, has tenaciously clung on to the mantle of law enforcement personnel

M.P. NATHANAEL

On April 16, Mohammed Rizwan, 19, a resident of Chhajapur village, Uttar Pradesh, ventured out of his home to buy biscuits. He was beaten with rifle butts and *lathis* by the police, while other residents purchased their groceries from the shop. In a battered condition, he managed to reach home. After some home remedies did not work, he was admitted to the local hospital where he died in the wee hours of April 18.

There was nothing unusual in this incident or similar acts of brutality committed by the police as migrant workers, taking an arduous inter-State journey, attempted to return to their respective villages. In several places, elderly people were ruthlessly beaten. The high-handedness shown by the police during the various phases of the ongoing lockdown even led to a petition being filed with the State Human Rights Commission of Tamil Nadu. The petition called for the institution of a grievance redressal mechanism to inquire into the excesses committed by law enforcement personnel.

Taking a serious view of police brutality, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in March issued a set of guidelines for police, in no uncertain terms prohibiting them from using force on persons violating the lockdown regulations. In this regard, the Bengaluru Police later set an example by divesting the policemen of batons and instead engaging in the use of persuasive methods to seriously implement the lockdown.

## Trained to be fierce

A legacy of the British rulers, brutality has been a tenacious characteristic of the Indian police and precious little has been done to eradicate it. Most policemen are made to believe from their very training days that brutality is inherent in the very role to be performed by them, to instil a certain degree of fear in the citizens. This attitude is reinforced by training instructors, who abuse and even manhandle errant trainees. Unfortunately, posting to police training institutions is considered a punishment. Having picked up the traits and

armed with the power to take anyone to task, policemen exercise their unbridled power to beat, abuse and even kill after they have donned the *khakis*.

Application of force is definitely a legal requirement and it is justified by arming policemen with *lathis*, pistols, rifles and other modern weapons. But the mere issue of *lathis* and weapons in no way justifies their indiscriminate use on innocents or even the accused. Prudence demands that these weapons be used in a just manner. Though the subject of human rights is a part of training curriculum in training institutions, no seriousness is attached to it. Those who violate human rights are seldom taken to task. By virtue of being from the same fraternity, most superiors overlook instances of brutality as they consider it an innate demand of the job of policing. True, there are officers who brook no unjustified use of force but their numbers are few.

To make matters worse, seldom are senior officers seen on the spot when their junior-ranking personnel are on duty. Presence of senior officers with their personnel in the field not only will be conducive in building up a spirit of camaraderie with them, it will also serve as an opportunity to brief the personnel and deter them from any wrongdoing.

## Difficult working conditions

On the other hand, it is true that long duty hours tend to test the patience of policemen. Working under tremendous pressure without any respite for relaxation, some of them are constantly on a short fuse and tend to vent their ire on innocent victims.

Large vacancies in police forces are also responsible for this state. Against the UN recommendations of 222 police personnel for a population of one lakh, most States in our country have around 100 personnel only. Proper planning in recruitment, training, in service courses and close supervision by senior officers can go a long way in reducing, if not eradicating, brutality by policemen.

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M.P. Nathanael is a retired Inspector General of Police, CRPF