

## Police officer under stress: Causes and Remedies

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### Abstract

“Animal behavior,” was the unusual language the Supreme Court deployed. The police carry a long and ignominious record of resort to indiscriminate force to quell peaceful protesters, which peaked in the public outrage over the Delhi gang-rape and the death of a journalist in Manipur in 2012. The context for the cryptic remarks was the gruesome lathi-charge on protesting teachers, predominantly women, and the attacks on a woman who sought police intervention in a case of assault. Often, the aims of the political masters the police serve are diametrically opposed to the public interest they are duty-bound to protect in a democracy. Moreover the events such as the Haryana Jat agitation and the mass leave call by the Karnataka Police Mahasangha have brought to light the deficiencies plaguing the Police setup in our country. Challenges faced by the police department like Dysfunctional administrative setup - Their authority has been eroded drastically over the past few years leaving the dept open to excessive political interference. This has hampered their ability to discharge their duties effectively. Frequent Transfers/Postings - A "spoils system" has developed over the past few years which rewards policemen to do the bidding of political executive and penalizes them for non-compliance. This has led to Public Law and Order as a casualty. Cruel working conditions - The Police profession is one of the most challenging and thankless job in the country today. The result is a demotivated force under highly stressful conditions which lead to deteriorating their outputs. In this paper we will discuss the issue in detail.

**Keywords:** Indian police forces, colonial era, police establishment board, police act drafting committee, model police act, National police commissions

### Introduction

#### Objective of study

1. To understand the stress level among police officials
  2. To find out the causes effects and possible remedies to it
- Stress is a common factor in contemporary society, but the way in which it manifests is dependent on a number of different lifestyle factors for each individual. Exam stress is common amongst school and university students, deadline stress can affect employees with targets to meet, and medical professionals can sometimes feel the strain of the intricacy and vital nature of their occupations.

It is commonly perceived that police in India are violent and abusive thanks to violent methods they use to thwart many peaceful protests held by students, activists or opposition parties among many other violence they indulge in. Why do you think this violent culture has persisted and what needs to be done to make police more humane? The reason can be explored from two sides: police side and people side.

Police side: Effect of colonial taste of power where police was used for suppression of masses and hence an inbuilt fear of police was formed in people's mind. No serious efforts have been taken to end this mistrust. Many police reform commission have been formed but behavioral changes have been hard to come by. Other reasons include political use of police and ideological biasness of policemen (casteistic, communal, religious fundamentalists). Later is an individual level reason which is very hard to be identified and hence to be addressed.

People side: Compare to western countries people in our country are not very aware about their rights, especially legal and constitutional rights. Hence police is fearless of common men. Recently with RTI and civil society activism some

changes are visible at this front.

It can be argued that the highest levels of stress are reserved for those people who assume the role of authority figures, in this case members of the police force. When you factor in the dangers that some police officers face, together with the administrative burden and the pressures of protecting the public, it is easy to see how stress has become a common problem.

Police is an exclusive subject under the State List (List II, Schedule 7 of the Indian Constitution). States can enact any law on the subject of police. But most of the states are following the archaic Indian Police Act 1861 with a few modifications. Police have become the 'subjects' of Parliamentarians and legislators – with a high degree of politicization and allegiance towards ruling party. Starting from the second Police Commission in 1902 headed by A.H.L. Fraser, there have been many commissions and committees formed to look into reforming the police in India. Prominent among them are: Gore Committee on Police Training, the National Police Commission, The Ribeiro Committee on Police Reforms, The Padmanabhaiah Committee on Police Reforms (summary), Prakash Singh Vs Union of India – SC directives for Police Reforms and Soli Sorabjee Committee.

The 22 September, 2006 verdict of the Supreme Court in the *Prakash Singh vs Union of India* case was the landmark in the fight for police reforms in India. Unfortunately, even the directions of SC have not been implemented by the states.

Police reforms is one of the most sought after demand which has been mostly ignored by our political masters due to their narrow objective of ruling and not governing the nation. Our police system works according to the laws laid down under

the Police Act, 1861 enacted by colonial regime to suppress any dissidence against the Raj. Thereby, the laws which are laid under it gives a wide ranging power (without accountability) to the authority to come down high handed on anything which do not toe their drawn line. Ten years of Prakash Singh signifies the valiant efforts of some within the police and amongst civil society to make improvements even if they are whistling in the wind. It shows also how strong the police-power connection is and how difficult it is to break a captive police from its enslavement to political clout. It proves how little individual safety — of women, children, the vulnerable, the minority, the migrant, the dissenter, “the other” — really matters to governments, whatever the party. It signals how unwilling they are to take the smallest steps to change the police from a force designed to tamp down the public to the public service our democracy deserves.

### **Cases of Police under siege?**

In Delhi, police men are being killed time and again by criminals. Also, they are sometimes victims of public rage. It is observed that there is no public outrage when a police officer is killed. This indifference or aversion of public toward police is result of its misuse by political establishment. Police has been reduced to a mere instrument in hands of politicians to further their ends. In last few years there has been a spate of protests and peaceful civil uprising against corruption and crime, more particularly in Delhi. In all these police was used by government to skirt their inefficiencies. This has tarnished image of police further. Further, political bosses retain tight control over the police force and selected personnel, in order to receive benefits and escape the clutches of law. They transfer and appoint personnel at their whims and fancies, which suits their own needs, rather than those of public.

In Delhi, currently 70000 policemen are on duty, out of which half are on VIP duties. There is shortfall of atleast 23000 personnel. There are 130 police stations out of which many are operating in tents or rented houses.

Policing and maintenance of law and order are primary, but not sole, responsibility of Police department. Civil authorities have to ensure proper infrastructure (like street lightning) is in place, due to which crime is curtailed. Further, society has to involve with police and inform about suspicious developments in their surroundings. In fact, in Kerala, there is system of community policing under which a small group of police officials (out of them one is women) pay regular house visits to listen to their grievances and ideas.

In India, there is overall low respect for police unlike that in developed countries like England and Japan. Corrupt image of police results in fear and resentment in public which in turn results non-cooperation. Public doesn't understand that most limitations on working of Police is imposed by politicians they elect. Indirectly, they are responsible for corruption and inefficiency of police department. But their bad behavior with police, results in disaffection of police with people. So to control public, they use disproportionate force, which further alienate people. This cycle goes on.

There is overall inefficiency in Criminal Justice System and Police is just one part of this system. Main party responsible for this mess is Judiciary's lethargic performance. Even for minor cases there takes place hundreds of hearings, which

unnecessarily increase workload of the police. In order to reform police, reforming judiciary is prerequisite. There are internal appraisal systems in police department like 'monthly police report' under which is submitted to senior authority. This report should be made public so as to better reflect performance of police. Further, there is need to boost of morale of police men. Last year, AAP gave 1 crore compensation to family of a killed police officer, which was a commendable step. Some time there are naïve allegations at Police for things like fake encounter. These should be only bases on concrete proofs. Under 2006 Supreme Court orders (under Parkash Singh Case) states were, among many things, directed to form a 'State Security Committee' under Chief Minister. Delhi have such committee but it is dormant.

### **Sources of Police Stress**

#### **Constant exposure to people suffering distress and pain**

The very nature of a police officer's job is to become deeply involved in the lives of those who have either committed a crime or been the victim of a crime. On both ends of this spectrum it is likely that the individuals involved are suffering in one way or another. Spending most of the day working with people who are experiencing high levels of distress is bound to affect one's own emotional state. The unfortunate fact is that police officers spend an above average amount of time around pain, suffering and sadness.

#### **Threats to an officer's safety or health**

Many police officers, and particularly those working in poorer neighborhoods or those with higher crime rates, experience physical danger on an almost daily basis. The constant possibility of being injured or worse by criminals is something that can weigh heavily on the mind of a police officer and cause a great deal of stress.

#### **The responsibility of protecting the lives of citizens**

Whilst police officers may seem like bastions of strength and stability to members of the public, the responsibility of being our first line of defense is not one that can be taken lightly. The stress of this responsibility can sometimes amount to too much for some members of the police force. Wanting to protect people is a noble goal, but shouldering that responsibility can be a source of great strain to some.

#### **Having to be in control of emotions even when provoked**

Stoicism and the ability not to rise to provocation are just two of the many emotional skills that police officers must employ on a regular basis. Often coming into contact with hostile and inflammatory individuals, police officers have to repress and restrain a number of natural emotional responses that might occur in these situations. The continual effort to smother these emotional responses can be very stressful in the long term.

#### **The inconclusive nature of police work**

Whilst many investigations are opened and closed in a satisfying manner, an unfortunate number of police cases are left unfinished or with insufficient evidence to continue. This can be a cause of great disappointment to the officers that have put so many working hours into a particular case, and many law enforcement officials find it difficult to move on from emotional cases.

### The quickly alternative pace of the job

A large portion of police work revolves around paperwork and desk protocol, but police officers must also be alert and ready to enter into dangerous scenarios at just a moment's notice. These switches from mundane desk work to faster paced police work never fully allow their minds to be at rest, and have been highlighted as a source of stress for police officers.

### The responsibility of owning a firearm or weapon

The responsibility of owning a gun or other harmful weapon can be something that weighs heavily on the minds of active police officers. It is not uncommon for police officers experiencing high levels of stress to cite the thought of keeping a weapon within their family home as a contributing factor. The constant worry that their children might find and misuse it is often the primary concern. Some officers have also remarked that they feel bouts of anxiety and stress when without their firearms, having grown to depend on the security that having a weapon close by can give them.

### The Prevalence of Stress among Police

After going through many of the sources of stress for law enforcement officers, what do we know about the actual prevalence of stress in their careers?

There has been an increasing level of awareness in the industry regarding the stress that officers are required to manage. A number of detailed studies have helped to quantify the prevalence of police officer stress issues. A recent study entitled 'Stress in Police Officers: A Study of the Origins, Prevalence and Severity of stress-related symptoms within a County Police Force' reached a number of important conclusions:

- Of all of the police officers that responded to the survey, a total of 41% scored highly in the detection of stress and stress factors with regards to their jobs.
- The key contributing factors that were repeatedly cited were not actually factors specific to the act of policing like danger or self imposed responsibility complexes. Instead, survey-takers offered reasons including lack of organization, lack of communication and consultation, inadequate support when faced with a large workload, and the demands of such work overflowing in to one's home life as main contributors to feelings of stress.
- Those survey-takers who scored highly when responding to occupational stressors, also scored equally as high on the personal stressor questions. This suggests that those who were suffering from stress at work are generally more stress-prone. However, this does not fully account for the incredibly high stress levels seen among police officers.
- The survey found a significant association between poor mental health, high levels of stress and gender. It was found that females working within the police force were far more likely to score highly on stress indicators than their male counterparts. This can be linked back to the issue of female police officers and the question of whether they are put under more stress when acting as an authority figure. This is particularly important in what is still a relatively patriarchal work environment.

### Symptoms of Police Stress

Working in an occupation that poses such a high risk of stress-related problems, individuals that work in the police force can show a number of varied and differing physical symptoms, as well as behavioral changes. These symptoms include but are not limited to:

1. **Fatigue:** The profession of a police officer can often involve long hours. This will naturally cause tiredness, but fatigue is also one of the classic signs of a stress-related condition. When the mind experiences something it deems to be a stressful event, the body enters into a 'fight or flight' response. This involves the release of adrenaline and cortisol, an increase in heart rate, plus changes in muscle tension and blood vessel constriction. Over time, repeated stressful situations can lead to adrenal exhaustion and long term fatigue.
2. **Insomnia and Restlessness:** The continue effects of stress on the body can cause changes to sleeping patterns. As the body continually reacts to stressful situations, the natural daily cortisol cycle can be disrupted. In a job that requires as much alertness and concentration as that of a police officer, getting satisfactory rest is vital for both physical and emotional well-being. Restlessness and insomnia can develop into a vicious cycle, leaving an individual never fully rested and never able to relax and recharge.
3. **Lowered sex drive:** A loss of libido and sexual desire is often be linked to periods of chronic stress, and the private lives of police officers can sometimes suffer as a result. Continuous exposure to stressful situations can lead to a long term lowering in sex hormone levels.
4. **Drinking too much:** It is a cultural tendency and tradition to have a glass of wine or beer at the end of the working day to help you unwind and relax. In stressful jobs like law enforcement, this can quickly develop into a more serious habit. An unintended dependence on alcohol can only further damage an individual's wellbeing.

### Problems faced by women in police force

A recent study undertaken by the Centre for Police Research (CPR), Pune, shows women in police do not find the police department to be gender-friendly. The study, which spanned urban and rural police stations of Maharashtra, analysed the responses of women police officers on four counts — work environment, gender respect, gender equality, and cooperation. Women police officers have predictably lamented the lack of basic facilities like toilets, changing rooms and restrooms in police stations. They have mentioned the lack of respect from male colleagues as a strong demotivator. Being assigned only specific duties has limited their horizons and hindered their professional growth. But the police station culture is yet to appreciate this need for growth and is comfortable in assigning them "soft" postings and routine tasks like reception desks, wireless or computer duties.

1. **Low induction-rate:** Women form only 6% of workforce compelling them to accept all professional biasness
2. **Work-profile:** Women are generally limited to desk-jobs, affecting their career advancement
3. **Lack of facilities:** Lack of basic infrastructure like

toilets, changing rooms etc. in police stations

4. **Segregating policies:** All-women police stations, setup by some States are criticized for creating gender-insensitivities and segregation
5. **Police-reforms:** Slow progress in implementing guidelines such as mandatory induction of 30% in police force as per Home Ministry directive, SC directive in Prakash Singh vs UoI Case etc.

### Stress Management for Police Officers

Stress is by no means permanent, and it can be managed or reduced through a number of effective methods. Stress can be tackled both on a personal level and at an organizational level.

### Personal Stress Management

1. Try to avoid using alcohol, nicotine and caffeine as coping mechanisms in an attempt to ease the stress. The effects that these substances have on the body will not help to reduce the symptoms but ultimately contribute to them.
2. Engaging in an all-round healthier lifestyle is a good way to begin reducing stress. A better diet and more exercise will improve the resilience of your body and mind to stressful situations.
3. Do not be afraid to say no. A high pressure job such law enforcement often involves employees taking on an even higher workload than their brief states. The fear of letting somebody down or disappointing can lead to people taking on way too much all at once. Knowing your limits and not being afraid to turn down potentially stress-inducing extra tasks is vital to maintaining a healthy balance.
4. Pick your battles. Try to avoid any unnecessary conflict both at home and in the work environment. Rather than trying to win unwinnable arguments, seek a solution that is amiable for both parties and move on with your day. Wasting precious energy on trivial matters is bound to cause unneeded stress.

### Organizational Stress Management

1. A better allocation of financial resources within the police department can often go a long way to easing the working stresses of some employees. More funding in deprived sectors can ease workloads and make the working environment a more relaxed and enjoyable place to be, therefore reducing stress levels.
2. Department leaders should produce a written plan detailing their efforts to manage workplace stress. This plan, even if all changes are not effected immediately, will show stressed officers that improvements in their work environment are forthcoming.
3. Upgrading the resources and facilities of police training academies will help to ease new recruits into the real world of policing. A sense of continuity and familiarity will help to make the transition as easy and seamless as possible, meaning that stress levels for the new generation of police officers will be lower from day one.
4. Employ a “person-job-fit-analysis” for each new recruit that will match each officer’s capabilities with the specific requirements of jobs within the department. Not all officers have the same mentality and personality.

Finding a post that suits their personality will help to eradicate any work-based stress that they may encounter.

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