

Of attitudes and approaches



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I think there is a consensus that one of the main culprits behind the ills of our society is the police system and the police mentality as perceived by the common man. The police are viewed as callous, corrupt, inefficient and cruel. They are feared, hated and held responsible for all the evils in society - for sheltering criminals, victimising complainants and serving as robotic agents of the government in power. Sometimes one gets completely exasperated with the situation as none of the various governments and their commissions has succeeded in changing the situation and obtaining some relief for the people or transform the police into a confident and intelligent force devoted to protect the rights of the citizens while promulgating the writ of the land. One strongly believes that law abiding, patriotic and conscientious personnel will rehabilitate the police's image among the people and will help them improve life and create a civilised society.

A sad event last week confirmed my belief in the power of humane factor in administration. An illustrious police officer, Khawaja Masroor Hussain died at Islamabad last week at the age of 81. He had been Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Inspector General of Police, and had retired honourably after a long career in the Police Service of Pakistan. His family and relations are grieved because they will never see him again. But his friends, colleagues, and the people mourned his death in memory of his honesty, simplicity, nobility and his approachability to all. He did not like to be an elitist; he was closer to the common people in spite of his educational background, taste for reading widely, and maintenance of privacy in personal matters. I met several people after his death. There was not a single person who expressed a negative opinion about him or narrated a degrading episode. It is remarkable in a city like Islamabad where competition is keen, intrigue is common and character assassination is accepted as routine. I attribute his positive attitude to the recognition of his ability in work, sense of duty, personal qualities, and behaviour towards others. This should be an example to emulate for police personnel and for that matter, all public servants. There is a serious flaw in our approach to administrative methods and practices for maintenance of law and order, and suppression of crime. What is being taught in the training academies and schools are the guidelines and practices of the colonial era when a foreign government was suppressing an

indigenous population to maintain its stranglehold. The foreign powers are gone. The once subjugated populations now elect the government. But thinking remains un-altered. The trainers and the norms created and left by colonial powers have spawned new generations of officials with the same colonial attitude of treating the common man as a serf and a menial and raising the elite to a pedestal. This has kept intact the chasm between police and the people.

The situation has been compounded by low salaries of the police while everybody around them has been minting money through trade, industry, modern agriculture, transport etc. Other government officials must be feeling the same frustration; the police, being in a more imposing situation, were in a better position to force sharing the windfall. And share they did in a big way. Nobody could grudge the aspiration to grow rich. But civil service is not the occupation to fulfil this desire. This made the public officials corrupt. Police with their coercive powers and greater knowledge of under-cover moneymaking operations became more corrupt, leaving their peers in other services way behind them.

It should be wrong to say that the police is not corrupt in other countries or that it was not corrupt during the British era in this country. The difference is of degree and the number of officials involved, and the speed with which the corrupt officials were apprehended. Today, we have reached a point that every policeman or woman considers it their duty to defend the offending police official, since each one of them is apprehensive of being caught at some stage, needing assistance of their colleagues. Until about two decades after independence, corrupt police officials were known and generally isolated. Honest officers took pride in their uprightness and courage. So were most other civil servants. But at the winds of commercialism and the spirit of profit-making rose the whole edifice of honesty and clean living was swept away - with police and the revenue collecting departments in the lead. Other compartments of life also fell victim to the temp-

tation of getting rich and the power that comes with that.

Still more corruption and high-handedness were fanned by the feudal politicians. Feudals and other big landlords were the creation or protege of the autocratic powers. With the advent of independence they walked into corridors of power unchecked and unhindered as they had cast their vote in line with the party that came into power. The others had to re-align their loyalties and get elected to the legislative bodies. To that end, they sought the assistance of the local police. Once in power, they returned the favour. Other functionaries joined in and the culture of Thana-Kutchery was born. Those in trouble with the law approached the local landlord who put a word with the local police boss. Once the complaint is resolved, the client falls into the coterie of the loyal yes men. Any time an innocent man defied the local boss, he would be handed over to the police for 'correction' and 'education'. This circle of events gave tremendous boost to the freedom of police to twist law for the benefit of the elite, and become partners in crime. The recent spate of the arrest of past and present police personnel for abetment in criminal activities astonishes one due to the level of intensity and sweep and is reflective of the depth of the malaise.

The most recent evidence of the lust for money and wandering has emerged in the form of service with the United Nations, at various trouble spots. One does not see anything wrong with this pursuit, especially, when all others are trying to do the same. The sad part is the scramble for these positions and the wire-pulling and leg-pulling being employed. Similar tactics are used for posts at locations within the country considered highly lucrative due to the opportunities for making illicit money.

If we expect police to perform well, we should provide them with a decent living, facilities for their families, and an insurance cover. After these conditions have been met, there will have to be programmes to change their attitudes. This will require re-education and training. Still, more people will have to be educated to change their attitudes towards abiding of the law, and the change in their perception of the police. One invites police intervention by breaking the law. So one should live within their rights and fulfil their obligations to others. One should also remember that respect is reciprocated by respect. Both the police and the citizens may like to ponder over that!