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Time to improve relations between police & minorities

Shashi Tharoor, Dec 7, 2008, 03.09am IST

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As the country copes with the aftermath of the horrors of Mumbai, the hard work of reconstruction, of rebuilding — of reimagining our country—has begun. One genuine cause of satisfaction must be that there was no demonization of our Muslim minority, which the terrorists must have hoped to provoke. The victims of the killers were from every faith, and Indians of every religion have stood united in their anger and determination.

And yet it was just the weekend before the attacks that the PM had urged senior police officers not to widen "the fault lines in our society" and to act to "restore the faith of the people— especially those belonging to religious and ethnic minorities and the weaker sections — in the impartiality and effectiveness of the police."

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His words reflected a real conundrum: the general public feels it is not adequately protected against the random violence of terrorists, but every pro-active policing effort seriously alienates India's largest minority community.

Young Muslim men have been picked up and brutalized for no reason other than their demographic profile, and yet the sneering triumphalism of the terrorists' Islamist propaganda seems to leave the authorities little choice. But if the efforts to stamp out the sources of terror merely incite the sullen resentment within which terrorism breeds, every crackdown will prove counter-productive. There has to be a better way.

And there is. Indian dealt effectively with Sikh extremism by the skilful use of the talents of a pluralist state. The Khalistanis never succeeded in making their cause one of the Sikh community versus the Indian state.

Instead, we saw the majority of Sikhs stay loyal to their country, as a largely Sikh police force, led by a charismatic Sikh officer, K.P.S. Gill, ably combated the minority of Sikh terrorists, while the Indian state orchestrated a democratic political process which brought elected Sikh leaders to power in Punjab. There is absolutely no reason why a similar approach cannot work with the Muslim community, the overwhelming majority of whom are proud and loyal Indians. To do so we must start by getting more Muslims into the security forces.

There are well-known historical and sociological reasons that explain why Muslims are under-represented in the country's police forces, the Central Reserve Police and crucial gendarmeries like UP's Provincial Armed Constabulary. Obviously, we cannot infuse a significant number of Muslims into these forces overnight.

But it's obvious that we need to enhance the recruitment and retention of minorities in the police forces and to conduct police outreach to minority communities. Such an approach would simultaneously reduce a major source of grievance in the Muslim community, increase the trust between the police and the people they are policing, and dramatically improve our own intelligence about currents within a community whose vulnerability to the blandishments of terror is high.

We can learn some lessons from how other democracies have dealt with similar concerns. Despite the Sachar Commission report, few in India want to see an additional layer of reservations for minorities in state institutions. But Britain, which abjures quotas altogether, follows a policy of 'positive action' to help under-represented groups compete more effectively in the selection process for police jobs, and conducts extensive outreach work through

mosques, black churches and community groups.

We in India also need to recognize that if we want under-represented Muslims to compete effectively for police jobs, they need to feel the police is part of them, rather than an external entity. It's clear we need to: actively solicit applications from minorities for the police at all levels (including the Provincial Armed Constabulary and the Central Reserve Police); offer special catch-up courses open only to members of the minority communities that will prepare them for the entrance examinations; at the moment few feel qualified to take the exams, and fewer still pass; and require police officers to work with community organizations, mosques and madrasas to encourage minorities to apply.

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In other words, instead of more "reservations", with the resentment that breeds, let us make it easier for minorities to join the police. But let's not stop with recruitment: we also need to focus on the retention and progression of minority officers. Unless young people from minorities see that the police service offers real career opportunities and a good quality of life in the workplace, they will not overcome their negative perceptions.

The fact that, in many Western countries, there are several officers from the visible minorities now at senior officer rank, sends a powerful message to these communities. In India, the promotion of minority police personnel at senior and middle levels and using them as visible symbols of the police force would constitute a powerful model to the minority community.

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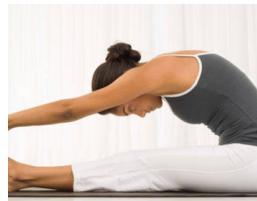
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