**Mafia’s Knock on Indian Democracy**

****Rising incidence of heinous crimes like extortion and gang rapes on high ways and communal assaults even in villages and the incapacity of the state to punish or even book dastardly killers in states like Uttar Pradesh have sent shock waves across the nation. While victims of Siwan, Kunda and Badaun await justice, gangsters like Shahabuddin and Raja Bhaiya have not only made a mockery of law but also developed enough clout to win elections and even threaten journalists, judges and chief ministers themselves.

No doubt gangsters and mafia lords exist outside India too. In the advanced west also, where huge profits are available in the flesh trade, drug peddling, money laundering and arms and human trafficking, thousands are organised in criminal syndicates ready to kill or maim for profit. But the extent to which hardened criminals have found entry in our legislatures, ministries and big business and accumulated power, prestige and immunity from law is a matter of grave concern. During the first decades after independence, criminals could not even stand in elections. Today, in some states, they have graduated from aiding politicians to controlling them. Honest officers are transferred, promoted and sometimes murdered at their instance; their ‘businesses’ run along corporate lines and whole industries such as real estate, bootlegging and entertainment channels have been swamped by their henchmen who can run kidnapping and extortion rackets even from jails. At times, enemy states also use them for unleashing terror, riots and disaffection in the country.

But this is not the whole story of growing crime in India. The cancer has struck the very core of society. Extortion and molestation are being reported even from places of worship, vice chancellors of some universities now engage musclemen to maintain ‘order’ on campuses, prostitution rackets have moved beyond brothels and hotels to housing societies and, most worryingly, we as citizens have watched the rot spread or found amusement in films and entertainment flooded with the underworld’s protégé and lingo. Further, the number of youngsters from affluent families resorting to kidnapping and carjacking just for ‘fun’ and white collar criminals supplying fake medicines, therapies and university degrees without inviting opprobrium from kith and kin indicates pervasive criminalization in an increasingly desensitized society. India’s countryside was afflicted with caste and feudal oppression for centuries but was relatively free from brazen eve-teasing and gang rapes by teenagers. This is no longer the case as shocking incidents of such crimes, forced withdrawal of girls from schools and use of carcinogenic colors and chemicals over farm produce are being reported with alarming frequency now.

It is notable that heightened crime hurts not only its immediate targets but also the state, economy, culture and, most tragically, people’s morale and psyche. On the surface, a functioning democracy like India may appear to have contained threats from parallel administrations being run by gangsters. In a major crisis like a disastrous war or prolonged unrest, however, such unattended fault-lines may explode and bring down the entire social order as seen in countries like Russia and China in the early 20th century and Syria and Iraq more recently. Democracies, we need to remember, have also been destroyed by dictators as well as warlords who presented themselves as champions of ethnic groups and even of the working poor initially.

Despite such threats mounting on our skyline, social scientists in India have rarely given salience to the study of organized crime and its implications for our polity and society. The likely reason for this neglect could be the assumption that crime and lawlessness are an ‘epiphenomena’ that would be addressed automatically once we contain societal contradictions such as sharpening inequities, the class character of our state and the capitalist world order.

The geography of crime, however, raises doubts against such assumptions. Japan and Singapore are highly unequal societies with minimum crime while egalitarian Yugoslavia turned out to be one of the worst centres of hatred and war crimes in recent times. Within India, economic contrasts as well as feudal, caste and gender inequities are starker in states like Haryana and Rajasthan while many more dastardly crimes are being reported from states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where lower caste mobilisaton has been stronger and more successful. In this light, the role of poor governance in regions suffused with identity politics and the sway of ruling party cadres over police and the lower judiciary need to be given greater attention than distant goals of complete equality or abolition of private property by our scholars.

A concrete plan of action against registered and unregistered crime in this light can yield good results. Indeed, inbuilt checks in our constitution, the fundamentally pluralist character of our people, the record of some of our central institutions including the election commission and higher judiciary and the presence of a minority of honest officers as well as politicians and activists are keeping the system going. But, if the rot is to be stemmed firmly, then a range of other reforms would be needed. Several enquiry commissions have listed pertinent measures in this regard. These include laws to debar history sheeters from elections, improved prosecution with stricter conditions for bail and parole in heinous cases, foolproof protection to witnesses and whistleblowers and proper honours and safety cover for samaritans helping the law against murderous gangs as also, prison reforms to turn jails into reformatories rather than universities of crime.

Along with this, greater autonomy for honest officers and transparency in their transfers, promotion and appointments, digitisation of all police records and property transactions and censorial checks on glorification of crime and brutality in films and TV serials could also help in arresting the tide of rising crime today. Lastly, impartial reporting of politicians’ and parties’ links with criminals, irrespective of their ‘socialist’, ‘secular’ or ‘nationalist’ masks, by media channels would be of critical help in securing the first entitlement that every citizen looks for namely, a safe and violence free environment to work and plan futures.

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