

THE AUDACITY OF ORDER

Policing a Young, Connected India

O. P. SINGH

Indian Police Service (1992-2025)

The 41st Director General of Police, Haryana

FREE SAMPLER

The opening chapters

*For the men and women in khaki, who hold the compact every day;
and for the citizen who must be able to trust them.*

. . .

*“The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not
the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.”*

— attributed to Robert Peel, Principles of Law Enforcement, 1829

THE LETTER

India to Its Police

*Written for a newspaper on the seventy-sixth Independence Day, in the
voice of the Republic; reproduced as it appeared.*

My Dear Indian Police,

As I stand tall on the world stage, marking seventy-six glorious years since the dawn of my independence, I find myself engulfed in a vortex of emotions. Gratitude, pride, hope and ambition fill my heart as I think of the journey I have traversed and the eternity that lies ahead. Each brick in my foundation owes its strength to millions and millions of my people who dedicated themselves to my well-being and upkeep. And among these countless heroes, you — my valiant police force — shine bright as the sentinels who’ve braved many a storm to keep my flag flying high. What can testify your sacrifice more than the aching fact that over thirty-five thousand of your brave brothers and sisters have since my independence laid down their lives, protecting me from the enemies of peace and order!

We all know that change is the only constant. As we stand at the crossroads of tradition and transformation, it is incumbent upon us to

shape a future that is in line with the aspirations of our people. The landscape of internal security today is vastly different from what it was even a decade ago. The nature of challenges, the volatility of emotions and the speed of information flow have all undergone quantum shifts.

In such times, you need to temper your ‘force’ and ‘authority’ with ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’.

While your bravery remains unquestioned, what I need now is a force that is adept at reading the undercurrents, one that can gauge the mood of a situation and act with discernment. This is not to diminish the importance of authority but to underscore the imperative of using force timely, sparingly and judiciously. By equipping yourselves with nuanced training in de-escalation, mediation and conflict resolution, you can transition from being mere law enforcers to cherished, proactive guardians of peace. Remember that in the intricacies of every situation lies an opportunity — an opportunity to showcase the depth of your understanding and the extent of your training.

Just as the rivers of Ganga, Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati converge in Prayagraj, tradition and technology must converge in my police force. We live in an era where the world is just a click away, where information travels faster than thought. As I have taken strides in space exploration, IT and digital innovations, my vision for you is as futuristic. Advanced surveillance systems, AI-driven investigative tools and efficient communication networks can drastically amplify your capabilities to keep order and detect crime. Body-worn cameras can serve as unbiased witnesses, ensuring transparency in your engagements. Sophisticated databases can help you connect the dots faster, ensuring swift justice.

These tools can revolutionise your operations, making them sharper, faster, and more attuned to today’s challenges.

However, with great power comes great responsibility. The ethical implications of technology are profound. Please ensure that while harnessing the power of technology, you don't lose sight of the rights and privacy of citizens you have taken oath to serve.

At the core of our culture, our values and our ethos lies an unwavering emphasis on humanity. The uniform you don is a symbol of duty but it must also be a beacon of empathy and understanding. Every interaction, be it in the bustling malls of Gurugram or the tranquil terrains of Meghalaya, must be grounded in respect and compassion. Sensitivity training, cultural immersion programs and ethical decision-making modules should be the cornerstone of your evolution. By deeply embedding these values, you can transition from just 'a police' to 'our police' — a force that truly cares for the people it serves.

As I embark on the journey towards my centennial, my dream is not just of economic prosperity or global acclaim. I dream of a harmonious homeland — a land where every citizen sleeps with the assurance of safety and wakes up with the guarantee of justice. And in this dream, you — my dear Indian police — play a pivotal role.

In times ahead, I envision for myself a force that is revered not just for its might but also its insight, not just for its authority but its empathy, not just for its legacy but its adaptability. Let us blend the wisdom of the past with the knowledge of the present to fulfil the promise of the future. Let us set forth on a path where your action is guided by tactics, your operation by technology and your heart by compassion.

With everlasting gratitude and boundless hope,

India

Prologue

The Answer

THE LETTER YOU HAVE JUST READ was written for a newspaper, on the seventy-sixth anniversary of independence. I wrote it myself, in the only voice that seemed equal to the occasion — the Republic's own. The conceit was borrowed; the asking was real. India was speaking to its police: be tactical, be techsavvy, be compassionate; temper force with judgment; master the new tools without losing the oath; become not merely a police, but our police. A letter like that deserves more than a salute in reply. It deserves an honest answer.

This book is that answer, written from inside the uniform. It begins with the part of the truth no news cycle will sell you: we are safer than the headlines suggest. The ordinary Indian day — a million strangers transacting, jostling and dispersing unharmed — succeeds at a rate no bulletin reports, and the chapters that follow will put numbers to it. But reassurance alone would be a dishonest answer. The world's order is rearranging itself; technology is handing citizen and criminal alike powers that did not exist a decade ago; and demography is bringing the largest young generation in history to its restless prime. Perspective without urgency is complacency; urgency without perspective is panic. What India needs — and what these pages attempt — is both at once, from a practitioner who has carried the consequences of getting it wrong.

I came to that uniform from a long way off — from a family and a place that gave me little but the conviction, pressed on me by my mother, that a person who backs himself and works harder than is asked can make his own road. The service confirmed it and complicated it. It showed me the state at its best and its worst, often in the same week. It taught me that the distance between order and disorder is frequently one human being making one decision well — and that the decision is rarely the dramatic one the films promise.

What I learned over thirty-three years is the substance of this book. I have tried to keep faith with two audiences who rarely read the same pages: the colleague who will recognise these rooms, and the citizen who has only ever seen them from the other side of the counter. To both, the same opening claim — that the order they take for granted is the most audacious thing their society does. This is how it is held, and how, in a changing India, it must now be held differently.

Introduction

The Argument

THIS IS A BOOK about order — the least glamorous and most important thing a state can provide. We notice it only when it fails, and we have therefore built a politics, a media and a folklore around its failures, and almost nothing around the immense, daily fact of its success. The argument of these pages is that this is a mistake we can no longer afford.

The thesis is simple to state and hard to live. Order is a nation's first public good — the ground every other good is built on. In a young, connected, aspirational India it can no longer be secured the old way, by force and by silos. It can be secured only by consent and by integration: by a state that earns its legitimacy, fuses its intelligence, develops its people, adopts its tools within ethical limits, and learns to win the contest of the story. I have called this the audacity of order, because building it is an act of defiance against a world that never promised it.

Why now? Because four things are happening at once. India is becoming the youngest large society on earth, with a vast cohort of the ambitious and the restless coming of age together. Technology is handing both the citizen and the criminal powers that did not exist a decade ago. Crime has slipped its borders, becoming networked,

financial and instant. And the institution charged with holding the line is trusted less than the task requires. Each is a chapter in Part One; together they are the security weather of the next thirty years.

From that diagnosis follows a doctrine, in five pillars, which is Part Two: order as the first public good; legitimacy as a force multiplier; integration over silos; people and machines developed as one; and narrative as a domain of security. Part Three is about building it — the people to recruit and train, the technology to adopt and govern, the agencies to connect, the fronts to hold, the citizen to serve. Part Four asks what India we could secure if we did these things, and hands the reader a question.

A word on standing. I have spent thirty-three years inside this machine — in districts and commissionerates, in financial investigation and a United Nations mission, and finally in a state's highest police office. What follows is not the view from a seminar. It is what the work taught me, set down with as much honesty as I can manage, including about the times I got it wrong, and the times the institution did. The book is written for three readers at once: the officer who wants something useful, the government that must decide, and the citizen who deserves to understand the force that serves in her name. If it does its job, all three will finish it seeing order — that quiet, audacious achievement — a little more clearly.

A note on how to read what follows. The officer pressed for time should go straight to Part Two, and take the chapterend briefs as a field summary; the policymaker will find the decisions in Parts Two and Four; the citizen should simply read on, in order — the book was written to be walked through. Whichever door you enter by, the destination is the same: order, seen clearly enough to be kept.

PART ONE

The New Disorder

Diagnosis — a changing population, changing tools, and why the old playbook fails.

“The future of conflict is urban, networked, systemsrich and coastal.”

— after David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*

PART ONE • THE NEW DISORDER

Chapter One

The Quiet Compact

A TUESDAY MORNING in any Indian city is a miracle that nobody attends. A million people leave their homes and converge — on trains pressed past capacity, on roads that obey no manual, into markets and offices and queues — and transact, jostle, disagree and disperse, and by evening almost all of them are home, unharmed, their small plans intact. No one organised this. No one could. It is the quiet compact: the vast, unspoken agreement among strangers to get through the day without preying on one another, underwritten by a state most of them will not see and do not think about.

Watch a level crossing in a small town at the moment the barrier lifts: a thousand competing intentions — scooters, a school van, a man late for a train, a cart that should not be there — negotiate a single narrow gap, and resolve it, almost always, without violence, by a million small courtesies and surrenders that no rule book contains. The state is barely visible in the scene, and yet the scene is the state's deepest achievement. Order is not the policeman at the crossing. It is the behaviour of the thousand who would behave much as they do even if he were not there — because they have, somewhere, accepted the

compact.

The arithmetic makes the point starker than any anecdote. India is among the most thinly policed of the major nations: roughly a hundred and fifty officers sanctioned for every hundred thousand citizens, with a fifth or so of those posts standing vacant in many states, and a large share of the officers actually present tied up guarding installations and dignitaries rather than walking among the public. (A ‘United Nations norm’ of 222 police per lakh is beloved of committee reports; it appears in no United Nations document, and this book will not lean on it — the state’s own arithmetic of sanctioned against actual strength is damning enough.) On any street, at any moment, the police are outnumbered by the policed by a margin so vast that compliance plainly cannot be coming from their presence — and it is not. The order we take for granted is overwhelmingly self-enforced, produced by the thousand rather than imposed upon them, and the constable is its backstop, not its source. This is the most important and least understood fact about Indian order: the state directly polices a fraction of it and depends, mostly unawares, on the compact to hold the rest.

What, then, actually holds it? Watch a farmer find that his neighbour’s plough has stolen a foot and a half of his field — the commonest spark of rural violence — and notice what stays his hand. Three things, none of them the policeman at his elbow. First, an internalised norm: he has absorbed, since childhood, that one does not knife a neighbour over soil, and the norm holds because his father’s generation kept it.

Second, a rough arithmetic of consequence: a blow means a case, a lawyer he cannot afford, a name in the records, a harvest left untended — the cost plainly exceeds the eighteen inches. Third, the existence of a lawful alternative: a patwari to petition, a panchayat to convene, a complaint to file — imperfect and slow, but real, so that he is not trapped between violence and surrender. Norm, arithmetic, alternative:

these three pillars stand beneath almost every one of the millions of peaceful interactions a day, and the work of the state is less to replace them than to keep all three upright — to reinforce the norm, to keep the arithmetic of consequence credible, and, above all, to be the lawful alternative that actually works on the day the citizen, having done everything right, finally walks up to the counter.

That compact is the true subject of this book, and the first thing to say about it is that it has held — remarkably, and for a long time. For all the country's noise and grievance, the overwhelming majority of Indian life is orderly, and, by most measures, has grown more so across the decades of the republic. But it has held on a particular set of foundations, and those foundations are now shifting all at once.

For most of the republic's life, the compact rested on a society that was largely rural, relatively slow, intensely local, and broadly deferential to authority. Trouble travelled at the speed of a person; a rumour took a day to cross a district, and by the time it arrived the district officer had usually heard of it. The people a constable policed were the people he knew, and who knew him, and whose elders he could summon. The criminal and his crime mostly occupied the same few square miles. And the citizen, for better and worse, largely did as the uniform said, out of a deference inherited from a state that had styled itself *mai-baap*, mother and father to a dependent people. On those four assumptions — settled, slow, local, deferential — the inherited machinery of order, built, as we shall see, for a quite different purpose, could just about cope.

I joined that police in the early 1990s and left it more than three decades later, and across those years I watched all four foundations give way. When I began, the police station was the visible and social centre of its area; the uniform was expected, and largely obeyed, and the station house officer was the authority on his patch, in something

close to complete control. By the end I was running a force that policed, often within a single district, a settled village, a heedless city, and the restless in-between that is neither — its stations splintered into special units and response wings, the old all-knowing SHO now one node among many, no longer the only law in sight.

In my first postings a rumour travelled at the speed of a bicycle, and the officer usually heard it before the crowd did; we worked by landline and wireless set, and time, for all its frustrations, was broadly on the side of the man trying to keep the peace. By the end a single forwarded message reached a whole district at once; everyone had already seen the same reel and read the same message, and in an age of the trending hashtag every onlooker was also a broadcaster. Policing had become, for the first time in my experience, structurally reactive — forever answering a story that had already spread. The crime had learned the same new distances. When I

started, the offender and his offence sat, more often than not, within a few square miles; by the time I left, the drug, the fraud and the trafficked person moved across states and across borders, and a citizen with a bank account and a phone had become, without leaving her home, a sitting duck for a predator she would never see.

And the citizen herself had changed most of all. The uniform once largely obeyed now meets a young Indian who knows her rights and lifts her phone to record their exercise. Deference has not altogether vanished — the old hierarchies survive, and even lower-level political workers now expect a say, above the law, in how the law is enforced on their turf — but something subtler has shifted beneath. When an officer falls today, his fall is no longer received as the exception that proves a decent rule; it is filed, instantly and publicly, as one more proof of a crumbling institution. The benefit of the doubt the uniform once carried has been spent. The compact is not breaking — but the

ground beneath it is moving, and an institution that does not move with it will find itself, before long, guarding a settlement that no longer exists.

There is nothing uniquely Indian in this. Every society that has urbanised has had to remake the way it keeps order, usually late and in a hurry. London built the first modern police in 1829 precisely because a swelling, anonymous industrial city had outgrown the parish watchman and the magistrate's posse; Robert Peel's insight was that a crowded, mobile society could be policed only with its own consent, by a force the public recognised as itself. India is now passing through a version of that transition at a speed and scale no nineteenth-century city ever faced — hundreds of millions urbanising in a generation, inside a democracy, under the gaze of a phone in every hand. The task is the same task Peel faced, multiplied and accelerated almost beyond recognition.

And the cost of getting it wrong is no longer local either. When the compact frays now, it does not fray quietly. A rumour becomes a mob in an hour; a single encounter at a counter becomes a national argument by nightfall; a local grievance, amplified, becomes a movement before the district officer has filed his first report. The same connectivity that has made the citizen powerful has made disorder fast, and an institution built for a slow world is forever arriving after the event it was meant to prevent.

This is no theoretical danger, as one grim season a few years ago made plain. A rumour of child-kidnappers, spread by forwarded message and answering to no real event, moved faster than any administration could chase it, and in town after town across several states a stranger — a beggar, a migrant, someone merely asking directions — was set upon and beaten to death by neighbours who had been, an hour earlier, ordinary citizens. No organisation summoned those crowds; a message

did. The state found itself exactly where this chapter places it: an institution built for a slow world, issuing clarifications into a medium that had already done its work, arriving in time only to count the dead. The lynching by rumour is the compact failing in its purest form — strangers preying on strangers because the quiet agreement among them dissolved, in an afternoon, on a phone.

It is worth being precise about what the compact actually is, because the rest of this book turns on it. It is not obedience, which a state can compel for a while, but reciprocity, which it cannot. The citizen keeps the peace, day after day, partly from habit and partly from a quiet expectation that the state will keep its half of the bargain — that when she is wronged she will be heard, when she is threatened she will be protected, and when she deals with the uniform she will be dealt with fairly. Where that expectation holds, order is cheap and selfrenewing; where it fails — where the counter humiliates, the complaint dies, the powerful go untouched — the citizen's compliance turns conditional, and the compact begins, quietly, to lapse. The four shifts this part describes are dangerous precisely because each strains that reciprocity at the very moment the institution is least equipped to honour it. The question this book is really asking, then, is simple and unforgiving: can the institution change as fast as the society it is sworn to police?

. . .

This is the diagnosis the rest of Part One sets out, one shift at a time. The youngest nation, and what its demography demands of those who must keep its peace. The machine age, and the new crimes it has birthed faster than the state has learned to see them. The dissolving of borders, and a criminal who has federated while the state remains a collection of boxes. And the trust the institution has spent over a century and a half, and must now find a way to rebuild. Only with that

diagnosis honestly made can the doctrine that follows be more than a slogan. We begin with the largest fact about India, which is also the one least absorbed by those who police it — that it is, overwhelmingly, young.

IN BRIEF

The question. Where does order actually come from?

The answer. From the self-restraint of the many — a quiet compact the police underwrite but could never enforce alone.

The move. Treat every encounter as maintenance of the compact: protect the willing, and do not manufacture enemies.

PART ONE · THE NEW DISORDER

Chapter Two