

THE LONG WAIT FOR SAFETY

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”Helpline 1090 in Uttar Pradesh was launched to prevent atrocities against women.”

Anchal Yadav, 18, finds the daily one hour commute by share autorickshaw to her college in Lucknow familiar, yet daunting. Every day, the rickshaw is chock-a-block with passengers. Anchal curls into a ball, using her arms to protect herself from any unwelcome touch, and keeps her bag on her lap. When she returns home in the afternoon from college, Anchal says she is wary of walking down the deserted street near her house. Public transport is poor in Uttar Pradesh’s capital. For women like Anchal, the autorickshaw is the best mode of transport and often the only one. Going to college is not just a routine, it is an exercise in staying alert — every day, all the time.

Down south, in Bengaluru, Jyothi Ramesh, 20, is equally familiar with this exhaustion. She says the journey late evening to the nearest bus stop from the factory where she works is nerve-racking. She is thankful to have found a colleague who goes in the same direction and often rides with her.

Traversing India’s cities is not just difficult for college girls and working women, but also for policewomen. Sheetal, 21, is a young woman in khaki. A constable with the Delhi police, she works night shifts. As part of the Police Control Room (PCR) unit, Sheetal is among the first responders to crimes in her area. Yet, Sheetal’s parents cannot stop worrying about her safety when she travels to and from work. Her phone buzzes through the night with calls from home. She puts her mobile phone on silent mode, as taking personal calls on duty is frowned upon.

Following the horrific gang rape of a young woman in a moving bus in New Delhi in December 2012 and the public outcry that followed it, the United Progressive Alliance-2 government set up the Nirbhaya Fund, named after the victim as she was referred to by the media, to ensure the safety of women across the country, with an initial corpus of 1,000 crore. The fund was announced at the fag end of that government’s term, and so little was spent from it. Over six years, the amount increased to 3,600 crore, but reports emerged that the money was not being used. Faced with severe criticism for this, the National Democratic Alliance government approved in March 2018 2,919 crore from this corpus for the Safe Cities programme for eight major cities — Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Lucknow — for three years. The Centre and States share the expenses for the scheme (60:40). The amount given by the Central government is 2,016.50 crore.

Delhi tops list for number of crimes against women, again

The Centre invited proposals from the Director Generals of Police (DGP) of these eight cities as well as from Municipal Commissioners. *The Hindu* tracked the status of implementation of the Safe Cities programme in six of the eight cities and found that not a single penny had been spent by the local administrations despite funds being released by the Centre. The police in many cities said that tendering for works proposed by them under the programme (such as installation of CCTV cameras, PCR vans, e-toilets and pink patrol bikes and cars) will begin only after the Lok Sabha elections are over. In Delhi, senior officials drew a blank when asked about the execution of the scheme.

Public pressure forced both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress to give more primacy

to women's safety in their 2014 manifestos, but that is not the case this time. Despite the BJP's 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' scheme, which aims to "prevent gender-biased sex selective elimination, ensure survival and protection of the girl child, and ensure education of girls", and the Congress's plan to develop a Citizens' Charter for Women's Safety and Security, the promise to fight against gender violence is drowned in the din of claims and counter-claims by political parties this election season. Further, it is clear that both the BJP and the Congress look at women's safety only through the prism of criminal investigation — the BJP talks about 'forensic facilities' and 'fast-track courts', and the Congress proposes a 'separate investigative agency' for heinous crimes against women. The focus on making public spaces safe and accessible for women like Anchal, Jyothi and Sheetal through sustained campaigns is entirely absent.

It is 4 p.m. and the control room in Lucknow is abuzz with the sounds of ceaseless typing, phones ringing, and calls being answered. Women police constables wearing headphones lend a patient ear to complaints from women on the other end of the line, type out complaints, and submit them online for further action.

The call centre is not far from the U.P. Police Headquarters. The 'Women Power Helpline 1090' was launched to ensure that police help is only a phone call away. Victims don't need to go to the police station to file a complaint. The requirement to file an FIR, too, has been dispensed with, in order to encourage women to break their silence without fear of reprisal, often from their own families.

As many as 45 women constables have been tasked with answering complaints about lewd phone calls, online abuse, stalking and sexual harassment. The helpline, which was launched in 2012, registers about 730 complaints a day. Once a complaint is filed, a male constable calls the offender and rebukes him for his misdemeanour, warns him of police action and, in rare cases when this is insufficient, books him for a crime. The grievance is considered resolved only after following up with the victim over 45 days.

"We tell the offender that he is being put on the police radar; that if he doesn't change, there will be legal action. So, it is both reformatory and punitive. But when there are incidents that require immediate action, say a case of rape, we lodge an FIR immediately," says U.P. Director General of Police O.P. Singh.

Hyderabad among safe cities

The data collected from calls made to the helpline offer an insight into the State. The most number of complaints come from Lucknow, Kanpur, Prayagraj, Varanasi and Gorakhpur. Data from 2018 show that 53% of women who called the helpline were non-working women. Thirty-four per cent of the calls came from college students. More than 70% of the complaints were about lewd phone calls. Incidents of cyber-harassment increased by four times in 2018 from the previous year.

The U.P. police plans to double the capability of this unique initiative under the Safe Cities programme and add 40 more computer terminals, says Singh. The Central government has approved 194 crore for Lucknow from the Nirbhaya Fund. Proposals also include integrating 1090 with another helpline, UP 100 (the Uttar Pradesh Police Emergency Management System); setting up an integrated control room linked to 1,500 CCTVs; pink outposts for facilitating easy filing of complaints by women; 100 pink patrol scooters, 100 pink SUVs, 74 pink toilets, and public transport buses that are GPS-enabled and equipped with panic buttons and CCTV cameras. A Data Analytics centre at the 1090 call centre has also been proposed. Singh says the Centre disbursed the entire sum in three tranches by January, but work on these projects will

commence only some time this year. He says the 1090 helpline and other measures have helped the U.P. police combat crimes against women, and that there was a 7% fall in rape cases in 2018 from 2017.

Richa Rastogi, a local women's rights activist, voices concern over these insular efforts, however. She points to the need to look at women's safety beyond violent crimes in public spaces. "A safe city must have provisions for shelter homes for women who have escaped from violent marriages and sometimes from their own parents who want to get them married without their consent. There is also a need to deploy protection officers mandated under the Domestic Violence Act," says Rastogi who works with Humsafar, an NGO supporting survivors of gender-based violence. She adds that an earlier initiative to introduce pink autos in the city failed as they were mostly operated and used by men. "We need to have women drivers. This will ensure women's empowerment and make women commuters feel safe," she says.

Women's safety: beyond panic buttons and raksha bands

It's 10 p.m. on a Saturday in the capital city. Sheetal, Manisha and Sarika (names changed), all constable rank officers, are circling New Delhi's Connaught Place in a PCR van. They have a 12-hour shift. Their task is to be the first responders to calls made to the police in the area. They often intervene in drunken brawls, rescue intoxicated men lying on the streets, and sometimes face the ire of victims of theft.

They may be cops, but their parents worry about their safety as they travel long distances from their homes on the outskirts of the city to report for work. "We travel alone, often at night. Though we are police officers, parents will always be parents. Sometimes, I get calls every half an hour on my way home," says Manisha, who lives in Haryana's Bahadurgarh. Manisha takes two buses, a metro and an autorickshaw to reach work.

Although these women have heard stories of discrimination by their male counterparts, they haven't had any unpleasant encounters since they joined the force in February this year, they say. "We have had meetings in which we have been told that we can inform our seniors or any officer in case someone misbehaves with us," says Sarika.

The city police says its women officers patrol outside schools and colleges to ensure that women students are safe. "All the Station House Officers are directed to increase patrolling in winter as the streets are more lonely then and visibility is low. Police booths and facilitation desks are also provided at identifiable places in crowded areas," says Geeta Rani Verma, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Police Unit for Women and Children).

The Delhi police was sanctioned 663.67 crore under the scheme. It was also the only city to receive 100% funding from the Centre. The Delhi police plans to procure hi-tech 'field devices' for enhanced real-time responses to crimes in the city; have dedicated women safety patrol vans equipped with dashboards for viewing live feeds from CCTV cameras across the city; and GPS tracking facilities. However, despite the scheme being approved more than a year ago, a senior official seems to know little about it.

Rajalakshmi, a working woman who frequently travels on the Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) between Chepauk and Velachery in Chennai, says it is unsafe to travel in the city late in the day. The MRTS stations are sprawling, dark, unutilised spaces. "It is an ordeal to reach the platform. I have to cross empty, dark spaces inside the station to reach it. A policeman or a security guard in the station is a rare sight. I know of women who are frequently harassed on running trains and in dark corners of the stations too," she says. Rajalakshmi's fear is not unfounded. In 2016, Chennai was gripped by horror when a 24-year-old Infosys employee was

hacked to death at a busy railway station in broad daylight. In January this year, a woman was molested at the Taramani MRTS station by railway staff.

The Chennai Corporation and police have an elaborate plan to augment the infrastructure in the city to ensure safety of women. The local body plans to have 617 'safe zone clusters' in places considered crime hotspots and where surveillance cameras and street lights are to be installed. These safe clusters will cover 19 bus stands, 10 colleges, 70 schools, seven shopping malls, seven IT parks, 56 railway stations as well as markets and places of worship. As many as 500 e-toilets for women are to be set up in public places and 30 mobile toilets for women police staff on bandobust duty at the cost of 27.77 crore. The city police also plans to conduct a GIS-based heat map of areas of crime against women that is to be integrated with notification services on mobile applications. A 24x7 emergency app to track women in distress and a helpline service for women are on the cards, officials claim. The total amount sanctioned to the city under the Safe Cities project is 426 crore.

But all these are only on paper.

"Once the elections are over, we will call for tenders," says an official on the condition of anonymity.

In Hyderabad, among the initiatives it has already undertaken to ensure that women are safe in the city, the police counts its SHE teams as a success. The aim of the SHE teams is to curb 'eve-teasing' in all aspects and in all places. In the last four and a half years, the SHE teams in Hyderabad have received 12,000 petitions. But these teams mostly have male officers.

Speaking of how complaints reach them, Shikha Goel, Additional Commissioner of Police (Crimes and SIT), Hyderabad, says women use social media often nowadays. "They trust this medium and we respond promptly," she says.

But SHE teams are not the only answer. Seven months after the Centre allocated 282 crore from the Nirbhaya Fund to the city administration under the Safe Cities programme, the money lies unused. A senior police officer says that in October 2018, the Centre released its share of 112.8 crore, but the 40% share from the State government has not come yet. "Once the funds are released from the State government, we will work on various projects related to women's safety, including the installation of CCTV cameras at hotspots and in public transport," the officer says.

The Bengaluru police launched pink hoysalas, or patrolling vehicles, to exclusively address women and child safety issues. But Dona Fernandes of Vimochana, a women's rights organisation, says that these pink hoysalas are often used for other policing jobs. Although this was started as a service that would have exclusive women patrolling staff, many of the hoysalas are run by male police personnel, she says.

The City Police Commissioner, T. Suneel Kumar, says that a 667 crore proposal for the Safe Cities programme is yet to be implemented. "The Karnataka government has received funds from the Central government, but we will carry out the project once the code of conduct for the elections comes to an end," he says.

The Centre allocated 252 crore to Mumbai for the Safe Cities programme and the Maharashtra Cabinet approved the installation of 1,600 CCTV cameras across the metropolis. Senior officials say they have so far not submitted a single bill to the Centre under the scheme and it would take at least another two months for work to begin.

While the plan to place Mumbai under the watch of a CCTV network had been in the works for several years, the project was made fully functional only in 2016, with Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis inaugurating 4,717 cameras covering 1,510 spots in the city. The feed from the cameras is viewed in real time at the Mumbai Police Control Room, enabling the police to keep an eye on law and order. The same feed is also beamed live to offices of senior officers like the Commissioner of Police and the Joint Commissioner of Police (Law and Order).

But is safety merely about having more eyes on the streets?

“An overemphasis on technology and policing will enhance security, but not necessarily make cities safer for women or enhance their access to public spaces,” says Kalpana Viswanath, co-founder of Safetipin, a mobile app that provides safety scores of different localities to its users. Viswanath is among the members of the committee headed by the Home Secretary to guide the formulation of the Safe Cities programme. She is also the chairperson of Jagori, an NGO that conducted a safety audit of Delhi in 2005-06. The study highlighted threats to women’s safety such as poor lighting in public spaces and broken pavements that force women to walk on the roads and render them vulnerable to verbal and sexual abuse by men on bikes and in cars. The audit also pointed out how women felt safer in areas that were populated by hawkers and vegetable-sellers late in the evening.

“Besides policing, we need to look at urban planning and designing gender-friendly spaces. We need to effect a change in cultural and social norms through campaigns. I am really surprised that none of these cities wants to spend money on a campaign,” she says. “Globally, wherever cities have made significant changes, it has been because of the municipal authorities. Whether it is New York, London, Bogota, or Seoul, it is because the mayoral system has been strengthened. For cities we must ask for stronger local bodies.”

Conversations with police officials across cities show that it is not only the State authorities, but also the civic authorities who have a role to play in securing the safety of women in public places.

With inputs from R. Sivaraman, Abhinay Deshpande, Tanu Kulkarni and Sharad Vyas

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