

Crime and prosperity

(Written by Kula Saikia)

Are development and crime twin sisters that grow and evolve together? According to NCRB data, the figures for total crimes and crime rate in India for 2016 were 2.97 million and 379 crimes per lakh population. Both these are higher than the corresponding figures for previous years. A concerned citizen may want to know how the development process has impacted criminal behaviour in our society. Most people agree that crime reduction and prevention has to be an important goal of the state's development agenda. It is expected that an upward shift in the quality of life would create a general well-being and thereby, help reduce the rates and levels of crime.

The probable reason for such crime reduction has been sought in the rise in the opportunity cost of committing crimes by economists like Gary Becker, who discussed criminal behaviour like any other economic activity based on rational choice. This would mean that the criminal would base his/her decision to commit a crime on a cost-benefit scale. The inverse relationship between crime and development has been borne out by several studies. For example, the 2011 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that the richer countries have far lower rates of violent crime than the poorer countries.

A number of other studies have also arrived at similar conclusions. However, a macro look at crime and its relation with development indices in the context of India reveals that both have been co-evolving at the same pace. It appears that improvement in economic prosperity as measured by the per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) has not resulted in the decline of crime rates in the prosperous states. For example, the richer states like Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala and Karnataka had higher IPC crime rates, while the poorer states including UP, Bihar and Odisha had lower crime rates than the all-India average in 2015.

Even a militancy-affected state like Assam has been no exception to this trend. Between 2004-05 and 2012-13, Assam witnessed a steady rise in per capita incomes. At the same time, crime rates also showed a steady increase. At the district level, the more developed districts had higher crime rates than the less developed districts during the corresponding time period. However, the general expectation connects high crime rates to a low level of development since criminal activities adversely influence the various parameters of economic growth. Not only does crime undermine the rule of law, it erodes people's faith in the security of private property, which is vital in a market economy. Moreover, crime extracts a price from business enterprises. Rising crime rates give rise to a feeling of insecurity, apprehension and fear. Evidence suggests that rise in crime discourages both domestic and foreign private investment and even forces the flight of investible resources. The increase in security-related expenses curtails profit margins, downgrading the competitiveness of firms. One would, therefore, conclude that crime has a negative impact on development.

The reverse, the impact of development on overall crime reduction, may not be that easy to gauge. The rise in crime in prosperous states could be explained as the result of increased reporting and registration of crimes. This is because overall development leads to progress in other indicators like improvement in literacy, fall in school dropout rates, empowerment of marginal groups, which encourages them to approach law enforcement agencies when necessary.

There is another possibility. The rise in economic activities could also open up more avenues for crime, especially if the opportunity cost of crime falls in the absence of a concomitant improvement in law enforcement strategies, logistics and other necessary infrastructure essential for the delivery of justice. Thus, development planners must account for additional manpower and

appropriate logistic support system if ordinary citizens are to enjoy the fruits of progress in a less-crime environment.

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