

Eight-hour shifts for the police is a move that was long overdue

For the first time in its 154-year history, the Mumbai police have switched to a compact eight-hour duty schedule for certain ranks, police commissioner Datta Padsalgikar announced on Wednesday. Launched as an experiment at the Deonar Police station in 2016, the plan will now be extended to police stations across the city.

The police force in the country, often accused of inefficiency, rudeness and corruption, is overworked and understaffed. According to data journalism site IndiaSpend, India has among the lowest police-to-population ratios in the world. The country was short of more than half a million police officers on January 1, 2015, the latest date for which nationwide data is available, the Lok Sabha was told in July, 2016.

There were 17.2 million police officers across 36 states and Union Territories, when there should have been 22.6 million, according to the estimates of the ministry of home affairs.

A 2015 study, 'National Requirement of Manpower for Eight-Hour Shift in Police Stations,' carried out by the Bureau of Police Research and Development found that 90% of police officers worked for more than eight hours a day, and 73% didn't get a weekly off even once a month. "Long and irregular work hours have negative impacts on efficient policing, since weary and overworked personnel can't be expected to put in their best ...," said the study. In recent months, police personnel in Mumbai faced a number of challenges owing to long duty hours including on-duty deaths, mental and physical illnesses. At times they were stationed in the field for 48 hours at a stretch, adding stress to their already fragile mental health.

In 2005, a committee under Soli Sorabjee set up by ministry of home affairs recommended a draft Model Police Act that delineated the social responsibilities of the police governed by the principles of impartiality and human rights norms, with special attention to the protection of weaker sections.

In 2006, the Supreme Court, responding to a PIL filed by former Uttar Pradesh director general of police Prakash Singh, issued guidelines to the states which included a clear segregation of law and order and crime functions of the police. More than a decade later, few of these reforms have percolated to the ground level.

Last year, frustrated over the slow pace of police reforms, former Chief Justice JS Khehar had complained: "Police reforms are going on and on. Nobody listens to our orders." In light of this bleak history, the Mumbai police's initiative to restore a semblance of work-life balance to the lives of its personnel should be appreciated – and wherever possible, replicated. That's the least we owe to the men and women who have no fixed days off and can be called to work at any hour of the day or night.

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