

THE UTTAR PRADESH MODEL FOR CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

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Uttar Pradesh has a new feather in its cap. At 70.8 per cent, it has registered the highest conviction rate in the country in cases of crimes against women in 2022, as per the latest report of the National Crime Records Bureau. This is the result of remarkable political support, strong administrative intent and meticulous monitoring of the state's ambitious flagship programme — Mission Shakti.

Mission Shakti was launched in October 2020 to make improvements to women's safety, dignity and empowerment in a state that has been infamous for its feudal mindset towards women and the consequent violence and exploitation faced by them. It is based on two founding pillars. The first involves a concerted attempt to ensure that the schemes and benefits rolled out by various departments for the upliftment and empowerment of women reaches the last mile.

The second promotes women's safety by ensuring easy access to law enforcement services, cracking down on crimes against women, and getting criminals punished in a time-bound manner. In pursuit of the second objective, special women's help desks have been operationalised at all 1,500-plus police stations in the state, supervised 24/7 by women police personnel. A culture of prompt registration of FIRs, time-bound investigations and maximising convictions has been carefully cultivated over the last four years. As a result, 13,099 convictions were awarded in UP in 2022 for crimes against women, which alone account for more than one-third of the total 37,551 convictions nationwide. This reflects a remarkable change in the work culture and accountability of the criminal justice system in the state.

The first and most significant change involves communicating, in no uncertain terms, that the work of the police does not end with investigation and chargesheets but with the actual conviction. The police has taken a lead in building synergies with prosecution officers and the judiciary. Dedicated monitoring cells have been constituted in all districts to pursue trials, to personally connect with the most important prosecution witnesses and to facilitate their appearance on the date of the hearing. The hitherto under-supervised public prosecutors and ad hoc government counsels have also started feeling the heat of accountability. This has been achieved through scaled-up monitoring at all levels creating a charged professional atmosphere.

Forensic science laboratories, a weak link in the justice delivery system, have been infused with a new energy. Sensitive and conviction-worthy cases of crimes against women are being taken off the long waitlist for DNA match or viscera analysis for priority testing. The state is frantically working on expanding the network of forensic labs to relieve the pressure on existing infrastructure. The first forensic institute of the state — the Uttar Pradesh State Institute of Forensic Science, affiliated with the National Forensic Sciences University, Gujarat — has become operational to cater to the massive requirement of forensic experts for the growing number of laboratories and to institutionalise scientific-evidence-driven crime investigation.

As a result of these efforts, the number of convictions within a matter of days and weeks of the commission of the crime is consistently growing. Healthy competition among the districts in seeking maximum punishment in the minimum possible time, is being encouraged, with the top performers being felicitated at state-level ceremonies and in the press. It is noteworthy that the felicitation is reserved for the on-ground crusaders — the investigating officer, public prosecutor

and constables pursuing the case in court. There is, thus, an overall attempt to not just demand accountability from the key components of the criminal justice system but to also inculcate in them a sense of ownership for the case concerned.

The magnitude of the achievement, thus recorded, is evident from the comparative conviction statistics of large states with a similarly heavy crime load. Rajasthan at 37.2 per cent, Maharashtra at 11.2 per cent and West Bengal at 8.9 per cent pale in comparison to UP's nearly 71 per cent conviction rate.

There is every reason to rejoice in this spectacular achievement of the UP government. There is robust global research to support the belief that only a time-bound justice delivery system is a powerful deterrent against the commission of crimes against women.

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