

A modern police

Following three years of dithering, the NDA government has finally put numbers to its election promise of speeding up the modernisation of India's creaking police infrastructure. The cash on the table is substantial: Rs 25,000 crore over three years, of which over Rs 18,000 crore will come from the Union government. Police in Jammu and Kashmir, the Northeast and states fighting Maoists will receive the largest share of the money, Rs 10,132 crore, to meet their needs for everything from modern weapons to hiring helicopters. For police forces across the country, hard-hit by funding cuts, this is good news.

In the wake of the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai, the Union government had significantly enhanced support for police modernisation. In 2015, though, the National Democratic Alliance government terminated financial support for creating physical infrastructure, like police stations, housing, forensic labs, and training institutions. The idea was that state governments would pick up the slack. In practice, police budgets in most states have been under severe stress, with police left unable in some cases to even meet routine expenditure, like purchasing new vehicles or meeting fuel bills.

Hard questions need to be asked, though, about how this cash will be spent - and whether it alone will be enough to give Indian citizens better policing. For one, the post-26/11 police modernisation effort suffered from poor conception and execution. Police stations on the coast have rotted away; expensive boats no longer work; guns purchased for commando units turned out to be impracticable. While physical infrastructure improved, its use didn't. New forensic labs were built, for example, but police on ground remained unskilled in modern investigation techniques. The bigger elephant in the room, though, is police reform itself.

For years, experts - backed by the Supreme Court - have been calling for new legislation to insulate the police from political interference. Though many states have passed new police legislation, few have respected the Supreme Court's injunction to ensure these laws give functional autonomy to the top police leadership. In the absence of autonomy, there can be no accountability - and the consequences of a lack of accountability have been demonstrated across the country, in everything from the collapse of police during Haryana's Jat agitation, to botched prosecutions. Police modernisation, clearly, isn't just about guns or buildings. The successes of the new police modernisation scheme, therefore, will have to be judged not by the cash it delivers, but how far the Central government is able to use this financial leverage to actually deliver better policing to citizens.

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