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The Police Mitra: Achieving Innovative Justice in India

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Police play a pivotal role in maintaining and strengthening internal security in India. To be effective, police must win and hold the trust of the people. Traditionally, Indian police forces follow Criminal Procedure Code, the Indian Penal Code, and other federal and state laws. Under this model, police faithfully register and investigate offenses reported by the complainants and submit legitimate offenses to courts for adjudication.

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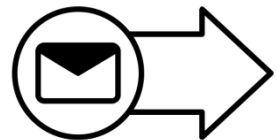


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British colonial masters instituted a hierarchy of command – District Superintendent of Police under the District Magistrate – to oversee lower-level Indian police officers. In three major cities – Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata – Commissioners of Police wielded a magistrate’s powers. This model suppressed the people’s aspirations behind a façade of law and order. Police served as the agents of the dictators. The public remained fearful of the colonial masters while anyone speaking or acting contrary to British rule was neutralized. The British applied this model throughout the empire.

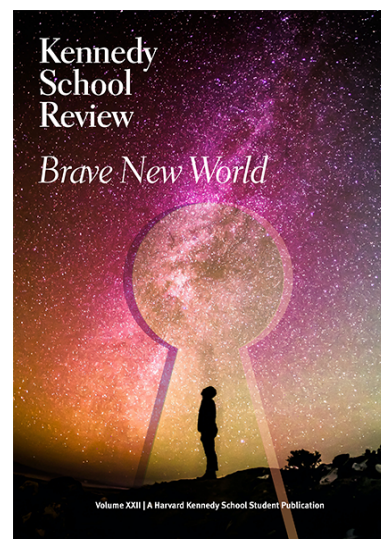
However, the model started experiencing cracks under both peaceful and violent freedom movements. The British left India when they could no longer govern effectively, yet the model of policing has continued largely unchanged. The result is an overburdened justice system incapable of meeting citizens’ needs. The phenomenal growth in traditional and modern criminal activities, such as cyber crimes and economic violations, complicates the matter further.

Police routinely receive criticism performing duties as simple as issuing traffic citations. As a result, police have become so hesitant that they fail to deliver the services citizens need.

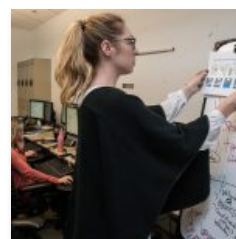
Traditional policing analysis models consider the historical, social, legal, and economic situation in India. These approaches are insufficient to meet the requirements and aspirations of an emerging India. Demographic surpluses of young Indians wish to be fully free from colonial influences and contribute to social policies resulting in peace, tranquility, law, and order. Many physically fit older Indians also wish to participate in establishing and maintaining a safe, secure India. In the western Indian state of Maharashtra, the police *Mitra* (volunteers) effectively incorporates these trends into an innovative new model.

As Commissioner of Police in Nagpur City (2008-2010), this author sought to improve police-public relations while promoting peace and justice. To achieve this goal, the author encouraged police to recruit citizens to assist with various duties. Citizens from all religions and genders were subjected to a background investigation, and selected volunteers then received training for duties such as assisting senior citizens, mentoring at-risk juveniles, crowd and traffic control, and inspecting for suspicious objects at large public gatherings. Local volunteers accompanying police on patrols boosted public confidence, morale, and service capacity. Young Indians who participated were awarded certificates of participation in promoting peace and justice. These certificates have since been used to establish character in job interviews.

The police *Mitra* program bridged an important communication gap between police officers and the public at large, effectively reducing intra-societal conflict when compared to the rest of Maharashtra state. Common crimes in Nagpur City decreased by 15% over the same period, while street crime in the rest of the state increased by 12%. Nagpur City’s volunteers were crucial in educating fellow citizens about preventive public safety measures in many areas. They taught



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people how to proactively safeguard their property, protect their children, improve personal cyber security, and avoid financial fraud schemes.

The police *Mitra* partnership also reduced the number of criminal complaints that were unregistered. Because volunteers added capacity on the streets, more police officers could receive complaints at or near police stations. Additional benefits include increased transparency and trust between citizens and the police; increased reporting of serious crimes; reduced corruption; and elimination of all custodial death incidents.

Critics of the police *Mitra* partnership may worry about citizen volunteers acting independently to deliver justice – a sort of vigilantism. In Nagpur City, we avoided this issue by ensuring that volunteers performed service only under strict guidance and supervision by police officers. No volunteers were empowered to act independently, which ensured confidence from the public. Others with implementation concerns should note that the police *Mitra* scheme was implemented at no additional cost, required no changes to existing law, and was successfully replicated throughout the state.

As cities grow, police organizations must expand their capacity to serve and protect. The police *Mitra* model is one way to achieve positive outcomes while increasing mutual trust between law enforcement and the citizens they serve.

Praveen Dixit serves as Special Rapporteur on National Human Rights Commission for Maharashtra and Goa. He recently retired as Director General of Police in Maharashtra, Mumbai, India. For more info, visit: <https://praveendixit.com>.

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