

The Washington Post

Makeover Via MIT for Indian Police

Research Team Helps Initiate Reforms to Fix Image Problem, Build Morale Among Officers

By Rama Lakshmi
Washington Post Foreign Service
Monday, February 23, 2009; A14

SHAHJAHANPUR, [India](#) -- The dominant image of an Indian police officer, etched in people's minds and embedded in movies, is that of a slothful, rude, potbellied and bribe-taking constable. But the police officers protest the depiction as unfair, saying they are overworked, underpaid and subject to abrupt transfers that disrupt any attempt to get to know the neighborhoods they pledge to protect.

Hazari Lal, a shy, mustached officer, has been posted to 13 stations in 13 years. And like other Indian police officers, he is on call 24/7, with no weekly day off, he said. "The police work without any rest. It makes us irritable all the time. And we take it out on the people who come to us for help," Lal, a station house officer in Shahjahanpur, about 80 miles southwest of New Delhi, said as he took off his khaki-colored beret and placed his two cellphones inside it. "We always carry an unknown fear called 'transfer' in our hearts because we can be posted out to a faraway station anytime."

The perception of poor police performance caught the attention of the Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which said the negative image created a stumbling block for effective police work in India. Researchers conducted a survey in 2005-2006 in the western state of Rajasthan and found that more than 70 percent of crime victims never reported incidents because many felt that the police would either do nothing or ask for a bribe to file a complaint. More than 80 percent said no constable had ever visited their neighborhood. The survey also found that an average of 64 percent of police officers were transferred every year.

The MIT economic researchers launched a two-year pilot project to try to fix the widespread distrust and hostility that Indians nurse about the police and to rev up the morale of the police in 162 stations in Rajasthan.

Under the program, they gave police officers one day off each week, froze transfers, invited a community volunteer every day to the station to observe the police work, rotated work among officers and trained the police in etiquette, stress management and scientific investigation skills.

The Poverty Action Lab provides evaluation tools to study policy around the world, and has assessed health and education programs in Rajasthan. The police reform project here was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Its evaluation report was presented last month.

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"For a policeman, the personal life is nil. But during the MIT project, we spent more time with our family and felt relaxed at work. We no longer felt pushed around by politicians who interfered in our investigation and threatened to transfer us," said Rajkumar Sharma, a constable in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan. "We were also taught how to attend to the complainants politely. To offer them a seat when they entered the station and not shoo them away or tell them to stand quietly in a corner."

The trials created such a buzz that local police officers refer to these police stations as "MIT-thana," or "MIT-station."

The MIT team said that the freeze on transfers produced a 19 percent drop in the public's fear of police. The behavior training yielded a 30 percent increase in crime victims' satisfaction with the handling of complaints. But the weekly day off produced only a 3 percent increase in police morale.

"We are not experts in policing, but we in the economics department wanted to provide Indian officials with rigorous evaluation of policy interventions," said Daniel Keniston, a PhD candidate at MIT who coordinated field research for the project. "The project is not about a feel-good, public relations exercise. It impacts issues like national security. Terror plots are foiled by the police very often because of the cooperation of the community and its network of informers. Local people should feel comfortable working with the police, and the police's familiarity with the area is critical."

With the rising wave of terrorist attacks in the country in the past two years, including in Rajasthan, analysts say the subject of police reforms may gain urgency. Indian police, a legacy of the 19th-century colonial British system, have been trained to be the coercive arm of the ruler to create fear and crush the subject with force. That image has stuck, and many say corruption, abuse and torture are widespread.

But officials complain that the police are severely understaffed, underfunded and overstretched. Although the MIT survey found crimes underreported, most every other problem is brought to the police department's doorstep, officers complain -- including power outages, water shortages and clogged drains, and teacher absenteeism. When politicians and VIPs move on the road, the police are called to guard the route and escort their vehicles.

Several government committees and a Supreme Court ruling have recommended reforms. But they have not been implemented because of bureaucratic and political unwillingness to loosen control over the police force. "Two years ago, we kept pleading with the government to give the police a day off in a week and to have a shift system. They said no," said M.K. Devarajan, additional director general of police in Jaipur, who supervised the MIT project. "There is a lack of political will and resources. It is not politically popular to do anything for the police in this country."

Even though the MIT program began with great enthusiasm, the implementation often weakened as time wore on and work increased, some said. "The MIT suggestions were difficult to implement 100 percent. Even though MIT forbade us, we called back our men many times from their day offs," said Lal, the station chief. "A few did get transferred because politicians continued to meddle. And transferring a police officer to a bad or a good station is still the most popular method of disciplining erring staff or rewarding good ones."

Lal's station has only one vehicle, and constables often have to use their personal motorcycles for work. Local industrialists helped them build a kitchen, a water tank and gate at the station, Lal said. "We don't even have enough furniture to sit on and have to request shops in the area to send us chairs. My constables have to pay for the petrol themselves when they go out on duty. Their cellphone bills are not paid by the government. Can a constable afford all this from his humble salary?" he said. "And then the

country expects us to be absolutely honest."

The Rajasthan police department wants to extend the MIT recommendations for etiquette training and the presence of the community observers to 150 more stations. But according to the MIT report, the community observer program did not have any impact on softening the public perception of the police.

In 2007, Harish Chandra Mahajan, a trader of ceramic fittings, volunteered as an observer for two hours at Lal's station. "They are corrupt and harass weak people. But when I was there at the station as an observer, they were on their best behavior," Mahajan, 34, said, sitting in his store down the street from the police station. "Now they have gone back to their old ways. Back to square one."

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