

Piercing the Panchkula haze

In the popular narrative, the Haryana police takes the brunt of the blame for the mob violence after Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's conviction. Reality is a little more complicated



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THE LAST WEEK was not a good time to be a godman in India. It was, however, a worse time to be a policeman in India. That the police were cowardly, incompetent and ineffective is a cliché of our times. It can be applied anywhere, most recently to the violence in Panchkula. So whether one believes that the situation was saved by the brave woman deputy commissioner of Panchkula, or by the arrival of the Indian Army, all the different narratives are united in their contempt for the conduct of the Haryana Police and the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) deployed with them. Having seen the challenges faced by the Haryana police over the last week at close quarters, this view is at best naive and ill-informed, and at worst maliciously biased. Either way, it is quite simply, wrong.

The police leadership of Haryana is being criticised for allowing a large crowd to gather in Panchkula in the days preceding the judgment. Within minutes of the verdict, mob frenzy took over. For nearly an hour, the Dera premis went on the rampage, burning vehicles, attacking police personnel on duty and damaging government property. Even the media were not spared. Their reporters were brutally attacked and their OB vans were burnt. The sky above Panchkula turned grey with smoke.

The initial onslaught certainly took the security forces by surprise. Once the order to disperse the mob by any means necessary was given, the sound of gunfire rang out and within a few minutes, the mob ran helter-skelter. An hour of mob fury was followed by an hour of the state displaying its heavy hand. It left 39 persons dead, while scores more were injured.

As with all such things in our country, politics soon overtook any rational analysis and debate about what had just happened, largely in Panchkula, but also in fits and spurts in other parts of Haryana and Punjab. The epicentre of the Dera, Sirsa, saw six deaths. While Punjab, too, was the scene of some destruction of property, thankfully there was no loss of life.

The events of Panchkula undoubtedly pose many uncomfortable questions for all of us in positions of authority. However, even before the dust has settled, the blame game and scrambling to take credit based on individual ambition and institutional turf has begun. One account would have us believe that but for one brave IAS officer, the ransacking of Panchkula was imminent. Another would have us believe that all was lost till the army arrived and saved the bumbling civilian administration yet again. Both narratives are economical with the truth. The officer was throughout escorted by policemen and the army did not fire a single shot. This is not to deny them their role in bringing the violence under control, but only to place it in perspective and set the record straight. What is more worrying is such simplistic self-serving narratives find takers in public discourse.

Let's be clear on one count. In the present scheme of things, the decision on whether a large crowd is to be allowed to assemble in the first place, whether preventive measures are to be taken, or whether a punitive



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response can take place only after violence has happened, is in the hands of the political executive. It is not a decision a chief secretary or a DGP can take on their own. As for the political executive, over the years, a consensus, cutting across party lines, has emerged that the political costs of pre-emptive action are not acceptable. It is to let the administration respond after violence has taken place and not second guess the intention of an assembled crowd and be accused of high-handedness. Legally, too, the bar for using deadly force in self-defence is set much lower than for using it to preempt violence. We can call it cowardice, incompetence, or collusion. But one cannot easily take away the right of the political executive to make the decision to exercise restraint till the last possible moment. This issue requires a more nuanced discussion and debate.

The second issue is about the capacity of the state to deal with such crowds. Over the years, the states of India have simply not invested enough in the police. As a result, for anything more than a routine, local law and order problem, the states end up seeking assistance from the Centre. This is usually provided in the form of CAPFs, and in extreme cases, by the Indian Army. Over the years, the CAPFs have grown to number nearly a million and provide crucial support to local police forces in a range of situations. However, other than the CRPF, the deployment of all other CAPFs comes at the cost of their primary mission and training. Similarly, the preparedness of the army is also affected by frequent interventions in civil emergencies. We really need to have a national mission to build state police capacities. A better-staffed, better-trained and better-equipped police force with its ear to the ground would be a more effective bulwark against law and order

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problems than central forces.

Last but not the least is the role of the Indian Army in such situations. In the aftermath of Panchkula, a section of our military veterans took to the media with uncompromising expressions of contempt and ridicule for civil authorities and the police. This is not only unfortunate, but also betrays a profound ignorance about civil-military relations. These self-styled custodians of the Indian Army seem to exist in a sociological and historical bubble. More worryingly, they think that military tactics and value systems are the best way to assess the response of civil authorities in law and order situations. They forget that the crowds we face are not our enemy, retreating before them and showing restraint in the face of their violent provocations is not cowardice. Shoot first ask questions later may be a sound military dictum, but it would be a poor policing tactic. The army coming to the aid of civilian authority is not a favour extended by the former to the citizens; it is an integral part of the charter of duties of any armed forces in a democracy.

The real tragedy of Panchkula is not the blame game and turf wars. It is the death of nearly 40 citizens at the hands of the state. They were not demanding the break-up of India. They were blinded by their faith in a conman, who, perhaps, gave some sense of meaning and purpose in their life. By all accounts, they came from the poorest and most marginalised sections of our society. Instead of chest thumping and finger pointing, it is important we find ways and means to ensure that such a tragedy is not repeated.

The writer, an IPS officer, is serving with the Border Security Force. The views expressed are personal

