

Police Reforms in India: Assessing the Implementation of Supreme Court Directives and Ground-Level Challenges

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Abstract: *Police reforms have remained a significant concern within the Indian criminal justice system due to persistent issues of political interference, lack of accountability, custodial violence, inadequate resources, and declining public trust. The landmark judgment of the Supreme Court in Prakash Singh v Union of India (2006) sought to transform police administration by introducing structural and functional reforms aimed at ensuring professionalism, autonomy, and accountability. Despite these judicial directives, implementation across various states has been inconsistent and often inadequate. This article critically examines the extent to which the Supreme Court's directives have been implemented and evaluates the practical challenges that continue to impede meaningful reform. The study analyses the constitutional and legal framework governing policing in India, judicial interventions, and the role of state governments in the reform process. It further explores ground-level realities such as political influence, resource constraints, custodial misconduct, and institutional resistance. The article concludes that while judicial intervention has provided a framework for reform, effective implementation requires political commitment, institutional accountability, and sustained legislative action. Strengthening democratic policing and ensuring compliance with judicial directives are essential for improving public confidence and enhancing the effectiveness of the criminal justice system.*

Keywords: Police Reforms, Prakash Singh, Supreme Court Directives, Police Accountability, Criminal Justice System, Democratic Policing.

I. INTRODUCTION

The police constitute one of the most important institutions within the criminal justice system and play a crucial role in maintaining law and order, preventing crime, protecting citizens, and enforcing legal norms. In a democratic society, policing must operate within the framework of constitutional values, respect for human rights, and principles of accountability. However, the Indian police system continues to be largely governed by the Police Act of 1861, a colonial legislation enacted primarily to maintain governmental control rather than to serve the public. Consequently, concerns regarding political interference, abuse of power, custodial violence, corruption, and inadequate accountability mechanisms have persisted for decades.

Recognising the urgent need for reform, several commissions and committees, including the National Police Commission, the Ribeiro Committee, the Padmanabhaiah Committee¹, and the Soli Sorabjee Committee, recommended comprehensive restructuring of police administration. Despite these recommendations, implementation remained limited due to political and administrative reluctance.

¹ Padmanabhaiah Committee, *Report of the Committee on Police Reforms* (Ministry of Home Affairs 2000).



A significant turning point occurred in 2006 when the Supreme Court of India, in *Prakash Singh v Union of India*², issued seven binding directives aimed at insulating the police from undue political influence and improving institutional accountability. These directives included the establishment of State Security Commissions, fixed tenure for senior police officers, separation of investigation from law-and-order functions, creation of Police Establishment Boards, Police Complaints Authorities, and the constitution of a National Security Commission.

Although the judgment represented a landmark effort towards police reform, subsequent developments reveal substantial gaps between judicial mandates and practical implementation. Several states have either partially implemented the directives or enacted legislation that dilutes their intended objectives. Furthermore, challenges such as inadequate funding, manpower shortages, infrastructural deficiencies, and resistance to institutional change continue to hinder reform efforts.

This article critically analyses the implementation of the Supreme Court's directives and evaluates the challenges that persist at the ground level. It argues that meaningful police reform requires not only judicial intervention but also legislative commitment, administrative willingness, and continuous public oversight to ensure accountable, transparent, and citizen-centric policing in India.

II. EVOLUTION OF POLICE ADMINISTRATION IN INDIA

The evolution of police administration in India reflects a transition from traditional community-based systems to a centralized and professional law enforcement structure. In ancient India, policing functions were performed by local officials responsible for maintaining public order and collecting information regarding criminal activities. During the Mughal period, officials such as the Kotwal and Faujdar played significant roles in maintaining law and order in urban and rural areas.

The modern police system emerged during British rule. Following the Revolt of 1857, the colonial administration recognized the need for a disciplined and centralized police force to maintain control over the population³. Consequently, the Police Commission of 1860 recommended the establishment of a uniform police organization, leading to the enactment of the Police Act, 1861. The Act created a hierarchical police structure headed by the Inspector General at the provincial level and the Superintendent of Police at the district level. However, the primary objective of the colonial police was not public service but the protection of British interests and suppression of dissent. Further reforms were introduced through the Indian Police Commission of 1902–03, which identified widespread corruption and inefficiency within the police system. The Commission recommended the creation of specialized investigative agencies, resulting in the establishment of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and improvements in police administration.

After independence, policing became a State subject under the Constitution of India. Although democratic governance replaced colonial rule, much of the police structure continued to operate under the framework of the Police Act, 1861. Successive committees and commissions repeatedly emphasized the need to transform the police from an instrument of state control into a service-oriented institution accountable to the public. Nevertheless, comprehensive reforms remained largely unimplemented, resulting in persistent concerns regarding political interference, lack of accountability, and inadequate professionalism.

III. NEED FOR POLICE REFORMS

The demand for police reforms in India stems from the continued operation of a policing system rooted in colonial objectives rather than democratic principles. The Police Act, 1861 was designed to maintain governmental authority

² *Prakash Singh v Union of India* (2006) 8 SCC 1.

³ Indian Police Commission, *Report of the Indian Police Commission 1902–03* (Government of India 1903).



and public order rather than protect citizens' rights⁴. Consequently, the police often function under excessive executive control, which undermines their independence and professionalism.

Political interference in appointments, transfers, and investigations has been one of the most significant obstacles to effective policing. Frequent transfers of officers, pressure from political authorities, and the misuse of police powers for partisan purposes have weakened public confidence in law enforcement institutions. Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of personnel, poor training facilities, and increasing workload adversely affect police efficiency. Human rights concerns such as custodial violence, arbitrary arrests, and abuse of authority have further highlighted the necessity for reform. The absence of effective accountability mechanisms often prevents timely action against police misconduct. These systemic deficiencies prompted several commissions, including the National Police Commission, Ribeiro Committee, Padmanabhaiah Committee⁵, and Malimath Committee⁶, to recommend structural and functional reforms. Despite these recommendations, implementation remained limited due to lack of political will and administrative resistance.

Therefore, police reforms are essential to ensure operational autonomy, accountability, transparency, protection of human rights, and improved public trust in the criminal justice system.

IV. ANALYSIS OF PRAKASH SINGH V UNION OF INDIA (2006)

The decision of the Supreme Court in *Prakash Singh v Union of India*⁷ represents the most significant judicial intervention in the field of police reforms in India. The case was initiated through a Public Interest Litigation filed by Prakash Singh, a former Director General of Police, seeking implementation of long-pending police reform recommendations. The petition highlighted excessive political interference, lack of accountability, and the continued dependence on the colonial Police Act, 1861.

Recognizing the failure of legislative and executive authorities to implement reforms despite repeated recommendations from expert committees, the Supreme Court exercised its constitutional powers and issued seven binding directives intended to operate until appropriate legislation was enacted. These directives included:

1. Establishment of State Security Commissions.
2. Merit-based appointment and minimum tenure of DGPs.
3. Minimum tenure for key operational police officers.
4. Separation of investigation from law-and-order functions.
5. Establishment of Police Establishment Boards.
6. Creation of Police Complaints Authorities.
7. Constitution of a National Security Commission.

The Court emphasized that the rule of law cannot be maintained without a professional and politically neutral police force. The judgment sought to balance police autonomy with accountability by insulating operational decisions from political influence while simultaneously creating independent oversight mechanisms⁸.

Despite its transformative potential, implementation has been uneven across states. Several states have enacted legislation that dilutes the spirit of the directives, while institutions such as State Security Commissions and Police Complaints Authorities often remain ineffective or non-functional. This gap between judicial directives and actual implementation continues to hinder meaningful police reform in India. Recent reports regarding inactive oversight bodies in some states demonstrate the continuing challenges in achieving compliance with the Court's vision.

⁴ National Police Commission, *Eighth Report* (Government of India 1981).

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Committee on Reforms of Criminal Justice System (Malimath Committee), *Report* (Ministry of Home Affairs 2003).

⁷ *Prakash Singh v Union of India* (2006) 8 SCC 1.

⁸ Julio Ribeiro Committee, *Committee on Police Reforms Report* (Ministry of Home Affairs 1998).



The judgment remains a constitutional milestone because it reaffirmed that effective policing is indispensable for protecting fundamental rights and strengthening democratic governance.

V. SUPREME COURT DIRECTIVES ON POLICE REFORMS

The landmark judgment in *Prakash Singh v Union of India* marked a significant step towards restructuring the Indian police system. Observing the continued failure of governments to implement police reform recommendations, the Supreme Court issued seven binding directives intended to ensure police autonomy, professionalism, and accountability. These directives were designed to operate until suitable legislation was enacted by Parliament and State Legislatures.

The first directive required the establishment of State Security Commissions (SSC) to insulate the police from unwarranted political interference and formulate broad policy guidelines. Secondly, the Court directed that the Director General of Police (DGP) should be selected through a merit-based process and provided with a minimum tenure of two years to ensure stability in leadership. The third directive mandated a minimum tenure of two years for key operational officers such as the Inspector General, Deputy Inspector General, Superintendent of Police, and Station House Officer. This measure was intended to reduce arbitrary transfers and enhance administrative efficiency. The fourth directive called for the separation of investigation from law-and-order functions, particularly in urban areas, to improve the quality and professionalism of criminal investigations. The fifth directive required the creation of Police Establishment Boards (PEBs) to manage transfers, postings, and promotions of police personnel and reduce political influence in personnel matters. The sixth directive provided for the establishment of Police Complaints Authorities (PCAs) at the state and district levels to investigate allegations of serious police misconduct, including custodial deaths, custodial violence, and abuse of authority. Finally, the Court directed the establishment of a National Security Commission (NSC) for the selection and placement of chiefs of central police organizations⁹. Collectively, these directives sought to balance operational independence with institutional accountability. The judgment recognized that democratic policing requires protection from political pressures while simultaneously ensuring public oversight and adherence to constitutional principles.

VI. STATE-WISE IMPLEMENTATION STATUS

Although the Supreme Court's directives were legally binding, implementation across Indian states has been inconsistent and often inadequate. Several states enacted new police legislation after the *Prakash Singh* judgment; however, many of these laws diluted the core objectives of police independence and accountability. Some states established State Security Commissions, Police Establishment Boards, and Police Complaints Authorities in compliance with the judgment. Nevertheless, many of these bodies suffer from structural weaknesses, inadequate staffing, limited powers, and excessive governmental control. In several states, State Security Commissions function merely as advisory bodies without meaningful influence over police administration.

Similarly, Police Complaints Authorities, which were intended to serve as independent accountability mechanisms, remain ineffective in many jurisdictions due to inadequate resources, lack of independence, and delays in appointments. The implementation of fixed tenure provisions has also been inconsistent, with frequent transfers of police officers continuing despite judicial directives. The separation of investigation from law-and-order functions has been partially implemented in some metropolitan areas but remains largely absent in many states due to manpower shortages and resource constraints. Likewise, the process for appointing Directors General of Police has often been influenced by political considerations despite judicial guidelines.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the lack of genuine compliance with its directives. Various reports and studies indicate that while states have formally complied with certain requirements, substantial

⁹ National Police Commission, *Eighth Report* (Government of India 1981).



implementation gaps continue to undermine the objective of creating an independent and accountable police service¹⁰. The uneven implementation of reforms demonstrates the continuing tension between judicial mandates and political realities. It also highlights the need for comprehensive legislative action and stronger monitoring mechanisms to ensure effective compliance.

VII. GROUND-LEVEL CHALLENGES

Despite judicial intervention and policy recommendations, numerous practical challenges continue to impede police reforms in India. One of the most significant challenges is political interference in police functioning. Frequent transfers, politically motivated postings, and external influence over investigations often compromise professional independence and undermine public confidence. Another major concern is the shortage of police personnel and inadequate infrastructure. Many police stations face resource constraints, including insufficient staff, outdated equipment, poor forensic support, and inadequate technological capabilities. These deficiencies negatively affect both law-and-order maintenance and criminal investigations. The persistence of custodial violence and human rights violations also remains a serious issue. Allegations of torture, unlawful detention, and excessive use of force continue to raise concerns regarding accountability and compliance with constitutional safeguards. Weak internal disciplinary mechanisms and ineffective external oversight often prevent meaningful accountability for misconduct.

Furthermore, lack of specialized training presents a significant obstacle. Modern policing requires expertise in cybercrime investigation, forensic science, financial crimes, and victim-sensitive approaches. However, training institutions frequently suffer from inadequate resources and outdated curricula. Institutional resistance to change constitutes another challenge. Bureaucratic inertia and reluctance to adopt structural reforms often delay implementation efforts. Additionally, public distrust of the police, resulting from historical experiences of corruption and abuse of power, complicates efforts to establish community-oriented policing. Finally, the absence of comprehensive legislative reform continues to hinder progress. While judicial directives have provided an important framework, sustainable reform requires political commitment, statutory backing, adequate funding, and continuous public oversight. Addressing these challenges is essential for transforming the police into a professional, accountable, and citizen-centric institution capable of meeting the demands of a modern democratic society.

VIII. SUGGESTION

The successful implementation of police reforms in India requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving legislative, administrative, and institutional measures. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- State Governments should ensure full compliance with the directives laid down by the Supreme Court in *Prakash Singh v Union of India*. Existing state police legislations must be reviewed and amended to align with the spirit and objectives of the Court's directions.
- State Security Commissions should be strengthened and made genuinely independent. These bodies must include representatives from civil society, judiciary, and academia to ensure transparency and prevent undue political interference in police functioning.
- Fixed tenure provisions for police officers should be strictly implemented. Arbitrary transfers and politically motivated postings should be discouraged to promote professionalism, continuity, and administrative stability within the police force.
- Police Complaints Authorities at the state and district levels should be adequately funded and empowered to conduct independent investigations into allegations of police misconduct, custodial violence, and abuse of power. Their recommendations should be made binding to ensure effective accountability.

¹⁰ Second Administrative Reforms Commission, *Fifth Report: Public Order* (Government of India 2007).



- The separation of investigation from law-and-order functions should be implemented across all states. Specialized investigation units equipped with modern forensic tools and trained personnel would significantly improve the quality of criminal investigations and conviction rates.
- Police training programmes should be modernized to address emerging challenges such as cybercrime, financial crimes, digital evidence, artificial intelligence, and victim-sensitive policing. Human rights education should form an integral part of police training curricula.
- Governments should increase investment in police infrastructure, technology, forensic laboratories, and personnel recruitment. Addressing manpower shortages and improving working conditions are essential for enhancing operational efficiency.
- Community policing initiatives should be encouraged to strengthen cooperation between citizens and law enforcement agencies. Public participation can improve trust, transparency, and responsiveness in policing.
- Parliament and State Legislatures should enact comprehensive police reform legislation based on democratic principles, constitutional values, and international best practices. Sustainable reform requires a statutory framework that guarantees both police autonomy and accountability.

The implementation of these recommendations would contribute significantly towards building a professional, transparent, accountable, and citizen-centric police system capable of meeting the demands of a modern democratic society.

IX. CONCLUSION

Police reforms remain indispensable for strengthening the rule of law and ensuring the effective functioning of the criminal justice system in India. The Supreme Court's landmark judgment in *Prakash Singh v Union of India* marked a historic attempt to transform policing by promoting accountability, professionalism, operational autonomy, and protection from political interference. The judgment provided a comprehensive framework for reform through the establishment of independent oversight mechanisms, fixed tenure provisions, and institutional safeguards.

However, this study demonstrates that despite the passage of nearly two decades since the judgment, implementation remains fragmented and inadequate across many states. While several reforms have been introduced formally, their practical impact has been limited by political resistance, administrative inertia, resource constraints, and weak accountability structures. The continued prevalence of arbitrary transfers, custodial violence, inadequate infrastructure, and ineffective oversight bodies highlights the gap between judicial directives and ground realities.

The findings reveal that meaningful police reform cannot be achieved solely through judicial intervention. It requires sustained political commitment, legislative action, institutional cooperation, and active public participation. Effective implementation of the Supreme Court's directives, coupled with modernization of police institutions and strengthening of accountability mechanisms, is essential for ensuring democratic policing.

Ultimately, a police force that is independent in its professional functions yet accountable to the law and the public is fundamental to constitutional governance. Comprehensive police reforms are therefore not merely an administrative necessity but a constitutional imperative for safeguarding human rights, enhancing public trust, and ensuring justice in a democratic society.

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