

Mass Molestation

Why in news?

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The mass molestation during the events of New Year's-eve in Bengaluru once again holds a mirror up to Indian society.

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What happened during New Year's Eve at Bengaluru?

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- Thousands of revellers had gathered in and around Mahatma Gandhi Road and Brigade Road to ring in 2017, as is something of a tradition in the city.

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- But, according to reports that subsequently emerged, **a large number of women were sexually assaulted around midnight.**

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- While no complaint had been filed, Bengaluru police have taken up an investigation based on the reports of women being groped and physically attacked.

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- Another incident, reportedly also of the early hours of January 1, has come graphically into the public domain, with CCTV footage showing a woman being grabbed as she makes her way home in a residential street before she pulls herself free and escapes.

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How a minister responded?

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- In an aftermath that has echoed with Karnataka Home Minister G. Parameshwara's effort **to blame the violence on "western culture"**, it

is easy to understand why no women came forth, at least initially, to register an offence.

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- Mr. Parameshwara's implication that for women to wear "western" dress and be out and about having a good time is to invite sexual harassment, ironically, explains the reluctance of women to register offences.

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- For, to do so is to very often court an accusatory glare, and be made to answer why they were out in a lonely street, after dark, in a place teeming with "boys" — or put simply, why they did not know better.

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How the society reacts to offence of women?

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- **The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013**, passed after national outrage over the Delhi gang rape of December 16, 2012, had sought to bring clarity to the continuum of sexual offences and to simplify procedures for women to bring them to the attention of the police.

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- To truly convince women that the state is on the same page, every crime against a woman must be regarded as a horror.

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- But without an administrative ethos that does not flip an accusation on a woman and instead asserts a woman's right to bodily integrity no matter where she is and what she is doing, no amount of law-making can significantly change things.

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Leadership deficit:

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- There is the other factor of inadequacies of police leadership that have become glaring over the years.

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- They look up to the Chief Minister or Home Minister for approval of even minor and routine field decisions.

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Outnumbered on the street:

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- There is nothing to suggest that the police were surprised at the happenings or were unprepared. There was indeed substantial deployment in traditional hotspots, taking into account past experience.
- What is now learnt is that the police were outnumbered in a few places, where the congregation of revellers was more than usual.
- **The local police stations could have possibly made an assessment late in the afternoon so that extra policemen could have been directed to localities where the crowds were pouring in.**
- There was therefore an element of failure on the part of city police intelligence. The police were reluctant to use force against the antisocial elements. They wait for orders from the top most hierarchy.
- This unfortunate situation has developed over the years because of many complaints of police excesses and the judicial enquiries ordered as a sequel. This is where politics creeps in.
- Many belonging to the Opposition lose no time accusing the police of overreaction, only to embarrass the ruling party even where there is consensus that the situation on the ground did warrant police opening fire or using batons.
- Unless this situation changes, one will continue to hear complaints of police failures.

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What changes have to be done?

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- In a seminal paper, '**Complexities of 21st Century Policing**', published last year, Professor David Bayley makes a plea for new institutions within the police so as to draw benefit from public inputs.

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- **Reliance should be more on institutional wisdom and memory rather than on individual experiences.**

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- What Prof. Bayley says has immediate relevance for the Indian police, especially after what we saw in Bengaluru on New Year's Eve, when an already poor image of the Indian police deteriorated further because of an apathetic urban police force standing by even as some women were being molested.

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- It was not just the Bengaluru police that failed that night; the criticism levelled against it applies to the police at large, even while giving allowance to varying standards of policing in our megacities.

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- In specific terms, what is required now is to **restructure existing police arrangements for special occasions** such as New Year celebrations.

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Way Ahead:

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- In the ultimate analysis, it is only strong public opinion that can bring a sea change to the styles of policing.

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- In the Bengaluru incidents, the **citizenry has a significant role to play** by bringing enough pressure on the government to identify the accused and bring them to book.

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- This brings me to the fundamental question of **enhancing police sensitivity to the task of protecting our women.**

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- There was also a laudable effort to make the law on sexual assaults on women more stringent. Whether this has helped to improve the quality of police protection to women is debatable.

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- New methods of training will certainly help, but only moderately. Imaginative day-to-day interaction on the subject between the higher echelons and policemen at the grass-roots level will alone help.

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