

Mumbai policemen demand union

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MUMBAI: A demand to unionise the Mumbai police has divided the force right through the middle, with senior officials calling it a subversive move that would destroy the institution; and the lower constabulary accusing them of being scared of being held accountable for their actions.

While a recent signature campaign initiated by the Nitish Rane-led Swabhiman Sanghatana to force the government to allow a union of policemen was nipped in the bud with Joint Commissioner of Police (Law and Order) Deven Bharti issuing orders asking policemen to desist from signing the petition, the discontent in the constabulary continues to brew.

The demand for a police union is not new and nor are the reasons why the policemen want to organise themselves into a pressure group. Long working hours, low wages, and poor housing are the grouses that have made unionisation a popular demand for years. The recent attack on policemen that did not evoke a strong response from their senior has only strengthened the demand.

What started with a spur-of-the moment agitation by policemen's wife when Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis visited the family of constable Vilas Shinde, who died after being assaulted on duty by a biker, has now become rallying call for the force. And as the efforts to form a union are thwarted, it has only increased the gulf between the constabulary and the senior officials.

Swabhiman Sanghatana workers claim that in just two days they had managed to secure the signatures over a lakh policemen and their family members on the petition.

Mumbai police has an official 12-hour work shift, which is four hours more than the maximum mandated for workers in retail outlets under the Shops and Establishment Act or factory workers under the Factory Act. But, as any constable would tell you, they almost always end up working for up to 14 to 15 hours. The New York police work eight-hour shifts and have a five-day week. Same applies to the UK's famed Scotland Yard, a police force Mumbai police once was compared to.

The living standards in the lower rung of the force are just as bad as the working conditions. A constable takes home Rs 18,000 a month and the police housing colonies are some of the most cramped and filthy in the city.

While none of the senior officers were willing to speak on record on the demand for a union for policemen, they all agreed that a lot could be done to improve the working conditions for the constabulary. However, they said the idea of a union in a uniformed force goes against its hierarchical character. "Can there be a union in the armed forces?" asked an officer.

Retired IPS officer and lawyer YP Singh said that it is impossible for the policemen to form a union as it is against the Police (Incitement to Disaffection) Act of 1922. However, he believes that the state can take certain measures to change the working conditions of its police force.

"The state can put in place a proper grievance redressal mechanism. So far, this has not worked in a satisfactory manner due to the red-tapism. The state should come up with a more substantial, credible and practical approach to the problem," Singh said.

With the cops bound by strict service rules, the demand for a union in the force is being spearheaded by the Police Wives Association and Bablu Jadhav, a retired assistant subinspector, who was the president of the only police union Mumbai has ever seen. The union was formed 1980 and was disbanded two years later when the city police went on a strike, triggering a massive spurt in crimes.

Manasi Bhosale, who heads the Police Wives Association, believes that IAS and IPS officers are against unionisation because it will take away their power to exploit their subordinates. "Our husbands work in inhuman conditions and they are deprived of their basic human rights," she said.

Bhosale said that though she met Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis with the demand, there is little hope it will be met. "We were okay with the government imposing certain conditions on the police union," Bhosale said.

Jadhav believes that the experiment with a police union in 1980 failed because senior officers undermined it. "In a situation where there is no police union, what the seniors say has to be done. No one can question them. In the two years we had the union, policemen did not go around collecting bribes on their seniors' behest. They do so now because the seniors force them to," Jadhav said.

Jadhav has written a letter to the chief minister stating that if the permission to form a police union was not granted by December 31, 2016, he will organise a protest march to his residence. "Since policemen are bound by strict service rules, retired police officers and their families and the families of serving policemen will be part of the protest," Jadhav said.