

1 “Democratic Accountability in Indian Policing: A Theoretical Assessment.”

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3
4 **Abstract-** Democratic accountability is a basic pillar of policing in constitutional
5 democracies. However, in the Indian context, the policing system continues to operate within
6 a very complex institutional framework characterised by colonial administrative legacies,
7 political involvement, bureaucratic domination, fragile accountability systems and declining
8 levels of public confidence. This paper tries to critically analyse the nature and problems of
9 democratic accountability in Indian policing theoretically and through secondary data. The
10 paper revolves around the reports of police reform commissions, court pronouncements,
11 governance literature, polls of public perception and current academic discourse. It looks at
12 the link between policing, democracy, institutional legitimacy and citizen trust. This article
13 uses theoretical insights from democratic governance, procedural justice, New Public
14 Governance and accountability studies to investigate the structural and operational
15 deficiencies of the Indian policing system. It argues that despite repeated calls for change and
16 significant judicial interventions, policing in India continues to be marked by politicisation,
17 limited transparency, inadequate civilian supervision and strained police-public relations. It
18 also highlights the importance of citizen orientated policing, institutional independence,
19 participatory governance and ethical accountability to allow democratic policing practices.
20 The paper concludes that a paradigmatic shift from the colonial ‘force-centric’ model to a
21 democratic ‘service-oriented’ model based on constitutional values, human rights, public
22 trust, transparency and responsive governance is mandatory for substantive police reform in
23 India.

24
25 **Keywords:** Democratic accountability, Indian policing, police reforms, police-public
26 relationship, democratic governance, public trust, procedural justice, institutional accountability.

27 **Introduction**

28 One of the most direct and palpable ways state authority is made manifest in democratic
29 democracies is through policing. Police institutions in constitutional democracies are charged
30 with not only the enforcement of law and maintenance of public order but also with the

31 protection of civil liberties, protection of constitutional values and preservation of institutional
32 legitimacy through public consent and accountability. Democratic policing is thus based on such
33 ideals as transparency, legality, accountability and citizen trust. However, the Indian context
34 continues to witness the policing system deeply rooted in colonial institutional legacies,
35 especially those in the Police Act of 1861, which was primarily designed to serve imperial
36 control rather than democratic governance. The relationship between police institutions and
37 citizens has, in recent decades, become a major area of academic and policy concern in India.
38 Public trust and institutional credibility have suffered as a result of custodial violence, charges of
39 corruption, excesses of force, encounter murders, communal bias, political intervention and lack
40 of adequate means to redress grievances. At the same time, rapid urbanisation, technological
41 advancement, cybercrime, social fragmentation and increasing democratic expectations have
42 raised demand for more transparent, accountable and citizen-focused policing systems. In
43 democratic systems, police accountability refers to the obligation of law enforcement agencies to
44 explain their actions, to comply with constitutional and legal norms, and to be answerable for
45 abuses of power. Democratic accountability is therefore multidimensional: legal accountability,
46 administrative oversight, judicial review, political neutrality, media scrutiny and public
47 engagement. But in India these mechanisms tend to be fragmented, patchy and institutionally
48 feeble. Time and again, reform commissions and expert committees like the National Police
49 Commission, Ribeiro Committee, Padmanabhaiah Committee, Malimath Committee and Second
50 Administrative Reforms Commission have reiterated the need for structural police reforms.
51 Similarly, the landmark judgement in Prakash Singh v. Union of India aimed at institutionalising
52 democratic accountability through directions for fixed tenure for police officials, constitution of
53 State Security Commissions, constitution of Police Complaints Authorities and enhancement of
54 operational autonomy. But implementation across Indian states has been uneven and limited
55 despite these reform initiatives. Colonial organisational culture, political patronage, bureaucratic
56 opposition and lack of civilian oversight have remained entrenched and have been a major
57 obstacle to the democratic transformation of policing institutions. Discourses on police
58 accountability have thus been closely linked to larger debates on democratic governance, human
59 rights, public trust and the legitimacy of the state in present-day Indian society. The paper
60 critically analyses the democratic accountability of Indian policing using a theoretical and
61 secondary source approach. The analysis draws on reform commission reports, academic

62 literature, judicial interventions, policy assessments and perception-based studies. The study
63 adds to the ongoing discourse on democratic governance, institutional legitimacy and police
64 reform in contemporary India.

65 66 **Objectives of the Study**

67
68 The main objectives of the present study are:

- 69
- 70 1. To study the theoretical basis of democratic accountability in policing
- 71 2. To analyse the historical evolution of policing and accountability mechanisms in India.
- 72 3. To critically examine efforts at police reform and mechanisms of institutional
- 73 accountability.
- 74 4. To assess the relationship between police legitimacy, civilian trust and democratic
- 75 governance.
- 76 5. To identify key structural and institutional challenges for democratic policing in India.
- 77 6. To recommend policy measures to enhance democratic accountability in Indian policing.
- 78

79 **Research Methodology**

80 The present study is qualitative, analytical and theoretical one. The data is obtained from
81 secondary sources. The study is based on Reports of police reform commissions and
82 committees, Government publications and policy documents, Supreme Court judgements and
83 constitutional provisions, Scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles, Survey reports
84 related to police perception and public trust. Research studies on democratic governance and
85 accountability. The study adopts a descriptive and interpretative methodology to analyse
86 institutional patterns, governance frameworks and accountability mechanisms in Indian policing.

87

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89

90

91 **Theoretical Framework**

92

93 **Democratic Governance Theory**

94

95 Democratic governance theory highlights the significance of participation, accountability,
96 transparency, responsiveness, and rule of law in public institutions. In democratic governance

97 theory, state institutions are deemed legitimate according to public consent, constitutional
98 principles, institutional accountability and formal legal power. Within this paradigm police
99 institutions are expected to function in accordance with democratic norms, civil liberties and
100 constitutional safeguards rather than authoritarian practices or coercive control. Democratic
101 policing thus means that law enforcement agencies should be accountable to elected
102 representatives, constitutional bodies, the judiciary, civil society organisations, media institutions
103 and citizens.

104

105 **Procedural Justice Theory**

106

107 Procedural Justice Theory argues that perceptions of fairness, impartiality, transparency and
108 respectful treatment in the process of policing are important factors that influence public trust
109 and cooperation with police institutions. Accountability mechanisms are important to prevent the
110 over-concentration of coercive power and the potential abuse of authority (Beetham, 1991; Held,
111 2006). Tom R. Tyler contends that institutional legitimacy involves more than just good
112 outcomes, but depends on the fairness of the procedures used to implement authority. Citizens
113 who view policing practices as fair, respectful and procedurally just are more likely to obey the
114 law and co-operate with police. This is a big challenge for procedural justice in the Indian
115 context, where there are recurring allegations of corruption, discriminatory practices, custodial
116 violence, arbitrary detention and abuse of police powers. The absence of procedural fairness
117 undermines the institutional legitimacy and erodes the public trust in policing institutions (Tyler,
118 2006).

119

120 **New Public Governance (NPG)**

121

122 The New Public Governance (NPG) is defined by a shift away from the traditional hierarchical
123 and state-centric administrative models towards collaborative and participative governance
124 involving multiple stakeholders, networks and citizens. The NPG paradigm views policing as a
125 collective process rather than the state's business, requiring collaboration among police
126 institutions, local communities, civil society organisations, private actors and other governance
127 networks. Policing in the NPG paradigm is marked by citizen involvement, partnership-based
128 governance, decentralisation, transparency and problem-solving through cooperation. In India
129 there are emerging efforts to integrate NPG principles into the governance of police through
130 community policing programmes, digital grievance redressal platforms, citizen feedback systems
131 and collaborative urban security mechanisms (Osborne, 2010).

132

133 **Accountability Theory**

134

135 Accountability Theory is grounded in principles of answerability, transparency, enforceability,
136 institutional oversight and responsibility in governance systems. Democratic policing is
137 accountable policing. Accountability is the mechanism by which law enforcement agencies
138 exercise their coercive power within constitutional limits and under public oversight. Democratic
139 accountability in policing has several interconnected dimensions:

140 * Internal accountability

141 * External accountability

142 * Judicial accountability

- 143 * Political accountability
- 144 * Social accountability
- 145 * Media accountability

146
147 For accountability mechanisms to be effective there must be independent oversight bodies,
148 transparent disciplinary procedures, public complaint systems accessible to the public, judicial
149 review, civilian participation and institutional transparency. Mechanisms of strong accountability
150 are important to improve police legitimacy, defend human rights and build democratic
151 governance (Bovens, 2007).

152 153 **The Evolution of Policing in India: A Historical Perspective**

154
155 The history of policing in India is closely linked to the colonial administrative history of the
156 country. The Revolt of 1857 had led to the passing of the Police Act of 1861 which laid the
157 foundation of the present police system. The main purpose of this law was not the
158 implementation of democratic law or the well-being of the citizens, but the strengthening of
159 imperial power and the elimination of political opposition. Thus the colonial police system was
160 conceived as a coercive, centralised apparatus for enforcement of obedience to the ruling regime
161 and not as a public service or accountable to the public. Post-independence, India adopted
162 democratic constitutional values that emphasised liberty, equality, justice and rule of law, but
163 much of the colonial policing framework persisted. Centralised hierarchies, political dependence,
164 bureaucratic control and a force-oriented institutional culture were thus to mark postcolonial
165 Indian policing. Scholars have argued that the continuity of colonial administrative structures has
166 been a major barrier to the democratisation of policing institutions in India (Bayley, 1969).
167 Various committees and reform commissions have repeatedly recommended comprehensive
168 police reforms to improve accountability, professionalism, operational autonomy and citizen-
169 oriented policing keeping in view the structural constraints of the policing system.

170 171 **National Police Commission (1977–1981)**

172
173 The National Police Commission pointed out political interference as one of the most serious
174 obstacles to professional and impartial policing in India. The Commission set a number of
175 structural reforms to encourage democratic accountability and operational independence. Its
176 major recommendations included establishment of State Security Commissions, fixed tenure for
177 senior police officers, separation of investigative functions from law-and-order duties,
178 establishment of independent complaint redressal mechanisms and reduction of undue political
179 interference in police administration (National Police Commission, 1979).

180 181 182 183 **Ribeiro Committee (1998)**

184
185 The Ribeiro Committee emphasised the need to improve professional autonomy while at the
186 same time enhancing institutional accountability in the police system. The Committee strongly
187 endorsed the implementation of the recommendations made by the National Police Commission
188 and stressed the need to liberate the police institutions from partisan political pressures.

189

190 **Padmanabhaiah Committee (2000)**

191

192 The Padmanabhaiah Committee examined issues of police modernisation, professional training,
193 ethical standards, community policing and improvement of working conditions of police
194 personnel. The Committee was of the view that in democratic societies, effective policing
195 necessitates institutional innovation and a greater sensitivity to public concerns.

196

197 **Malimath Committee (2003)**

198

199 The Malimath Committee was mainly concerned with the reform of the criminal justice system
200 and stressed the need for better co-ordination among police agencies, judicial institutions and the
201 prosecution machinery. The Committee emphasised that efficient administration of criminal
202 justice requires institutional co-operation, procedural efficiency and accountability.

203

204 **Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2007)**

205

206 The Second Administrative Reforms Commission recommended a citizen-centric approach to
207 policing, based on ethical governance, transparency, public participation and democratic
208 accountability. The Commission highlighted the significance of community policing practices,
209 institutional integrity and effective grievance redressal mechanisms in establishing public trust
210 and democratic legitimacy. However, despite reiteration, the implementation of these reform
211 bodies has been uneven and inconsistent across Indian states. Political reticence, bureaucratic
212 resistance, institutional inertia and the existence of colonial organisational culture continue to
213 block genuine police changes in India, scholars and policy experts say. So, while there has been
214 reform talk and judicial involvement for decades, the democratic transformation of Indian
215 policing has been limited.

216

217

218 **Democratic Accountability and Indian Policing**

219

220 Democratic accountability means the institutional and constitutional mechanisms that make sure
221 police organisations are accountable to democratic values, legal structures, public bodies and
222 citizens. In democratic societies, police forces are expected to exercise power within the
223 framework of constitutional government, rule of law, transparency and public accountability.
224 Therefore, accountability procedures are needed to prevent the misuse of coercive authority and
225 preserve the legitimacy of institutions.

226

227

228

229 **Political Accountability**

230

231 In India, police institutions are, in theory, accountable to elected governments operating within
232 the framework of parliamentary democracy. But excessive political interference has frequently
233 undermined the professionalism, neutrality and operational independence of police institutions.
234 Transfer, posting, promotion, criminal investigation and priority of operations are often based on

235 political considerations rather than professional standards. The continued dominance of partisan
236 political control undermines the independence of the institutions and contributes to the loss of
237 public faith in law enforcement agencies. They have argued that political interference not only
238 undermines impartial policing but also perpetuates patronage networks and selective law
239 enforcement practices (Bayley, 1969).

240

241 **Judicial Accountability**

242

243 The judiciary is an essential mechanism of democratic accountability within the policing system.
244 Indian courts have regularly addressed custodial assault, wrongful incarceration, encounter
245 deaths, abuse of authority and violation of fundamental rights. Thus Judicial activism has been
246 important in highlighting the need for police reforms and protection of civil liberties. The
247 judgement in the case of Prakash Singh v. Union of India, was a significant step in this direction
248 wherein the Supreme Court of India directed all states to undertake major structural reforms to
249 strengthen police accountability and operational autonomy. The Court suggested the setting up of
250 State Security Commissions, Police Establishment Boards, Police Complaints Authorities Fixed
251 tenure for police officials Merit-based selection of Directors General of Police (DGPs) Despite
252 the importance of these directions, implementation across states has been patchy and incomplete,
253 thus curtailing the transformative potential of judicial intervention.

254

255 **Administrative Accountability**

256

257 Administrative accountability refers to internal disciplinary and supervisory mechanisms to
258 ensure professional conduct, ethical behaviour and adherence to institutional norms within police
259 organisations. These mechanisms include departmental enquiries, disciplinary proceedings,
260 supervision and internal vigilance mechanisms. However, internal accountability mechanisms in
261 India are often blunted by the hierarchical culture of the organisations, bureaucratic secrecy, lack
262 of transparency and institutional protectionism. Some critics argue that internal disciplinary
263 mechanisms often serve organisational interests at the expense of independent justice and
264 accountability, and thereby undermine public trust in police institutions (Verma, 2012).

265

266 **Public Accountability**

267

268 Public accountability is related to police institutions' responsiveness to citizen complaints, public
269 participation, transparency, and community engagement. Democratic policing goes beyond legal
270 authority. It is rooted in public trust, cooperation and institutional legitimacy built on the
271 confidence of citizens. But in India, several perception-based research and public surveys reveal
272 widespread distrust in enforcement organisations. Police behaviour is often criticised by citizens
273 for corruption, discrimination, delay in response, custodial abuse, abuse of power and
274 insensitivity. Decline in police credibility and strained police-public relations are also
275 attributable to weak public accountability systems.

276

277 The problem of democratic governance has drawn growing attention to the need to bolster
278 citizen-oriented policing and participatory accountability procedures. Police–Public Relations
279 and Public Trust. The legitimacy of police organisations in democratic countries is based to a
280 large extent on public trust and citizen co-operation. Fair, impartial, transparent, and accountable

281 police agencies are more likely to generate public compliance and support when residents see the
282 police in this way. Thus democratic policing is based not only on legal power, but on
283 institutional legitimacy, which is based on public confidence and social acceptability. But in
284 Indian context police-public relations are strained due to a number of structural and behavioural
285 issues. Accusations of corruption, custodial violence, political bias, delay in administration of
286 justice, use of excessive force, discriminatory practices and insensitivity towards marginalised
287 populations have all contributed in no small measure to the public's lack of trust in policing
288 institutions. Such problems have damaged the image of the police as democratic service
289 providers and have instead helped to increase the public fear and alienation toward the law
290 enforcement agencies. Studies on policing in India based on perception suggest that many
291 citizens view police institutions with suspicion and apprehension rather than trust and
292 cooperation. This chronic deficit of trust has an adverse effect on democratic governance,
293 weakens institutional legitimacy and compromises the efficacy of community policing strategies.
294 Thus scholars have argued that public trust is a key component of democratic accountability and
295 effective law enforcement (Tyler, 2006). Procedural Justice Theory states that citizens are more
296 likely to trust and cooperate with police institutions when they are treated respectfully, fairly,
297 transparently, neutrally and effectively communicated with during police interactions. Tom R.
298 Tyler argues that legitimacy is created not only by good outcomes, but also by procedurally fair
299 and respectful institutional behaviour. Procedural fairness, thus, is an important mechanism for
300 enhancing police legitimacy and police-public relations.

301
302 With the increasing concern about public trust, different community policing initiatives have
303 been introduced in different parts of India to promote cooperation between police institutions and
304 local communities. Some of the prominent examples are the Janamaithri Suraksha Project in
305 Kerala and the Mohalla Committees in Maharashtra. Also, digital grievance redressal platforms,
306 citizen feedback mechanisms and community outreach programmes are attempts to make
307 policing more accessible, transparent and engaging to citizens. But many scholars argue that
308 localised or isolated reforms cannot replace broader structural transformation within the policing
309 system. Significant reforms to address political interference, accountability, institutional culture,
310 human rights protections, and democratic oversight systems will be necessary to bring about
311 sustainable improvements in police-public relations. Without structural reforms community
312 policing efforts are unlikely to generate sustained institutional legitimacy or public trust.

313 314 **Problems to Democratic Accountability in Indian Policing**

315
316 Democratic accountability in Indian policing still faces many structural, institutional, political
317 and technological problems. A number of reform initiatives and judicial interventions have failed
318 to overcome many systemic limitations that continue to impede the transformation of policing
319 into a transparent, citizen-centric and democratically accountable institution.

320 **Colonial Institutional Legacy**

321
322 The organisational structure and operational culture of policing in India continue to reflect
323 colonial administrative traditions based on coercion, centralised authority and rigid hierarchy.
324 The colonial police system was not built to promote democratic accountability or public service,
325 but to maintain political control. While post-independence India took on a democratic

326 constitutional framework, many colonial institutional practices and authoritarian policing
327 mindsets have persisted in the present-day policing framework (Bayley, 1969).

328

329 **Political Interference**

330

331 Excessive political interference is one of the most daunting challenges for democratic policing in
332 India. Transfers, postings, criminal investigations and operational decision-making are
333 sometimes subject to political control at the expense of institutional autonomy, professional
334 neutrality and impartial law enforcement.

335

336 **Weak Oversight Mechanisms**

337

338 Institutional oversight bodies such as Police Complaints Authorities and State Security
339 Commissions have been established to ensure accountability and to curb the arbitrary use of
340 police power. Chronic political interference, it is said, undermines public confidence and
341 encourages selective or partisan policing. However, these institutions are characterised by
342 limited independence, poor financial and administrative resources, insufficient staffing and weak
343 enforcement capabilities in many jurisdictions. Hence, their capacity to deliver effective
344 oversight and accountability remains heavily constrained.

345

346 **Human Rights Violations**

347

348 Issues of custodial deaths, allegations of torture, encounter killings, wrongful detention and
349 abuse of force continue to pose serious issues of constitutional rights and democratic
350 accountability in policing. The use of force and custodial abuse in policing tactics have been
351 repeatedly highlighted as inappropriate by human rights bodies, the judiciary and civil society
352 groups. Such transgressions delegitimise institutions and erode public confidence in the systems
353 of democratic governance.

354

355 **Lack of Transparency**

356

357 Low transparency in the administration of the police system continues to be a major obstacle to
358 democratic accountability. Opaque disciplinary processes, bureaucratic opacity, poor public
359 communication and limited access to institutional information may at times undermine public
360 confidence in the institutions of policing. Transparency is the bedrock of public confidence,
361 institutional oversight and accountable governance. Resource Constraints Indian policing is also
362 plagued with several structural and operational constraints due to understaffing, poor
363 infrastructure, overburdening, lack of technological support and limited professional training.
364 Such constraints have a negative impact on police efficiency, responsiveness, ethical conduct and
365 institutional accountability.

366 Law enforcement duties often make it difficult for police personnel to meet democratic
367 expectations of citizen-oriented policing. Social and Institutional Bias Concerns relating to caste,
368 religion, gender, regional identity and class-based discrimination also influence public
369 perceptions of policing in India. Ongoing claims of policing bias and differential treatment of
370 marginalised groups erode police credibility and public trust. Institutional and social biases such
371 institutional and social biases pose significant challenges to democratic principles of equality,

372 fairness and impartiality in law enforcement systems. The increasing use of surveillance
373 technologies, facial recognition systems, predictive policing tools, artificial intelligence and
374 digital monitoring mechanisms have raised new challenges related to privacy, civil liberties, data
375 protection and algorithmic accountability. The technological modernisation of policing has
376 increased the efficiency of some parts but also has raised concerns about mass surveillance,
377 misuse of personal data, lack of regulatory oversight, and erosion of constitutional liberties.

378
379 Democratic accountability in contemporary policing must therefore, slowly, also start to grapple
380 with digital governance and technical ethics. Democratic Policing and Reform Imperatives
381 Democratization of policing in India needs a paradigm shift from the colonial and control-
382 oriented policing model to a service-oriented model based on constitutionalism, public trust,
383 accountability and citizen engagement. Democratic policing is about legality, transparency,
384 accountability, procedural justice and respect for human rights.

385
386 In this context, substantive institutional reforms are central to the reinforcement of democratic
387 governance and improvement of police legitimacy in contemporary India. Reinforcing
388 Institutional Autonomy One of the key imperatives of democratic policing is the establishment of
389 institutional autonomy within police organisations. Insulation of police agencies from arbitrary
390 political interference in matters relating to transfers, postings, investigations and operational
391 decision-making. At the same time autonomy has to be balanced by democratic accountability
392 and constitutional monitoring. Operational independence is the precondition for ensuring
393 professionalism, neutrality and impartial enforcement of law, argue scholars (Bayley, 1969).

394 395 **Independent Complaint Mechanisms**

396
397 Independent grievance redressal and oversight institutions are essential for improving
398 accountability in policing systems. Police Complaints Authorities should be independent
399 authorities with adequate financial resources, legal authority, investigative capacity and
400 enforcement powers.

401 402 **Complaint Mechanisms**

403
404 Effective complaint mechanisms are useful in dealing with cases of abuse of authority, custodial
405 violence, corruption and misconduct and for improving public confidence in police institutions.

406 407 **Community Policing**

408
409 Democratic policing demands the active participation of citizens and the collaborative
410 engagement of the policing institutions with local communities. Community policing builds
411 trust, resolves conflict, encourages participatory governance and solves problems together. In the
412 context of the New Public Governance, police activity is a shared responsibility of police
413 agencies, civil society organisations, local institutions and residents. Increased community
414 involvement can therefore improve police legitimacy and democratic accountability.

415 416 **Human Rights Training Professional**

417 training programmes of police institutions should focus more on constitutional ethics, procedural
418 justice, gender sensitivity, human rights protections and democratic values. To reduce custodial
419 violence, discrimination and disproportionate use of force, human rights-based policing is
420 needed. Training in ethical conduct and citizen-focused policing can be useful in improving
421 institutional behaviour and public trust.

422

423 **Transparency and digital accountability**

424

425 Technological innovations can play an important role in enhancing transparency and
426 accountability in policing systems. All of these can improve institutions' transparency and
427 reduce opportunities for misconduct: body-worn cameras, digital complaint registration systems,
428 public accountability dashboards, online grievance portals and transparent data-sharing methods.
429 However, digital accountability mechanisms need to be deployed in conjunction with safeguards
430 with respect to privacy, data protection and human liberties.

431

432 **Police Welfare and Professionalisation**

433

434 Democratic policing also depends on the welfare, capability and professional competence of
435 police officers. Better institutional efficiency and accountability depends on better working
436 conditions, lighter workloads, mental health support, modernised infrastructure and improved
437 professional training. Studies by academics have noted that police personnel who are
438 overworked and undersupported are less likely to offer citizen-oriented and democratic policing
439 services.

440

441 **Implementation of Supreme Court Directives**

442

443 The effective implementation of the directives issued in Prakash Singh v. Union of India remains
444 critical for improving institutional accountability and democratic policing in India. The
445 judgement sought to put in place mechanisms like the State Security Commissions, Police
446 Complaints Authorities, fixed tenure for police personnel and appointments on merit to do away
447 with political interference and to enhance professional autonomy. State implementation,
448 however, remains a challenge to a broader democratic transformation of policing institutions.

449

450 **A comprehensive review of Democratic Accountability in Indian Policing**

451

452 It finds considerable variation between states, institutional cultures and governance frameworks.
453 Some jurisdictions have experimented with community orientated and participatory police
454 tactics. Others still have tendencies of politicisation, custodial abuse, weak mechanisms of
455 investigation and poor public accountability. Comparative analysis reveals that democratic
456 policing in India remains uneven, decentralised and heavily influenced by the regional
457 administrative capacity, political culture and institutional leadership.

458

459 **State-Wise Variations in Policing and Accountability**

460

461 The functioning of police institutions is substantially different across Indian states. The southern
462 states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are often cited for relatively stronger community policing,

463 high literacy-led civic engagement and stronger citizen outreach systems. But some northern
464 states still remain under criticism for political interference, delay in investigations, custodial
465 violence and poor police-public relations. Kerala's Janamaithri Suraksha Project is often cited as
466 a relatively successful model of community-oriented policing that emphasises citizen
467 participation, neighbourhood contact and trust-building mechanisms. Studies show the strategy
468 has led to more interaction between residents and police personnel and reduced the social
469 distance between law enforcement organisations and local communities. The flip side, however,
470 is that states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have come under repeated attack for charges of
471 encounter killings, political favouritism, excessive use of force and custodial torture. Concerns
472 about democratic accountability have particularly arisen in relation to 'encounter policing' which
473 raises questions about due process, judicial oversight and constitutional rights. Delhi, on the
474 other hand, also has a dichotomy of institutions. NCRB based evaluations show that Delhi has
475 very high rates of crime registration but poor investigative follow through and low charge
476 sheeting rates. On the contrary, Kerala has better rates of completion of investigation and higher
477 procedural efficiency.

478

479 **NCRB Statistics and Institutional Accountability**

480

481 The data released by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals a number of structural
482 problems, which are essential for democratic policing and accountability. Data from the NCRB
483 showed that this year India recorded over 62 lakh cognisable crimes, which is a 7.2% rise over
484 the previous year. (The Times of India) Custodial violence, deaths in jail remain serious concern.
485 According to NCRB data, Maharashtra registered the highest number of custodial deaths in 2023
486 with 17 cases. (The Times of India) Prison data also highlighted continuing concerns about
487 unnatural deaths in prisons, overcrowding and institutional violence in states such as Punjab,
488 Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Crime data also reveal differences in efficiency of investigation
489 Gender offences in states (The Times of India) NCRB assessments reveal crimes against women
490 remained disturbingly high, with wide geographical variation in reporting and conviction rates.
491 While cities like Jaipur, Lucknow and Delhi saw high rates of crime against women, others like
492 Chennai and Kolkata had comparatively lower rates and better institutional response systems.
493 Statistical variations suggest that democratic accountability cannot be conceptualised solely in
494 terms of national level institutional structures; rather, accountability outcomes are heavily
495 influenced by state capacity, governance culture, institutional professionalism and local political
496 conditions.

497

498 **Case Studies and Contemporary Incidents**

499

500 A few contemporary incidents have heightened public discourse on the notion of democratic
501 accountability in Indian policing. One of the most talked about case was the custodial death of
502 Jayaraj and Bennix in Tamil Nadu in 2020, which evoked nationwide outrage against police
503 brutality and custodial torture. The incident exposed systemic gaps in accountability mechanisms
504 and reignited calls for the implementation of police reforms and human rights safeguards. The
505 2019 encounter case in Hyderabad involving accused persons in the rape and murder of a
506 veterinarian, similarly, elicited polarised public reactions. Many citizens hailed the police action
507 as "instant justice", but legal scholars and human rights organisations raised concerns over extra-
508 judicial killings, violation of due process and erosion of constitutional accountability. Another

509 big example is the proliferation of facial recognition systems and AI-based surveillance tech in
510 states such as Delhi, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh. Governments have defended these
511 technologies as necessary tools for crime prevention and public safety, but civil liberties
512 organisations have raised concerns about mass surveillance, violations of privacy, algorithmic
513 bias and a lack of regulatory oversight. These cases exemplify the ongoing tension between the
514 public demand for tough policing and the democratic principles of legality, transparency and
515 procedural justice.

516

517 **Comparative Analysis with Other Democracies**

518

519 A comparative analysis with other democracies reveals that the police accountability
520 mechanisms of India are institutionally weaker in a number of ways. The policing systems in the
521 United Kingdom function under relatively stronger structures of civilian oversight, parliamentary
522 scrutiny, independent complaint bodies and localised policing traditions. Independent policing
523 authorities, such as the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), oversee police
524 misconduct and abuse of power. Mechanisms of democratic accountability like civilian review
525 boards, federal investigations, judicial review, media scrutiny and community oversight are
526 comparatively more institutionalised in the United States, but policing remains hotly contested
527 over racial profiling and excessive force. Incidents like the killing of George Floyd sparked
528 nationwide protests and policy conversations on police reform, racial justice and accountability.
529 Similarly, countries like Japan and Norway emphasise community-based policing, local
530 engagement and high levels of trust in policing institutions. Less aggressive enforcement and
531 more social legitimacy, procedural fairness and citizen cooperation are their policing styles.
532 Indian policing remains highly centralised, politically dependent and insufficiently accountable
533 to civilian institutions compared to these democracies. The lack of fully independent complaint
534 authorities, weak implementation of judicial reforms and limited public participation continue to
535 restrict democratic policing practices in India.

536

537 **Analytical Assessment**

538

539 The comparative evidence suggests that democratic accountability in policing depends not only
540 on formal legal structures but also on institutional culture, political commitment, citizen
541 participation, procedural fairness and public trust. States with higher community participation,
542 clear grievance systems and professional autonomy are likely to have relatively better
543 institutional legitimacy . The introduction of digital policing and surveillance technology also
544 offers both opportunities and hazards. Technological systems can improve transparency, data
545 management and investigative efficiency, but they can also give rise to concerns about privacy,
546 discriminatory profiling and unchecked state surveillance, unless underpinned by robust
547 democratic safeguards. The future of democratic policing in India, therefore, rests on striking a
548 balance between institutional autonomy and constitutional accountability, enhancing civilian
549 oversight, improving procedural justice, and promoting citizen-centric models of governance
550 based on democratic values and human rights.

551

552 **Discussion**

553

554 The issue of democratic accountability in Indian policing is symptomatic of deeper structural
555 contradictions between coercive authority of the state and normative ideals of democratic
556 government. India's constitutional framework is strong on rule of law, civil liberties, judicial
557 scrutiny and democratic accountability, but its policing institutions have applied these principles
558 in a selective and uneven manner. This disjuncture between constitutional ideals and institutional
559 realities continues to inform contemporary debates on police reform and democratic legitimacy
560 in India. Despite the work of various reform commissions, judicial interventions and policy
561 recommendations, police institutions continue to function within a governance system of
562 political patronage, bureaucratic centralisation and ongoing colonial administrative practices.
563 These institutional factors have been instrumental in preserving the hierarchical policing culture,
564 operational opacity, selective accountability, and over-reliance on political authority.
565 Accountability mechanisms are thus more symbolic or procedural than real instruments of
566 democratic transformation and institutional control (Bayley, 1969). Theoretical views of
567 democratic governance and procedural justice indicate that coercive authority or legal power
568 alone cannot ensure the legitimacy of institutions. Democratic legitimacy is based on fairness,
569 transparency, responsiveness, ethnicity and citizens' trust as fundamental principles. Procedural
570 Justice Theory (Tyler, 1990, 2004) suggests that if citizens perceive policing processes to be fair,
571 respectful and procedurally just, they are more likely to comply with police institutions.
572 Therefore, democratic accountability in policing is not just about legal compliance, but also
573 about moral legitimacy derived from public trust and constitutional compliance (Tyler, 2006).
574 The emergence of digital governance, smart policing systems, surveillance technologies,
575 artificial intelligence, predictive policing tools and data-driven governance mechanisms have
576 created opportunities to enhance accountability, transparency and citizen engagement. Digital
577 complaint portals, body-worn cameras, public information dashboards and technical monitoring
578 systems can be used to enhance institutional control and constrain opportunities for corruption
579 and wrongdoing. Yet technological renewal in the absence of appropriate democratic protections
580 can also exacerbate worries about privacy infringements, algorithmic bias, surveillance
581 capitalism, data abuse, and the growth of unchecked state authority (Lyon, 2018). Hence, the
582 democratic policing in India needs a more structural transformation based on constitutional
583 morality, institutional autonomy, participatory governance, procedural fairness and respect for
584 human rights. Sustainable police reform is not merely about administrative restructuring or
585 technology modernisation, but requires a democratic reorientation of police philosophy,
586 institutional culture and governance procedures. Hence, promoting democratic accountability is
587 important not just for better policing but also for strengthening democratic governance and
588 institutional credibility in the Indian state.

589 Democratic accountability is the foundation of legitimate policing in modern constitutional
590 democracies. In democratic countries, police institutions are supposed to be not only instruments
591 of coercion for the state but also accountable public service agencies committed to constitutional
592 ideals, the rule of law, citizens' rights and democratic government. However, the policing
593 institutions in India continue to be plagued by persistent challenges of political interference,
594 institutional opacity, weak oversight mechanisms, inadequate public accountability and declining
595 levels of citizen trust. Multiple reform commissions, judicial interventions, expert committees
596 and policy initiatives have repeatedly underlined the need for democratic policing. But
597 implementation of reforms has remained fragmented and uneven, and often ineffectual across
598 states. Colonial institutional culture, centralised administrative authority and politicised policing
599 practices continue to shape and significantly limit the democratisation of policing institutions.

600 Thus, public perceptions of policing continue to be associated with coercion, fear, discrimination
601 and unresponsiveness rather than the provision of democratic services and constitutional
602 accountability. The paper contends that democratic policing in India cannot be realised by simply
603 modernising technology, restructuring administration or increasing surveillance capacities.
604 Meaningful change requires profound institutional reforms that are based on accountability,
605 procedural fairness, citizen participation, operational autonomy, ethical professionalism,
606 openness, and constitutional commitment. Democratic legitimacy depends on police institutions'
607 capacity to enforce the law, but also to exercise their authority fairly, transparently, humanely
608 and accountably. Hence, the future of policing in India lies in restoring public trust through
609 responsive governance, effective grievance redressal mechanisms, protection of human rights,
610 institutional transparency and participatory policing practices. To enhance democratic
611 accountability, we need to associate police autonomy with constitutional oversight mechanisms,
612 establish independent accountability institutions and foster the creation of citizen-centric
613 government structures. Finally, an institution of police, sensitive to the citizens, respectful of
614 human dignity, guided by constitutional morality and accountable to the law, is a necessity in the
615 strengthening of democracy, rule of law and democratic legitimacy in India
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