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RESEARCH ARTICLE

“DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN INDIAN POLICING: A THEORETICAL ASSESSMENT”

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Abstract

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

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Introduction: -

One of the most direct and palpable ways state authority is made manifest in democratic democracies is through policing. Police institutions in constitutional democracies are charged with not only the enforcement of law and maintenance of public order but also with the protection of civil liberties, protection of constitutional values and preservation of institutional legitimacy through public consent and accountability. Democratic policing is thus based on such ideals as transparency, legality, accountability and citizen trust. However, the Indian context continues to witness the policing system deeply rooted in colonial institutional legacies, especially those in the Police Act of 1861, which was primarily designed to serve imperial control rather than democratic governance. The relationship between police institutions and citizens has, in recent decades, become a major area of academic and policy concern

in India. Public trust and institutional credibility have suffered as a result of custodial violence, charges of corruption, excesses of force, encounter murders, communal bias, political intervention and lack of adequate means to redress grievances. At the same time, rapid urbanisation, technological advancement, cybercrime, social fragmentation and increasing democratic expectations have raised demand for more transparent, accountable and citizen-focused policing systems. In democratic systems, police accountability refers to the obligation of law enforcement agencies to explain their actions, to comply with constitutional and legal norms, and to be answerable for abuses of power. Democratic accountability is therefore multidimensional: legal accountability, administrative oversight, judicial review, political neutrality, media scrutiny and public engagement. But in India these mechanisms tend to be fragmented, patchy and institutionally feeble.

Time and again, reform commissions and expert committees like the National Police Commission, Ribeiro Committee, Padmanabhaiah Committee, Malimath Committee and Second Administrative Reforms Commission have reiterated the need for structural police reforms. Similarly, the landmark judgement in Prakash Singh v. Union of India aimed at institutionalising democratic accountability through directions for fixed tenure for police officials, constitution of State Security Commissions, constitution of Police Complaints Authorities and enhancement of operational autonomy. But implementation across Indian states has been uneven and limited despite these reform initiatives. Colonial organisational culture, political patronage, bureaucratic opposition and lack of civilian oversight have remained entrenched and have been a major obstacle to the democratic transformation of policing institutions. Discourses on police accountability have thus been closely linked to larger debates on democratic governance, human rights, public trust and the legitimacy of the state in present-day Indian society. The paper critically analyses the democratic accountability of Indian policing using a theoretical and secondary source approach. The analysis draws on reform commission reports, academic literature, judicial interventions, policy assessments and perception-based studies. The study adds to the ongoing discourse on democratic governance, institutional legitimacy and police reform in contemporary India.

Objectives of the Study: -

The main objectives of the present study are: -

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

Research Methodology: -

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

Theoretical Framework: -

Democratic Governance Theory: -

Democratic governance theory highlights the significance of participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and rule of law in public institutions. In democratic governance theory, state institutions are deemed legitimate according to public consent, constitutional principles, institutional accountability and formal legal power. Within this paradigm police institutions are expected to function in accordance with democratic norms, civil liberties and constitutional safeguards rather than authoritarian practices or coercive control. Democratic policing thus means that law enforcement agencies should be accountable to elected representatives, constitutional bodies, the judiciary, civil society organisations, media institutions and citizens.

Procedural Justice Theory: -

Procedural Justice Theory argues that perceptions of fairness, impartiality, transparency and respectful treatment in the process of policing are important factors that influence public trust and cooperation with police institutions. Accountability mechanisms are important to prevent the over-concentration of coercive power and the potential abuse of authority (Beetham, 1991; Held, 2006). Tom R. Tyler contends that institutional legitimacy involves more

than just good outcomes, but depends on the fairness of the procedures used to implement authority. Citizens who view policing practices as fair, respectful and procedurally just are more likely to obey the law and co-operate with police. This is a big challenge for procedural justice in the Indian context, where there are recurring allegations of corruption, discriminatory practices, custodial violence, arbitrary detention and abuse of police powers. The absence of procedural fairness undermines the institutional legitimacy and erodes the public trust in policing institutions (Tyler, 2006).

New Public Governance (NPG): -

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

Accountability Theory: -

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

- * Internal accountability
- * External accountability
- * Judicial accountability
- * Political accountability
- * Social accountability
- * Media accountability

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

The Evolution of Policing in India: A Historical Perspective:-

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

National Police Commission (1977–1981):-

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

Ribeiro Committee (1998): -

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

Padmanabhaiah Committee (2000): -

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

Malimath Committee (2003): -

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

Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2007): -

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

Democratic Accountability and Indian Policing: -

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

Political Accountability: -

In India, police institutions are, in theory, accountable to elected governments operating within the framework of parliamentary democracy. But excessive political interference has frequently undermined the professionalism, neutrality and operational independence of police institutions. Transfer, posting, promotion, criminal investigation and priority of operations are often based on political considerations rather than professional standards. The continued dominance of partisan political control undermines the independence of the institutions and contributes to the loss of public faith in law enforcement agencies. They have argued that political interference not only undermines impartial policing but also perpetuates patronage networks and selective law enforcement practices (Bayley, 1969).

Judicial Accountability: -

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

Administrative Accountability: -

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

Public Accountability: -

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

The problem of democratic governance has drawn growing attention to the need to bolster citizen-oriented policing and participatory accountability procedures. Police–Public Relations and Public Trust. The legitimacy of police organisations in democratic countries is based to a large extent on public trust and citizen co-operation. Fair, impartial, transparent, and accountable police agencies are more likely to generate public compliance and support when residents see the police in this way. Thus democratic policing is based not only on legal power, but on institutional legitimacy, which is based on public confidence and social acceptability. But in Indian context police-public relations are strained due to a number of structural and behavioural issues. Accusations of corruption, custodial violence, political bias, delay in administration of justice, use of excessive force, discriminatory practices and insensitivity towards marginalised populations have all contributed in no small measure to the public's lack of trust in policing institutions. Such problems have damaged the image of the police as democratic service providers and have instead helped to increase the public fear and alienation toward the law enforcement agencies. Studies on policing in India based on perception suggest that many citizens view police institutions with suspicion and apprehension rather than trust and cooperation. This chronic deficit of trust has an adverse effect on democratic governance, weakens institutional legitimacy and compromises the efficacy of community policing strategies. Thus scholars have argued that public trust is a key component of democratic accountability and effective law enforcement (Tyler, 2006). Procedural Justice Theory states that citizens are more likely to trust and cooperate with police institutions when they are treated respectfully, fairly, transparently, neutrally and effectively communicated with during police interactions. Tom R. Tyler argues that legitimacy is created not only by good outcomes, but also by procedurally fair and respectful institutional behaviour. Procedural fairness, thus, is an important mechanism for enhancing police legitimacy and police-public relations.

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

Problems to Democratic Accountability in Indian Policing: -

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

Colonial Institutional Legacy: -

The organisational structure and operational culture of policing in India continue to reflect colonial administrative traditions based on coercion, centralised authority and rigid hierarchy. The colonial police system was not built to promote democratic accountability or public service, but to maintain political control. While post-independence India took on a democratic constitutional framework, many colonial institutional practices and authoritarian policing mindsets have persisted in the present-day policing framework (Bayley, 1969).

Political Interference: -

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

Weak Oversight Mechanisms: -

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

Human Rights Violations: -

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

Lack of Transparency: -

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

Law enforcement duties often make it difficult for police personnel to meet democratic expectations of citizen-oriented policing. Social and Institutional Bias Concerns relating to caste, religion, gender, regional identity and class-based discrimination also influence public perceptions of policing in India. Ongoing claims of policing bias and differential treatment of marginalised groups erode police credibility and public trust. Institutional and social biases such as institutional and social biases pose significant challenges to democratic principles of equality, fairness and impartiality in law enforcement systems. The increasing use of surveillance technologies, facial recognition systems, predictive policing tools, artificial intelligence and digital monitoring mechanisms have raised new challenges related to privacy, civil liberties, data protection and algorithmic accountability. The technological modernisation of policing has increased the efficiency of some parts but also has raised concerns about mass surveillance, misuse of personal data, lack of regulatory oversight, and erosion of constitutional liberties.

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

In this context, substantive institutional reforms are central to the reinforcement of democratic governance and improvement of police legitimacy in contemporary India. Reinforcing Institutional Autonomy One of the key imperatives of democratic policing is the establishment of institutional autonomy within police organisations. Insulation of police agencies from arbitrary political interference in matters relating to transfers, postings,

investigations and operational decision-making. At the same time autonomy has to be balanced by democratic accountability and constitutional monitoring. Operational independence is the precondition for ensuring professionalism, neutrality and impartial enforcement of law, argue scholars (Bayley, 1969).

Independent Complaint Mechanisms: -

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

Complaint Mechanisms: -

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

Community Policing: -

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

Human Rights Training Professional: -

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

Transparency and Digital Accountability: -

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

Police Welfare and Professionalisation: -

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

Implementation of Supreme Court Directives: -

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

A comprehensive review of Democratic Accountability in Indian Policing: -

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

State-Wise Variations in Policing and Accountability: -

The functioning of police institutions is substantially different across Indian states. The southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are often cited for relatively stronger community policing, high literacy-led civic engagement and

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

NCRB Statistics and Institutional Accountability: -

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

Case Studies and Contemporary Incidents: -

A few contemporary incidents have heightened public discourse on the notion of democratic accountability in Indian policing. One of the most talked about case was the custodial death of Jayaraj and Bennix in Tamil Nadu in 2020, which evoked nationwide outrage against police brutality and custodial torture. The incident exposed systemic gaps in accountability mechanisms and reignited calls for the implementation of police reforms and human rights safeguards. The 2019 encounter case in Hyderabad involving accused persons in the rape and murder of a veterinarian, similarly, elicited polarised public reactions. Many citizens hailed the police action as "instant justice", but legal scholars and human rights organisations raised concerns over extra-judicial killings, violation of due process and erosion of constitutional accountability. Another big example is the proliferation of facial recognition systems and AI-based surveillance tech in states such as Delhi, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh. Governments have defended these technologies as necessary tools for crime prevention and public safety, but civil liberties organisations have raised concerns about mass surveillance, violations of privacy, algorithmic bias and a lack of regulatory oversight. These cases exemplify the ongoing tension between the public demand for tough policing and the democratic principles of legality, transparency and procedural justice.

Comparative Analysis with Other Democracies: -

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

independent complaint authorities, weak implementation of judicial reforms and limited public participation continue to restrict democratic policing practices in India.

Analytical Assessment: -

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

Discussion: -

The issue of democratic accountability in Indian policing is symptomatic of deeper structural contradictions between coercive authority of the state and normative ideals of democratic government. India's constitutional framework is strong on rule of law, civil liberties, judicial scrutiny and democratic accountability, but its policing institutions have applied these principles in a selective and uneven manner. This disjuncture between constitutional ideals and institutional realities continues to inform contemporary debates on police reform and democratic legitimacy in India. Despite the work of various reform commissions, judicial interventions and policy recommendations, police institutions continue to function within a governance system of political patronage, bureaucratic centralisation and ongoing colonial administrative practices. These institutional factors have been instrumental in preserving the hierarchical policing culture, operational opacity, selective accountability, and over-reliance on political authority. Accountability mechanisms are thus more symbolic or procedural than real instruments of democratic transformation and institutional control (Bayley, 1969).

Theoretical views of democratic governance and procedural justice indicate that coercive authority or legal power alone cannot ensure the legitimacy of institutions. Democratic legitimacy is based on fairness, transparency, responsiveness, ethicality and citizens' trust as fundamental principles. Procedural Justice Theory (Tyler, 1990, 2004) suggests that if citizens perceive policing processes to be fair, respectful and procedurally just, they are more likely to comply with police institutions. Therefore, democratic accountability in policing is not just about legal compliance, but also about moral legitimacy derived from public trust and constitutional compliance (Tyler, 2006). The emergence of digital governance, smart policing systems, surveillance technologies, artificial intelligence, predictive policing tools and data-driven governance mechanisms have created opportunities to enhance accountability, transparency and citizen engagement. Digital complaint portals, body-worn cameras, public information dashboards and technical monitoring systems can be used to enhance institutional control and constrain opportunities for corruption and wrongdoing. Yet technological renewal in the absence of appropriate democratic protections can also exacerbate worries about privacy infringements, algorithmic bias, surveillance capitalism, data abuse, and the growth of unchecked state authority (Lyon, 2018). Hence, the democratic policing in India needs a more structural transformation based on constitutional morality, institutional autonomy, participatory governance, procedural fairness and respect for human rights. Sustainable police reform is not merely about administrative restructuring or technology modernisation, but requires a democratic reorientation of police philosophy, institutional culture and governance procedures. Hence, promoting democratic accountability is important not just for better policing but also for strengthening democratic governance and institutional credibility in the Indian state.

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

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

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