

Keeping India Safe: The Dilemma of Internal Security,

by Vappala Balachandran, Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India,
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*Ghanshyam Katoch**

The hedgehog's or the porcupine's dilemma is a metaphor about the challenges of coexistence. It describes a situation in which a group of hedgehogs seek to move close to one another to share the heat and survive in freezing weather. However, they must remain apart because they cannot avoid hurting one another with their sharp quills. Though they all share the intention of a close reciprocal relationship, this may not occur, for reasons they cannot avoid. Eventually they settle into an ideal distance, where they can derive some benefit yet not hurt each other.

The title of the book alludes to a similar dilemma that India's internal security structure faces, and which is laid down in the Constitution of India. As per the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, the responsibility for internal security is divided between the Centre and the States, with the latter having primacy. Considering the current nature of transnational terrorism which operates across borders, there is a problem as to how the security challenges can be tackled. In externally supported terrorism, such as in India, intelligence about terrorists is generated by intelligence agencies of the centre government, which alone has the mandate and capability to do so. But this intelligence has to be acted upon by the

* Lieutenant General Ghanshyam Singh Katoch, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd.) is an Associate Member of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) and an elected member of the Executive Council of the United Services Institute of India (USI).

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States whose police forces are not so capable. They are also committed to myriad duties which are given a higher priority by the state.

The author, Vappala Balachandran, is a former Indian Police Service (IPS) officer of the Maharashtra cadre. As an IPS officer, he has extensive experience of policing in his state. He retired as Special Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat and hence can thread issues from the perspective of the Central government as well. Also, he was a member of the high-level Ram Pradhan Committee, which studied the performance of the Maharashtra Police during the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. Hence, his observations regarding the confusion created by having multiple agencies dealing with crisis in internal security situations have to be given credence. In this book, Balachandran analyses the shortcomings of India's security system. He traces the origin of the problem, makes a case for reducing the burden on the police to make them more efficient, and offers solutions to fix the problem.

The author opines that there is a dilemma created by the Indian Constitution which places policing in the 'State List'. Since the die has been cast, any attempt to centralise powers with the Union is considered to be impinging on the freedom that the States have been given by the Constitution to manage their own affairs. Thus, to ensure India's internal security, there is a difficult choice to be made between two options: to maintain status quo, that is, leave the states to be responsible for internal security; or to give primacy in policing and unfettered power to the central government to fulfil this task. Balachandran brings out the advantages and disadvantages of both alternatives in the book. Keeping in view the current dynamics of terrorism and the importance of maintaining civil liberties, each option has its supporters and detractors.

Keeping India Safe is organised into seven chapters besides the introduction and the epilogue. Chapter 1 goes into the evolution of India's policing system in the British colonial period. Chapter 2 throws light on India's internal security problems after independence, which include the origins of the Naga insurgency and the Telangana movement. It covers the Indian political dynamics starting from 1885, which led to the partition of the country as well as factors that shaped our internal security architecture. Chapter 3 seeks to study the overburdened Indian police system and looks at foreign—mostly Western—police systems to understand how they manage to reduce the burden of their police forces so that they can concentrate towards the primary police responsibility of

crime prevention, investigation, apprehensions, and maintenance of law and order.

Chapter 4 is devoted to William Henry Sleeman's fight against the Thugs (more about this chapter later). Chapter 5 looks at the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. This is more from the viewpoint of the author himself and the problems of the police that he experienced first-hand as Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Branch-1). Chapter 6 is about the 26/11 attacks and the police and central government's response. The author obviously has detailed knowledge of the event since he was part of the two-man Ram Pradhan Committee. Chapter 7 concludes with suggestions on how the policing system in India can be improved.

The chapter on William Henry Sleeman highlights the importance of building databases to track and apprehend the Thugs. It brings out the need for synergy between the police and the military to tackle what were the equivalent of modern-day terrorist modules. The building up of databases, albeit manually and painstakingly by Sleeman, led to the effective crackdown on the age-old scourge of Thugee. Balachandran brings out that the modus operandi of the central police that Sleeman commanded was similar to any modern anti-terror unit. It is this sort of all-India jurisdiction, including deciding on the place to conduct trails that he advocates. This is considered important by the author because he cites incidents wherein different approaches by different state police forces have stymied investigations.

A distraction in the book is that certain chapters are not woven in a chronological narrative. Such narration does break the monotony in reading for those readers who are interested in either historical content or those seeking a more modern context. However, it requires a revisit to what has been read earlier to pick up the thread. To illustrate, Chapter 3, rooted in the present overburdening of the Indian police force, gives way to William Henry Sleeman circa 1860 in Chapter 4. The next chapter then jumps to the period 1973–76 and the Emergency, which is more of a personal view of the author as to what happened in Bombay (presently Mumbai) at that time, from the prelude to the Emergency till the author left on deputation for the Cabinet Secretariat. Chapter 6 carries forward the narrative to 2008 and 26/11, from where the author goes to Chapter 7, 'How Can India Fix its Security System?', which is the penultimate chapter.

This last chapter is a logical conclusion to the theme of the book and its title is a question, which the author attempts to answer. As is but natural, some of the solutions given are those which have been given by earlier analysts and some are new. A few of these recommendations are: splitting of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to enable the senior minister to devote his time to internal security; having an MHA think tank on the lines of the Ministry of Defence's Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) to do research exclusively on internal security and terrorism; placing the Coast Guard under the MHA; splitting the jurisdiction of commissioners of big cities; audit of state police forces; and having municipal police and public-private partnership in policing.

The author quotes the practices followed by Western countries, especially the United States, as templates that we should follow. However, while we need to learn from the good practices of other countries, it is prudent to keep in mind that our financial resources and the stage of nation-building are on a different plane when compared to the Western democracies. Therefore, before following Western practices blindly, our resources, conditions and social constraints need to be carefully considered.

The value of the book lies in providing a historical narrative to policing in India, explaining the congenital reason for policemen being seen as—and many times conforming to the image of being—intimidating and corrupt. The book also recreates the security situation prior to the imposition of the Emergency in June 1975. This provides the rationale for the imposition of the Emergency, an episode where Indira Gandhi has traditionally been painted in a bad light. The narrative gives some justification for that step, which is always seen as a dark period of Indian democracy.

Balachandran has also been able to cover the infirmities of the police, central agencies and security forces in the 26/11 attacks, in fair detail. However, some contradictory statements could have been researched further. For example, the author states that the army and naval contingents that were deployed prior to the arrival of the National Security Guard (NSG) 'proved ineffective in resisting the heavily armed and well-trained terrorists'. The actual malaise was not their inability to take on the terrorists but the very issue that the author has raised in the book: the maze of bureaucratic constraints which had to be traversed before any executive orders could be given, or acted upon. He painstakingly lists out the number of red flags that were raised indicating

an attack from the sea on Mumbai was in the offing. However, the same bureaucratic procedures and the Centre–State dynamics ensured that the response could never be pre-emptive. Citing the 26/11 incident, the author brings out clearly that the metaphorical entities—the Centre and the States—have not yet settled into an ideal relationship, which is not good for the internal security of the country. In fact, Balachandran states in the epilogue that the existing system has totally failed. He is of the firm conviction that a new internal security architecture is required where the responsibility of internal security must be taken away from the States and primacy given to the Centre.

The book has a catchy dust jacket, is neatly printed, has simple and effective prose, and is embellished with exhaustive and informative footnotes. Overall, the book is a valuable, well-written addition to the literature on Indian police, the Indian internal security system, its shortcomings and the options to improve our internal security architecture.

