Crime and the pandemic

The lockdown had a bearing on the patterns of crimes that were registered in 2020

The annual report, 'Crime in India', released by the National Crime Records Bureau in mid-September this year needs to be carefully parsed before gleaning insights or making State-wise comparisons. The reason is the significant variances in case registration across States and Union Territories, especially serious crimes pertaining to rape and violence against women. States/UTs such as Tamil Nadu with 1808.8, Kerala (1568.4) and Delhi (1309.6) recorded the highest crime rate (crimes per one lakh people) overall. But it is difficult not to see these numbers as a reflection of better reporting and police registration of cases in these States and the capital city, respectively. On the other hand, while there was an 8.3% decline in registered cases of crimes against women in 2020 (of which the bulk of them, 30.2%, were of the category "Cruelty by husband or his relatives"), this number has to be assessed along with the fact that the year saw prolonged lockdowns during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic (between late March and May 2021 in particular). This period coincided with a high number of complaints of domestic violence – the number of complaints received by National Commission for Women registered a 10-year high as of June 2020. The seeming mismatch between the NCW and NCRB data must be studied and can only be explained by a lack of registration of cases in some States where crime reporting remains sluggish either due to a fear of doing so or a lackadaisical approach to such cases by law enforcement. On the other hand, the lockdown also led to an overall fall in crime related to theft, burglary and dacoity.

The COVID-19 related disruption also led to a greater registration of cases overall (a 28% increase in 2020 compared to 2019) largely due to a 21-fold increase in cases related to disobedience to the order duly promulgated by a public servant and over four times in cases involving violations of other State local laws. This is not surprising either. India had one of the most stringent lockdowns and law enforcement spared little in enforcing strictures on physical distancing. The question of registration does not apply to some types of cases such as murders – which showed only a marginal increase of 1% compared to 2019. Worryingly, while there was a reduction in the registered number of economic offences (by 12% since 2019), cybercrimes recorded an increase of 11.8% . The increase in cybercrimes is cause for concern as this requires sharper law enforcement as seen even in highly developed societies. While cases related to sedition declined from 93 in 2019 to 73 last year, Manipur and Assam led with 15 and 12 cases each. Sedition has increasingly been used as a weapon to stifle dissent and this trend needs to be reversed urgently.