Decoding the puzzle of India's low murder rate

SWAMINOMICS

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India's murder rate has fallen to its lowest level since data were published in 1957. Moreover, India has among the lowest murder rates in the world. The National Crime Records Bureau's latest report, Crime in India 2023, says murders per lakh population were 2.6 per lakh in 1957, but then rose and peaked at 5.2 per lakh in 1992 after militancy increased in Punjab, Kashmir, Assam and the Maoist tribal belt. It has since fallen steadily to 2.3 per lakh in 2023. Hurrah!

Crimes are grossly under-reported in India and elsewhere. But murder is well documented—dead bodies are difficult to ignore, and the police give top priority to murder cases. The curbing of militancy since 1992 has greatly helped. Police stations have expanded, especially in the Maoist belt, and modern surveillance systems like CCTV cameras have helped too. The United Nations and World Bank report that worldwide homicide rates have fallen almost everywhere. Remarkably, India is among the safest countries. The murder rate is highest in South Africa (34 per lakh population) followed by Brazil (22.5). Even advanced states such as Russia (7.3) and the US (6.4) have higher rates than India. The safest are China (0.5) and Japan (0.3), according to latest data.

Indians complain about a lousy police-judicial system that delivers no justice. How then is India's murder rate so low? Economic explanations will not do — India is much poorer than SA or Latin American countries. Some analysts offer cultural explanations, which are rarely accurate. India does not have a low murder rate because of the peaceful traditions of Buddha and Ashoka. It is a land with all sorts of violence. Yet, social evolution in India and most Asian countries gives them less crime even if they are poor and badly policed.

World Bank economist Hans Binswanger-Mkhize told me he was struck by the remarkable difference between pavement hawkers in SA and India. In India, hawkers take over pavements to illegally sell an infinite variety of goods. Some risk their lives threading their way through cars at crowded traffic lights. Dharavi, among the world's largest slums in Mumbai, has become a hub of small manufacturing.

But in Soweto, the huge black district of Johannesburg, the pavements have no hawkers. Fear of crime means better-off South Africans will never shop at Soweto or open their windows to buy from a street hawker. Gangs rule different parts of Soweto, and plunder rather than encourage small businesses. An Indian businessman from Nigeria told me that thieves steal his car and home appliances every few months, and the police do nothing. His company told him to let the thieves steal, and replaced his car and appliances after each theft. It was part of normal life in Lagos. As for Brazil, see the film 'City of God', shot in an actual slum in Rio de Janeiro, showing the harsh reality of gangster rule.

SAFETY NET: Expansion of police stations, curbing of militancy and Maoist insurgency have helped

Indian hawkers complain of official harassment but not crime. They say they have to pay the local police hafta — which they think is reasonable and gets them protection. The fruit seller near my residence says he has fruit worth Rs 65,000 in his cart. In the evening, he simply covers his cart with a plastic tarpaulin, secures it with ropes, and goes home. He has no fear of theft. A vegetable seller tells me the same thing. India is full of gangs and theft of public goods — anything made of steel or other metals that can be sold to the kabaadi is stolen, such as iron manhole covers or copper from transformers. But not fruit and vegetables. Gangsters sometimes extort protection money from small businesses.

Research by Prashant Narang of the Centre for Civil Society shows that property rights have evolved in illegal spaces on the pavements. The owner of a space can operate, sell, or rent it, and all other hawkers and police respect that. People co-operate to create a market system that enables all to earn a decent living in peace. This is totally unlike the crime-ridden systems of Africa and Latin America, though similar to most other Asian countries.

Economist Mancur Olson showed how power and money evolved in societies. They typically begin with roving bandits who attack for plunder, often killing their victims. Bigger bandits (who sometimes call themselves kings) become what Olson calls "stationary bandits". They find it more profitable to end plunder and killing, while encouraging commerce which gets them regular taxes. Roving bandits still thrive in Latin America and Africa. But India is a land of stationary bandits (including politicians, bureaucrats, police, and gangsters). This helps explain our low murder rate, even though upper caste oppressors still kill Dalits and grooms still burn brides for dowry. ■

Wary of unpredictable US, SE

BY INVITATION

ANIL WADHWA

Once again, it is the season for the clustered diplomatic marathon, with ASEAN and East Asia Summits kicking off in Kuala Lumpur (KL) from Sunday.

As southeast Asia struggles to manage great-power competition, and cope with US tariffs, Malaysia as the current chair is seeking to ensure centrality to the grouping's role while focusing on stability and economic recovery. India will look to reinforce its Indo-Pacific presence, rejuvenate trade and strategic ties with ASEAN

portedly good progress, in the India-US bilateral trade agreement negotiations. India will be represented by foreign minister S Jaishankar.

For India, maritime security is a key focus. It has proposed declaring 2026 the 'ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation', underlining its role in ensuring freedom of navigation, sustainable fisheries, and regional disaster management. With shared anxieties over China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, ASEAN states see value in India's quiet capacity-building support and non-provocative naval presence, as well as continued funding for joint capacity-building projects and coastal-security workshops.

In 2022, India and