CHAPTER III

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AMONG POLICE OFFICERS
It is not uncommon for one to read in the newspaper or see in the electronic media of policemen committing suicide, shooting and killing his superiors, committing acts of brutality on under-trails and detainees and even those who they were meant to protect. Media reports of police brutality and indiscipline can be perceived as warning signs of job stress, emphatically pointing out to the mismanagement of this crucial problem (Mathur, 1994). Job stress as a phenomenon is an inevitable part of man’s work environment and the policeman’s work environment, does not escape this reality. The paradoxical nature of the policeman’s job makes it like tightrope walking and deserves a closer scrutiny than accorded to as yet in our country.

Somodevilla (1978) opined that a police officer is under stress and pressure unequalled to in any other profession. In this chapter, it is proposed to elaborate and explain the chronic and acute nature of occupational stress faced by police officers who are peculiar and unique considering their multifaceted role, the organisation, the law and the society expects them to play. Society views the police not only as a law enforcing agency but also as an instrument of social service and as the protector of the rights and duties of the people.

Law enforcement entails that the police perform their job, be on duty even in the scorching heat of summer, pouring rain and freezing winter. Mathur (1994) observed that the glamorous exterior image of a police overshadows the challenges encountered in role enactment which are often life threatening and endanger the personnel in uniform not only on duty but even off-duty. The duties of the police encompass preservation of law and order, safeguarding people from harm and protection of property among others. The society expects the police to play the varied roles with
equal elan. He is a helper, a saviour, a friend and a referee. As a law enforcer he makes arrests and uses force to enforce the rule of law (Bratz, 1986).

The job of a police officer makes great demands on the mental, emotional and physical capabilities, demands that are all too often so stressful that they begin to destroy the individual (Depue, 1979). To preserve and protect lives on the one hand and to be prepared at a moments notice to lay down his own life in the service of the nation is a challenge this occupation expects its aspirants to handle. People involved in law enforcement are constantly exposed to other people’s problems in addition to their own. The daily problems occurring in every person’s life becomes greatly intensified for a police officer on duty. Law enforcement tends to impose a higher degree of stress and a multiplicity of stressful situations on the individual than do most other professions (Colwell, 1988). In the course of his duty, the police officer encounters the dark side of human nature, standing alone in the street facing the reality of irrational violence, the police officer has to cope with his emotions, suppressing them and appearing in control as society expects of him.

With the growing incidence of crime and widening role expectations, the mental and physical health of police personnel assumes greater significance than before. The many triggering factors of stress are varied and incomprehensible. The triggering factors may be societal and political changes, economic conditions, police organisational set up, functioning of the criminal justice system, undue demand of the police officer’s time, by the very nature of his duties and at the same time the expectations of the family and even the stress caused to the family members. The very job of the policeman is stressful either because of the cumulative effects of various interactive factors or because of the various stress causing factors (Grencik, 1975).
The proclaimed objectives of the police force itself make their duties stressful. To enumerate the objectives of the police force are:

- Protect the lives and liberties of the people from criminal and anti-social elements and bring about improvement in the quality of life in the society.
- Earn the good will, support and active assistance of the community.
- Co-ordinate with other wings of the criminal justice system.
- Provide equal treatment to all regardless of caste, religion, social and economic status or political affiliations.
- Promote human rights and show special consideration to women, children, senior citizens and weaker sections.
- Strive to improve professional knowledge, skills and attitudes and adopt modern methods in police work.
- Foster professional values in policing with special emphasis on integrity, impartiality and efficiency.

It is not at all surprising that the police personnel’s very nature of duty is stressful. A study of these factors and understanding their impact will certainly help the police force and country as a whole.

3.1 STRESSORS FACED BY POLICE OFFICERS

The roles and expectations of the police as elaborated above are the causes of stress, these stressors faced by a police can officer can be broadly categorized into: external stressors which include societal, systematic, political stressors and internal stressors.
which include individual, family, task and organisational stressors (Mohan M. M., 2003).

3.1.1 EXTERNAL STRESSORS

a) Societal Stressors: Society looks at the police officer as a messiah and a superman who can do any amount of work to solve any problem of the common man. It expects him to be omnipresent and omnipotent. In the process of its self-interest, society forgets that the police officer is also an ordinary human being requiring normal rest and having human limitations like anybody. The police officer also tries to live up to the macho-image imposed upon him. He also has to operate within the legal framework; he cannot always live up, to his own expectations or the expectations of his clientele, which are the citizens.

The traditional Indian society in transition is full of conflicts between traditional values like caste/clan affinity, village loyalty and modern values like objectivity, impartiality and so on. The people around a police officer expect him to dole out favors as a matter of right. If the police officer is his village mate or country cousin or of the same caste he expects more favours. But the organizational ethics and legal framework expects him to work rationally and not emotionally. These conflicts act as stressors to police officers. The same society entertains a very negative opinion about the performance and is generally not very cooperative to him in discharge of his duties. This puts a lot of stress on the police officer during his work. The police officer being a member of the same society faces these two opposite pressures, viz. macho expectations and adverse opinion, leading to stress.
These multiple roles and the very high expectations of efficiency have placed the police officer on high level and expect him to behave accordingly. Unfortunately, in terms of finance monetary benefits are much less as compared to an individual employed in similar situations in a private establishment or even the defence forces. The police officer being a member of a societal set up, in fact tries to increase his low remunerative employment situation by other means like bribery and favoritism. The very nature of such activity and sometimes even the refusal to indulge in any such monetarily beneficial activity by itself causes further stress to the police officer.

b) Systematic Stressors: The system emanates from society itself. So, the stressors from these two sources tend to overlap. The legal framework guiding the Indian Police, which basically does not trust the police, is another stressful factor for the police in Indian context. At times in the criminal justice system, it might happen that the court often tends to accept the evidence of a criminal willingly, rather than that of a police officer.

The Indian Police is governed and guided by the Indian Police Act of 1861 and other outdated laws that are a British legacy. The British rule did not give the Indian police the democratic model of policing of Lord Peel that they adopted in their country, but, they gave us the Colonial Model of Policing that is the Irish model as an agency of social control with an anti-people slant. The supreme law of the land, the Constitution of India, expects the Indian Police to be an agency of social change. The subsequent enactments aimed at social change have put onerous responsibility on the police. Added to this, the judiciary, the media and the senior officers keep on exhorting the police...
officers to enforce the law of the land only. But the police tied down by the systematic shackles are unable to live up to its own expectations but also those of the founding fathers of the Constitution and the citizens of this nation. This leads to a lot of internal conflicts and stress in the police officer. It is not uncommon that a police officer who is rewarded or lauded for his initiative or investigative ability is at times made a scapegoat or victim by the same system for the very same act. Thus, the balance between a conduct of excellence and an unacceptable behaviour is often indeterminable and the weights may turn any one side at any point of time causing uncertainty leading to stress.

c) Political Stressors: The Indian democracy, which is more than half a century old, is still to mature. The present political masters, like their British predecessors still expect the police to serve their political ends even at the cost of societal interests. More often than not, police officers face demands from the political executive, which in a democratic society is supposed to represent the popular will. The attempt to appease political master’s conflict with the charter of duties laid down by the laws of the land and the expectations of the citizens. This perceived or real political intervention with a potential career discomfort creates stress to the police officer.

3.1.2 INTERNAL STRESSORS

a) Individual Stressors: The perception of stress is highly individual. It depends on the individual’s previous experiences, emotional/psychological state and his evaluations of the situation. The Type A personality officers in police service face more stress in a given situation compared to Type B officers. The
level of stress also depends on his ability to keep his official and his personal life separate and the ability to rationalize the contradictions in his job.

A Type A personality may be more concerned about his own security at the time of controlling or regulating security or law and order situation. His stress quotient will certainly be more than Type B personality officer whose concern may be in controlling the situation rather than his own personal security. Consequently, it might happen that he would put himself to greater risks thus causing a stressful situation to himself. Other stressors like concerns and doubts about his own ability and training to deal with complex situations constitute further stress causing factors.

This kind of stressful situations and consequent stress on an individual would also depend upon one’s locus of control. For a police officer whose locus of control is external the stress would be much greater because he would naturally feel helpless and unsure of himself in any crisis situation. But a police officer whose locus of control is internal will be able to handle crisis situations better. Thus, same situations, same kind of crises can differ in its stressfulness between individual police officers.

b) *Family Stressors:* The demands of the family and the job of a police officer tend to conflict most of the time. In the Indian situation, often there is only one earning member who is often the head of the family and the police officer’s family is no exception to such a phenomenon. Secondly, the Indian family system is a closed unit system, whether it is participating in a societal event, religious ceremonies or a family function, everyone, specially the head of the family is expected to be present and participate though he has no specific role
in that particular activity. Because of this social situation the demand on the earning member or the head of the family is much more compared to a Western family unit. Therefore, like any family, the police officer’s family expects him to devote enough time for them. But the Indian police officer at the lower level works on an average for about 13 hours and is expected to be available on call round the clock. Whereas, the world over, the police officers work in a strictly compartmentalized eight hourly shifts. As a result, the Indian police officer feels that he is unable to do justice to his family and consequently faces stress. This is mainly due to the role conflict, between various roles of the police officer as a father, a husband, a son, a friend. In addition to this, some families tend to put unreasonable demands and prod the police officer to resort to undesirable ways in the job to earn more and compensate for the extra time he puts in the job. This leads to a conflict within the police officer leading to further stress.

c) Task Stressors: In many job situations, the fulfillments of job responsibilities or tasks by themselves are often stressful. A police officer is exposed to violent situations, witness distressing events and see victims of child abuse. The Indian police officer is often exposed to the above types of situations in the course of discharge of his duties and experiences stress as a result.

The constitutional mandate, the expectations from the police in a democratic nation and the objectives of the police department, with the changing socio-political scenario in India has put the police officer in a quandary and complicated situation, be it dealing with insurgents, political upheaval, natural calamities, man-made disasters or ordinary law and order situations have all contributed as a task stressor to the police officer.
With the changing technology and multiple roles, the police officer is expected to operate computers and also to handle decomposed dead bodies. He is supposed to know the law, techniques of public relations, every aspect of field craft and tactics to handle extremist operations, principles of VVIP security, intelligence trade craft, effective management of politicians and bosses and so on.

d) *Organizational Stressors:* The very nature of police organization gives birth to many stressors. The organisational stress related to the hierarchical set up of the police organisation. For a police officer of a lower rank, who feels that his knowledge or opinion on an issue is better than of his superiors will feel stressed when in an organisational situation is unable to put across his ideas. The police organisation often works on the often quoted principle of *first obey then argue.*

The police hierarchical structure is so rigid that an officer of a lower rank feels helpless at his inability to communicate effectively or ignore an illegal order of a superior, which itself may act as a stressor. Adamant and incompatible bosses, immoral and corrupt higher officers all cause stress to a police officer.

3.2 CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS ON POLICE OFFICERS

Having analysed the various factors that cause stress among police officers, one needs to analyze the consequences of these stressors. The consequence does impact the police officers in various ways and differs from individual to individual. The general
categorization of such consequences could be, individual, interpersonal, familial and societal levels and organizational levels.

a) **Individual level:** At the individual level it has both physiological and psychological effects on the police officer. Due to the factors discussed earlier, a particular police officer may start feeling that he is a failure in personal, professional and as a family man; and even society does not recognize his sacrifices. In such a situation, his peer group and immediate superiors are his last straw. When he perceives injustice from them, perceived or real, the dam of patience, restraint, discipline breaks leading to ugly incidents like shooting down of colleagues and superiors. The pent up frustration finds expression in many more ways. He suffers from sleeplessness, guilt, self doubt, lack of concentration, irritation and drop in morale and performance. Prolonged stress leads to psychosomatic disorders like anxiety neuroticism, depression, stomach upsets, stomach ulcers, cirrhosis, high blood pressure, diabetes, headaches, cardiovascular problems and so on. The individual police officer resorts to escape strategies like drinking, smoking or even drugs.

b) **Interpersonal level:** Sometimes the peers/colleagues of the stressed police officers pay a very heavy price. Cruel and inhuman treatment to juniors, refusal to obey orders, violent reactions to the superiors like shooting of the superiors and at times stressed police officers going on a rampage are not uncommon events in India.

c) **Family level and societal level:** At the family level it has implications for the entire future of his children and wife. Wife beating by police officers may be a result of excessive/prolonged stress. Various addictions like alcoholism and smoking also have a huge economic cost which affects the family.
The societal implications of police stress are very significant. Inhuman behaviour towards the common man by the police officers, custodial violence, human rights violations are all results of stress. Reduced performance has a long-term impact on the security situation and consequently on the overall development of the society.

d) **Organizational level:** Stress among police officers has taken a heavy toll of the over-all efficiency of the police service to the common man. The police are never looked upon as an efficient organisation by the people especially by the press. The police are often blamed for inefficient and ineffective handling of various law and order situations. Their actions are always treated either as excessive or insufficient. Stress has even led to poor quality of police investigations, poor image of police in the mind of the general public, organizational indiscipline, poor work culture and so on.

This is evident that a police officer faces many stressful situations by the very nature of his duties he performs in society; it is in the interest of society to ensure that the stress and stressful situations are minimized and controlled in the professional lives of a police officer. The first step towards this is becoming aware of the existence of stress, stress causing situations and the effect of such stress on the police officer.

Concern about the stress caused to police officers is not new; there have been investigations, research leading to in-depth studies of the various causes and consequences of stress among police officers. Understanding and assimilating the existing knowledge and information in this area will certainly provide a better basis or direction for further investigation or targeted study of stress related issue among police officers.