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VIOLENCE, CRIME AND POVERTY IN PATNA, BIHAR

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Cities are inherently conflictual spaces, concentrating large numbers of diverse people with incongruent interests. This conflict is generally managed peacefully, but can tip into violence when regulation breaks down or can no longer cope

Patna, the capital of the Indian state of Bihar, potentially offers an insight into how a situation of chronic urban violence can return to one of managed conflict. Known as the 'crime capital' of India during the 1990s and early 2000s, Patna is generally considered to have become peaceful and secure since the accession to power of the reformer politician, Nitish Kumar, in 2005.

A new geography of violence

Research[1] suggests that the perception of increased security in Patna is linked to a decline in violent crimes, such as murder, kidnapping or robbery, rather than a fall in overall crime rates, which have actually increased since 2005. While the predominant forms of violence in the city have become less visible, there has been a shift in the geography of violence, and this is now concentrated in Patna's slums.

This transformation has been the result of a strategy since 2005 of more targeted policing, particularly vis-à-vis organised crime. Measures have included increasing police resources, 'fast-track trials', and a ban on gambling, formerly controlled by criminal gangs.

To compensate for a reduction in state revenues after the gambling ban, the Bihar government liberalised alcohol production and sales. Research found that this significantly increased alcohol consumption, especially in the slums.

Levels of violence, particularly domestic violence against women, also increased as a result of alcohol-fuelled conflicts. Domestic violence is less visible than organised crime and tends to be spatially less spread out. The police were also reported as persistently failing to intervene in cases of alcohol-fuelled domestic violence in slums, unless this spilled over into public spaces beyond the slums.

Selective policing

This selective policing and its logic of containment were also evident in the contrasting police reactions to two other major forms of conflict in Patna's slums — over land tenure, and access to water and toilets. The former often led to violence by landowners or developers against slum-dwellers, in which the police rarely intervened. Conversely, the police generally acted rapidly in relation to antagonisms over water and toilets, which frequently polarised along caste and communal lines, and thus had the potential to spill out beyond the slums.

Mansoorganj Musahartoli slum, Patna.

Although Patna is now much safer for the middle and upper classes, this is principally due to a transformation, rather than a reduction, in patterns of violence in the city. Major forms of violence that spread across the city have been eliminated, and police patrolling since 2005 aims at containing slum-based conflicts that might spill beyond the slums. This has led to an intensification of violence in the city's slums, and 76 percent of slum-dwellers contended that violence was still an overwhelming feature of their everyday lives.

Key policy points

- Although Patna is widely perceived as having undergone a significant decrease in urban violence since 2005, the violence has not so much been reduced as contained in the city's slums.
- This situation fails to tackle the underlying causes of conflict and violence in Patna, and the sustainability of the current situation can be questioned.
- Sustainable violence reduction can only be based on more inclusive and participatory forms of prevention that aim to promote equitable outcomes for the city as a whole, rather than a select group.

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