

# Zen in Uniform

by [Subroto Bagchi](#)

Bhubaneswar's women police are trained at an air hostess training centre. And that's not about cosmetics, says the city's top cop Bijay Sharma



*Image: Rajnarayan Choudhury for Forbes India*

## **Bijay Sharma**

**Profile:** Commissioner of Police for Bhubaneswar-Cuttack

### **He Says:**

- We can have no work breakdown between men and women. They do a tough job without complaint and they make the street smart, efficient and courteous. I did what I had to do.
- Be in the mud. Make do with what you have. Don't seek favours from the system.

On one side was Bijay Sharma, Indian Police Service (IPS) officer and superintendent of police (SP). On the other side was the district magistrate and collector, who was from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Both officers were in their twenties and hot blooded. They had gotten into a serious disagreement that, looking back, was over something trivial. The issue got somewhat out of control. The government took notice of the matter and sent the two on "punishment postings". That is how Sharma landed up in the Phulbani district of Odisha which was considered the place for the condemned.

Packing for his new assignment, Sharma told himself three things: I will enjoy every day of my new job. I will never approach anyone for a transfer from hell. I will never ask for good officers to be brought in from outside the district. Phulbani was for the rogues and the misfit. When Sharma landed there and toured his new district, he was welcomed in some places by cynical, dysfunctional troops and in others, they were simply not there as his jeep pulled up for inspection. In one such place, as he sought to chastise a previously absconding inspector twice his age, the man defiantly said, "What worse can you do to me? Can there be a jail inside the jail?"

"After every inspection, one is expected to return to the district headquarter and dictate the inspection report. But my stenographer was absconding. So, I sat there for the next couple of hours in the police station and in my own handwriting, wrote a 30-page report in the flickering light of the lone lantern, handed it over to the man and got back into my jeep," says Sharma.

Two days after the incident, Sharma had a visitor. It was the same defiant inspector. He stood in front of Sharma's door with the 30-page report in his hand. Never in his life, he said, had an SP visited his outpost; no one ever had given him a handwritten report; good or bad. Sir, he said, this will be treasured by me till I die. Three years later, when Sharma was transferred, the entire town showed up to bid goodbye.

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Bijay Sharma is no longer a rookie officer. He is 50. After Phulbani, a brilliant, well-decorated career has emerged. He has been awarded two President's Medals, an award from the Governor of the State and numerous civic felicitations. Challenging and prestigious assignments have followed. But the one that will make him a legend in the eyes of the people of Odisha is the most current: Commissioner of Police for Bhubaneswar-Cuttack, where he leads a force of 2,500 men and women. As he stepped into this role, Sharma went about his work, thinking like an entrepreneur. He created his own mission, vision and values and published them to his stakeholders. He built imposing physical infrastructure that notified his strategic intent. He created the systems and processes that shifted the idea of policing from simply dealing with crime and punishment to life and living. "Only 30 percent of all the calls we get on our Police Control Room hotline has something to do with the police," Sharma says.

"Seventy percent is related to civic services, including an out-of-town student asking for directions to an examination venue. But when I took over, we were not emotionally ready to brace a new approach."



Years ago, I was being taken around the ruins at the Chennakesava temple in Belur, Karnataka. My guide stopped me and drew my attention to the sculpted figures of women equestrians of the time. "Yatra naryastu pujoyante, ramante tatra devata," he said to me. Gods revel in the land that respects its women. A thousand years back, there was not just equality for women; they excelled in every field and the figurines show how progressive that society was.

To humanise his workforce, Sharma brought in Odiya women as traffic cops. But he had to deal with scepticism. A lot of it had to do with the issues of self-esteem in Odiya women. Sharma turned for help to the folks at the Frankfinn Institute of Air Hostess Training. Despite the unusual charter, they not only stepped up, they saw it as their contribution to law and order. Without a charge, they took up the training of women constables in grooming and etiquette. Bhubaneswar changed forever.

Today, when tourists arrive in Bhubaneswar, they want to be photographed with Bhubaneswar's women police. The media loves them and the people of Odisha treat them like a badge of honour. I want to know how the commissioner of police could get permission from the top to send his staff to an air-hostess training academy after their graduation from the police academy.

"I didn't ask for permission. Training them at Frankfurt was not about cosmetics. Anywhere in the world, you form an impression about a city by the experience you have on its streets. My force does a tough job but with efficiency and civility. Soon, a third of my workforce would consist of women. I cannot afford to treat them as 'extras'; they are not museum pieces. We can have no work breakdown between men and women. They do a tough job without complaint and they make the street smart, efficient and courteous. I did what I had to do."



After the women hit the road, Sharma claims that the men in uniform became a lot more conscious and aware and polite with the citizenry. But it did not stop there. Odiya people, who culturally do not mess with women, found it awkward to violate traffic rules if a woman was in charge!

On the walls of his impressive office, Sharma is surrounded by the accolades his force has brought him. They overshadow the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship at the John Hopkins University and the many commendations he has earned for himself for outstanding contributions to drug handling and wild life protection.

It is time for me to catch the flight to Bangalore. Before heading out, I have one question to him on managing change. What can businesses learn from the khaki?

Without blinking the man says, "Be in the mud. Make do with what you have. Don't seek favours from the system. Respect the guy confronting you; see yourself in him. And then, play the game."

*Subroto Bagchi is co-founder & gardener, MindTree and a best-selling author. His brief: Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs*