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Stone Age cops prefer lathis to drones

— By *Sindhu J Mansukhani*, August 31, 2014 01:55 am



Drones enable aerial surveillance at a fraction of the cost of a chopper but cops say they are not of much help

Mumbai

Not only are the laws that govern the Indian police antiquated, their methods too are from the Stone Age. A case in point is the refusal by the Mumbai police to use drones for aerial surveillance during immersion this Ganeshotsav. Cops all over the world find the eye-in-the-sky useful but our cops still prefer the good old lathi.

"It is considered more of a novelty that drones are being used for aerial surveillance. The bandobast that the police does is more than enough to effectively monitor all the activities on ground," said a top police officer on condition of anonymity. He added that Mumbai police did not find the drones useful in the handful of occasions they used them.

However, not everyone is convinced. Private agencies which have supplied drones to the police in the past say the cops may rue their decision.

"The problem with Mumbai is not the distance, but mobility. Drones can easily cover a huge area within a few minutes as they fly and have no obstructions. On ground however, such mobility is impossible due to traffic and the crowd during such events," said Rahul Singh, chief technical officer of Idea Forge whose drone 'Netra' was used by the police last year during immersion at Girgaum chowpatty.

The police had also used drones at the funeral procession of Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray in 2012.

Girgaum chowpatty was a sea of people coming in and going out, said Singh. "The situation could have easily erupted into a stampede had the bandobast not been proper. The live feed provided by drones assists in monitoring and predicting the occurrence of such events," he said.

Shinil Shekar of Airpix Drone Photography said that the footage recorded by drones could be saved and analysed later to figure out alternative routes to a particular place. "Our drones can fly up to 100 metres and the camera can cover an area of almost 600 metres in one frame. Cameras on ground cannot provide such line of sight and as such their coverage is limited. They can be a good source of evidence too," he added.

Chaityabhoomi too witnessed an endless sea of people on December 6 last year, when the police was monitoring it through Airpix's drone.

The cameras on drones come with several controls such as zooming into particular areas, which provides a more precise view of the activities on ground. "If some problem is taking place on the ground, it will take some time for a person on the ground to reach there. Till that time the drone can at least track the activities and even follow the culprits by the time police personnel reach the spot. Unlike ground policing, it offers uninterrupted control of the situation," Singh said.

According to both Shekar and Singh, the presence of drones could have been a great advantage in the Ganeshotsav bandobast.

Shekar feels that it will require a tragedy for the police to appreciate the importance of drones. Singh said that although drones are used by cops all over the world, it is still an early technology in India and perhaps it will take time for law-enforcing agencies to warm up to it. "However, I am sure that eventually it will be a hit with everyone as it offers the service of say, a helicopter, that is providing an aerial view at the price of a police vehicle on ground," he said.

Police commissioner Rakesh Maria said recently that they are deploying heavy ground police for the bandobast but not drones. When asked if this could prove to be a disadvantage, he said, "We have other methods of monitoring the critical areas during Ganpati visarjan. However, I wouldn't want to go into the details."

Observers feel that there is more than meets the eye in this case. They point out that the home department has been unable to get CCTV cameras for the city in the last six years.

Sindhu J Mansukhani

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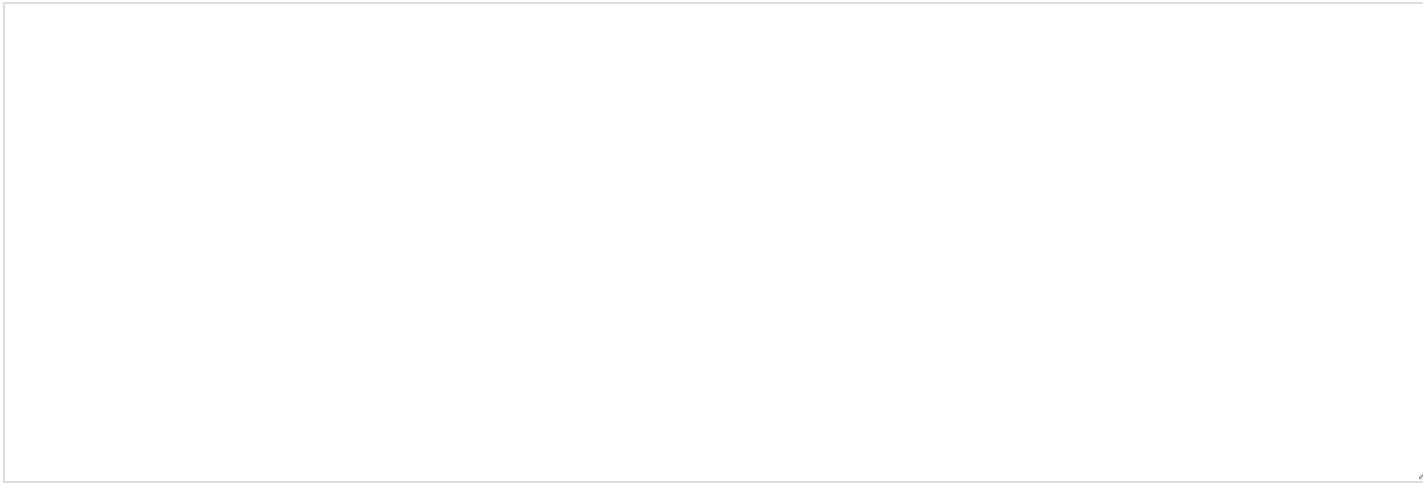
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