

Private forensic labs take citizens for a ride

Many of the 18 private forensic labs in India, including six in the state, allegedly have no infrastructure or expertise to conduct high-end forensic tests or offer courses in forensic science. Yet they continue to fool unsuspecting citizens. The Union Home ministry has set up a high-level committee to probe the matter

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A MAJORITY of the half-a-dozen private forensic science laboratories that have sprung up across the city and its surrounding districts are allegedly duping unsuspecting people by claiming they have expertise to conduct high-end forensic tests and offer diploma courses in forensic science. In many cases, they even outsource work to government-run forensic labs but charge customers much higher rates than what the government agency would charge for a similar test.

Taking serious cognisance of this issue, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has now formed a high-level committee comprising Union home secretary Dr CN Bhattacharya, Chief Forensic Scientist, DFS, Ministry of HA, Dr JM Vyas, Director, Gujarat Forensic Science University and Director Generals of Police from four states to find ways and means to check this quasi-legal existence of private forensic laboratories.

At present there are 18 such private laboratories, which are operational across the country, including in Mumbai and Pune and most of them have an online presence as well. Each of these agencies claim on their respective websites, that

they provide forensic services for questioned documents, cyber forensics, finger printing, audio-video forensics and forensic toxicology. Most of the services do not just require expertise but also high-end equipments. Operating such services also need permission from the concerned state government.

More questions than answers

Forensic experts, politicians and the cops are equally baffled as to how these private labs were given permission to function in the way they do. How could, for instance, a private forensic laboratory do ballistic testing, without a firing range? Or do a DNA sample testing, without having required equipment?

Rukmini Krishnamurthy, former director of State Forensics Science Laboratory and former technical advisor for Institute of Forensic Science, Maharashtra, who is also academic counsel member of Gujarat Forensic Science University, said, "It is worrying to hear that some of these lab owners, who claim to be forensic experts, do not even have basic forensic education. In some cases these people operate from their homes and outsource the samples received."

Krishnamurthy added, "Some former forensic experts have set up their own online and distant education programmes with no practical training or affiliation to any of the recognised universities. They are misleading students in the name of forensic science."

High-level committee formed under MHA

When SUNDAY MID DAY contacted Dr Bhattacharya on Saturday, he said, "We have understood the gravity of the case and are working on modalities to keep a check on such private laboratories."

Dr Vyas echoed similar concerns and said, "Such private laboratories should not be allowed, without checking the credentials of people who are running it. There has to be a licensing system and the central government and Ministry of Home Affairs are working on this."

Chief Secretary, Maharashtra Jayant Bhanthia said, "I am shocked. I will surely discuss this matter soon with the Additional Chief Secretary (Home) and Director General of Police."