

# Rendezvous with Militants: the Indian Experience

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**Abstract.** Terrorist militancy in India is explicable in terms of a constellation of factors and none is sufficient by itself to account for terrorism. Any blueprint to counter terrorism must be as multifaceted as the causes of terrorism. An integrated approach and methodology is necessary to counter the menace of terrorism in India. Apart from the economic dimension of terrorism, its ideological, cultural and psychological aspects must figure prominently in any policy agenda to combat the terrorist threat. The transformation of terrorists is impossible without a transformation of the attitude of the Government which often itself assumes the role of terrorist. The abolition of terrorism must be preceded by the abolition of state terrorism.

**Keywords:** Militancy, Terrorism, Violence, Identity Politics

## 1. Introduction

India in the new millennium is confronted with a multiplicity of challenges the most potent among which, is the menace of terrorist militancy. Terrorism with its portentous national and international ramifications, has posed a formidable problem for policy makers. The alarming frequency with which, terrorist acts have been perpetrated in a number of places in the last few years has created consternation not only in the political echelons but has also infected the common people with a fear psychosis. The series of terrorist attacks twice in Delhi in quick succession, particularly on Indian Parliament and also bomb blasts in Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Assam and finally culminating in the diabolical Mumbai carnage of November 26, 2008, has raised questions about the credibility of the intelligence agencies and also highlighted the failure of the state to formulate an adequate policy to counter terrorism. The situation has been rendered more grave by the ceaseless operation of secessionist militant movements in India like the Jammu and Kashmir insurgency, Naxals, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and KLO (Kamtapur Liberation Organization) in Assam and North Bengal, NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) in Nagaland and Maoists in Central India, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal all of which are based on the ideology of violence with the ultimate end of carving out a separate sovereign state. Such movements have adopted violent methods of struggle like individual and genocide, ambush, abduction, extortion and intimidation thereby threatening India with the spectre of sanguinary carnage. The present paper seeks to address the seminal question as to how the challenge of terrorism can be countered and intends to provide a policy blueprint for the same.

## 2. Case for a Changed Mindset

While grappling with the challenge of terrorism the policy makers have a number of policy options available to them from which they have to make a rational choice for policy formulation in tune with situational exigencies. Here they must shed some of the common inhibitions and predilections which often create a predisposition for or against a particular course of action. They must come to grip with the reality that terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is the product of a constellation of forces which varies from place to place. No one factor can by itself cause terrorism. A particular factor can be of primary importance in a specific case while in other cases, it may have a secondary or even minimal role to play. Thus despite an enormous proliferation of literature on the subject, a universal theory of terrorism has proved elusive. According to an expert, there is no universal definition of terrorism except the broad consensus that it is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon and that there is no typical profile of a terrorist which makes identification and detection of terrorists difficult.<sup>1</sup> Since terrorism is a multi-causal rather than a mono-causal phenomenon, the process of countering it must also be multi-pronged. Different types of policy are needed for different types and brands of terrorists. Moreover in many terrorist organizations, a distinction must be made between the hard core elements who are ideologically sensitive and those who join either out of

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frustration caused by poverty, unemployment and social injustice or out of momentary impulse. Two separate sets of policy are required for leaders and cadres as the former are ideologically motivated unlike the latter that are devoid of any ideological consciousness. While situational specificity determines the appropriate response to terrorism no policy can be framed without understanding the roots of terrorism which are multifarious. In the case of the recruitment of ULFA and KLO militants (at least the lower level cadres) poverty and unemployment figure prominently but in the case of the militants of Jammu and Kashmir the ideology of *Jihad* is the main propellant along with state terrorism. An expert attributes the spurt of terrorism to the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslims and recommends economic uplift and secular education as the panacea for terrorism.<sup>2</sup> This does not explain why economically affluent people and educated youths take to terrorism. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the September 11 attack on America, was studying engineering in North Carolina and Ramzi Yousef the Pakistani national who planned the attack on the World Trading Centre in 1993, was an engineering Graduate from Wales. According to a study by the US scholar Peter Bergen in 2005, 53% of 75 Islamic terrorists had attended college or received a college degree.<sup>3</sup> Another survey by Princeton and Georgetown University researchers, finds that the rural poor in Pakistan do not support the *jihadis* as they are the victims of their acts as well as reprisal by the authorities. While a portion of *jihadis* are recruited from the poor strata, wealthy districts are less supportive of religious militancy than those with middle income. Reduction of poverty level is not likely to reduce support for *Jihad*.<sup>4</sup> Economic deprivation is thus not sufficient by itself to spur one to commit terrorist acts but may do so if bolstered by the force of ideology which overpowers psychology. The policy makers should treat terrorism more as a psychological rather than political and economic problem and assign priority to the cause rather than the consequence because diabolical terrorist acts are often the consequence of misguided psychology deformed by brainwashing rather than consciously pursued political motives.

### 3. Unraveling the Roots of Terrorism

Terrorist organizations normally make poor families, the target group for cadre recruitment. The Maoist movement in India based on ultra-left ideology of violence is predominantly the consequence of years of economic impoverishment. Most people in the forests subsist on insects and suffer from malnutrition. Hunger drives man to the point of madness when his rational faculties are paralysed and terrorist groups capitalize on their dehumanized existence first by monetary allurements followed by ideological justification of violence. It is a major question whether poverty by itself, motivates people to go for revolutionary change. On this point Eric Hoffer's answer is clearly in the negative. According to him poverty is a barrier to instability because those who are concerned with the immediate goal of the next meal will not bother about transformation of society.<sup>5</sup> Hoffer's theorization of the problem provides important insights. He argues that discontent by itself does not create a desire for change. Other factors have to be present before discontent turns into disaffection. One of these is a sense of power.<sup>6</sup> Those who are awed by their surroundings do not think of change, no matter how miserable their condition. The reputed Indian economist Amartya Sen observes that 'The increasing tendency in recent years to justify policies of poverty removal on the ground that this is the surest way to prevent political strife and turmoil'.<sup>7</sup> Sen admits that 'Destitution can of course produce provocation for defying established laws and rules'<sup>8</sup> but he adds in the same vein as Hoffer that 'It need not give people the initiative, courage and actual ability to do anything very violent. Destitution can be accompanied not only by economic debility but also by political helplessness. A starving wretch can be too frail and too dejected to fight and battle, and even to protest and holler. It is thus not surprising that often enough intense and widespread suffering and misery have been accompanied by unusual peace and silence.'<sup>9</sup> He says that 'Leaders like Osama bin Laden do not to say the least suffer from poverty. And yet the movements that are led by well off leaders typically do rely on a sense of injustice, inequality and humiliation that the established world order is seen as having produced. Poverty and economic inequality may not instantly bred terrorism or influence the leaders of terrorist organizations, but nevertheless they can help to create rich recruiting grounds for the foot soldiers of the terrorist camps.'

While the economic factor is of vital importance as a catalyst of militancy, the ideological factor is also of special significance. A minimum level of ideological commitment and motivation can canalize the frustration resulting from poverty towards anti-state militant behaviour. Ideology provides a set of beliefs

that guide and justify a series of behavioral mandates. Keane is of the opinion that 'For terrorism to succeed, it demands a rigid adherence to a simple idea. The mind that questions, debates, open itself to challenging ideas will prove a source of division for a terrorist movement in the heat of the battle. Sticking to a rigid orthodoxy offers security and justification to people committing acts of terror.'<sup>10</sup> Belief produces meaning and purpose and above all a deep assurance where there is no scope for doubt, criticism or skepticism. It signifies a common and broadly agreed upon set of rules to which an individual subscribes that help to regulate and determine behavior linked to beliefs, values, principles and goals. Rapoport refers to the divine mandate which is potentially the most concerning feature of the extremist driven by religious ideology. He alludes to the transcendental source of holy terror where the deity is perceived as being directly involved in the determination of means and ends and exemplifies his point with reference to Nasra Hassan's study of 250 Palestinian terrorists who felt that their actions were sanctioned by the divinely revealed religion of Islam.<sup>11</sup> This compares favourably with the testimony of arrested militants connected with the Delhi bomb blast of September 13, 2008. It appears that militants who are religious zealots have no sense of repentance for their acts and their actions are based on a militant interpretation of Islam. One of them Zia-Ur-Rehman went on record saying that 'If Allah wants, I'll bomb the market where my mother buys vegetables. She will be sent to paradise.'<sup>12</sup> He added, 'Whatever knowledge I had of Islam, I have no regrets about what I did.' Another arrested militant Mohammed Shekeel reportedly said 'No regrets. It's Allah's test of our fortitude.' He added 'I experienced in me an awakening after I committed my life to Allah. Now nothing scares me. Life and death are the same'.<sup>13</sup> Taylor explicates the point further saying that ideology controls behaviour by providing a set of contingencies that link immediate behaviour that is violence to distant outcomes like new state and after-life rewards. These are powerful re-inforcers and motivators.<sup>14</sup> To be brainwashed means whitewashing all moral compunctions. Marsella amplifies further that ideology provides a sense of belief which reduces uncertainty and the hallmark of this syndrome is the inability to tolerate doubt and uncertainty.<sup>15</sup>

In any analysis of a militant movement the ideological component assumes significance as it provides the militant with an instrument to legitimize his actions. Ideology can serve to destroy all psychological deterrents to violence. Extremist ideologies stimulate militant behavior particularly by appealing to religious instinct which is the most vulnerable point. Political and economic ideologies aiming at radical change do not always produce an equal instant effect because the role of religion as a decisive factor in human life is a reality. Movements based on a secular ideology might display violence in equal magnitude but the cadre mobilization process is likely to be more time consuming. Ideological indoctrination transforms educated youths into hardcore militants through incessant propaganda whose magnetic appeal captivates even students at the London School of Economics. Middle class families from Jordan and elsewhere send their sons for education in the West but away from home they fall prey to *Jihadis* who instil in them the belief that though they come from different parts of the globe like Sudan, Jordan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Iraq etc, yet Islam is their common religion which is in danger from the Christian world. Ed Husain a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin has averred in his memoirs that 'I had very little contact with non-Muslims. And even to this day, a young person in Tower Hamlets, has just two or three choices: Join a gang, or choose the more glamorous option of joining an Islamist organization.'<sup>16</sup> Apart from training in firearms, explosives and physical toughening as testified by Ajmal Kasab, the prime accused in the attack on Taj Hotel, Mumbai in November 2008, it is also true that the Lashkar -e-Toiba, the *jihadi* outfit, ensures indoctrination of recruits at the Muridike Complex before being initiated to military training. Prof. Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, its founder declared on November 3, 1999, that they would not rest until the whole of India was dissolved into Pakistan and then again on October 17, 2008, that India understands only the language of *Jihad*.<sup>17</sup>

An important dimension of terrorist behavior is rooted in their psychology. Terrorism is essentially based on a psychology of revenge and anger which often assumes the form of vengeance emanating from an obsessive drive. The quest for a paradise, real or imaginary and also the aspiration for status and respect motivate militant behaviour. A feeling of remediable injustice based on grievances economic, ethnic, racial, legal, political and social constitutes the foundation of terrorist behavior.<sup>18</sup> Closely linked to the feeling of injustice is the experience of personal abuse and humiliation. In North Ireland young adolescents who were themselves terrorized ultimately became terrorists.<sup>19</sup> According to another specialist on the subject, terrorists

have the experience of a traumatized childhood when they suffered chronic physical abuse and profound emotional humiliation.<sup>20</sup> State terrorism often creates childhood trauma and breeds terrorism by breeding a psychology of revenge. In 1996, several surrendered militants in India joined forces with the army to fight militants and came to be known as *Ikhwanis*. Mustafa Khan who was an innocent child somehow got implicated in an attack on the *Ikhwanis* who regularly visited his house and harassed him even before the reported attack took place. After the attack they came to his house and beat his mother Shameema Begum. This exceeded Mustafa's tolerance. He was arrested in 1999 and soon learnt that his childhood friend Shakeel was killed by the *Ikhwanis* shortly after his arrest. He himself had to undergo cruel torture in prison and was made to sponge down the blood soaked vehicle on which Shakeel had been tortured to death. After his release the *Ikhwanis* asked him to report regularly at the 34 Rashtriya Rifles Camp in Beerwa town of central Kashmir together with his mother. Khan found this humiliation impossible to digest and secretly left home to join the *Hizb-ul-Mujahideen* with the intention of giving a tough time to the counter insurgents. On July 30, 2001, he was shot dead and thousands of people attended his funeral. His native village mourned him not for his martyrdom but for the painful tales of his lost childhood.<sup>21</sup>

One of the potent psychological stimulants to terrorism is the longing for an identity. Once someone joins a terrorist organization his individual identity is merged in the larger group identity. As a member of a terrorist group, a person is able to fill up a vacuum in his life which he is unable to do as a member of society. 'Membership in a terrorist group provides a sense of identity or belonging for those personalities whose underlying sense of identity is flawed.'<sup>22</sup> Terrorists are motivated by a desperate quest for personal meaning constantly harping on the self addressed question 'Who am I?' This is the main constitutive element of identity politics but when applied to terrorist behaviour it relates to the very selfhood of man. Joining a terrorist group means regaining his lost self. 'Belonging to the terrorist group becomes the most important component of their psychological identity.'<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that people join terrorist organizations at a crucial psychological moment in their life. These young people find themselves at a time in their life when they are looking into their future with the hope of engaging in meaningful behavior that will be satisfying. Initiation to terrorism means inflammation of imagination which leads one to commit horrendous acts without any qualm of conscience and generates in youthful hearts, a sense of emancipation of selfhood from eternal bondage. However they are destined to be disillusioned as has been the case of many Kashmiri militants who have returned home impoverished and frustrated. Many of them quit fighting in 1995 after they were disgusted with ideological clashes between fractured militant groups. One of them climbed a sentry post and pleaded to the Indian soldiers to allow him to return. One was welcomed by his brother after returning but turned out the next day. Another's wife refused to accept him.<sup>24</sup> Should the Government be sympathetic or apathetic to these misguided souls?

#### **4. Quest for Introspection**

The policy establishment is often guided by the belief that the back of the terrorists can be broken by military operations as proved by the success of Operations *Rhino* and *Bajrang* against the ULFA in Assam and *Operation All Clear* launched against the KLO by the government of Bhutan. Military action can emasculate a militant movement but not permanently. Thus within one year after *Operation All Clear*, the Greater Coochbehar movement escalated in North Bengal. The ULFA and the KLO were paralyzed by military action because their ideological base was very weak as proved by cases of large scale desertion by disillusioned cadres in the hope of rejoining the mainstream. Notably, no radical religious ideology has motivated militancy in North East India as in the case of Jammu and Kashmir. The latter are less amenable to offers of peaceful negotiation than the former. Had the ideology of *Jihad* percolated the ranks of the ULFA, NSCN and the KLO they would have shown greater resilience against military operations. For religion has a force and appeal of its own which renders indoctrination easier than by anti-state propaganda based on reminders about poverty and underdevelopment. To counter militancy spurred by a crusading propellant, one has to look beyond military force. Apart from dialogue and packages of economic development there is the Gandhian nonviolent alternative to military action that is psychological warfare aiming at the transformation of the arrested militants through psychiatric intervention and redemptive psychological counselling. What is of vital importance is that the Government should never treat military action as an end in itself and aim at the

extermination of militants. For violence begets violence, massacring militants is no index of the efficiency of the Government, in countering the menace of terrorism. For militants have a past history which has turned them into militants. By ignoring that history, the Government commits a crime as heinous as those perpetrated by militants. Their career as militants is also not confined to terrorist acts alone. The late Indira Goswami who mediated between the Assam Government and the ULFA militants has testified that she was surprised to find after her first visit to an ULFA camp in Darang that some of the activities of the militants included supplying food to the poor, inculcation of self reliance among women by training them in the art of weaving etc.<sup>25</sup> She also discovered that in the Saraipani village 25 km away from Jorhat, ex-ULFA men had done enormous humanitarian work like establishment of schools and orphan homes.<sup>26</sup> She has also referred to the letter of an ULFA militant to her dated January 16, 1996, describing his constructive activities in a village where he had set up a library.<sup>27</sup> Indira Goswami was shocked to learn later on that almost all the militants whose unknown history had been revealed to her were shot dead. Interesting details of SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) cadres being used by the security forces of the Assam Government for murdering relatives, friends and colleagues of ULFA militants have come to light. ‘The most apparent justification for the whole exercise was that it was a tit for tat response to the ULFA sponsored terrorism, specially the killing of their old comrades-the SULFAs.’<sup>28</sup> The entire exercise was intended to ‘teach ULFA a lesson. Since ULFA was killing innocent people, SULFA members and party workers of the Asom Gana Parishad which was in power then, the ULFA leader’s families should be targeted to hit the militants where it hurts most...SULFA members, aided by security forces would enter the house of the victim at midnight, pick up their target and their bodies would be found the next morning.’<sup>29</sup> While militants are guilty of gruesome acts, state terrorism has a history which the pen shrinks from recording. Occasionally, terrorism of the Government is more atrocious. The Government must abandon its ruthless and vindictive attitude and unveil its human face.

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