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India's Hindu Terror: Can it be tamed?

By Bibhu Prasad Routray

Synopsis

The arrests of individuals linked to fringe Hindu groups for involvement in several terror attacks present an opportunity for the Indian government to show that it is not soft on terror.

Commentary

THE REALITY of terror attacks by Hindu groups is gradually registering in the minds of Indians, although the extent of the damage potential of these fringe formations remains a matter of debate.

According to available information, persons associated with the Hindu terror groups, such as the one ironically named Abhinav Bharat (Modern India) and the other Sanatan Sanshtha (Eternal Organisation), carried out explosions in several places across the country. Prominent among them were two blasts in Malegaon in Maharashtra state in 2006 and 2008; an explosion targeting a train that runs between India and Pakistan in 2007 in Haryana; a blast in the Sufi shrine of Ajmer Durgah in Rajasthan in 2007; and a blast in a mosque in Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh in 2007. Collectively these five attacks claimed the lives of at least 126 civilians, mostly Muslims.

Criminal Planning

Investigations into all these attacks reveal the details of planning that went into them. They were carried out by a compact group of men and women, ostensibly to take revenge for the 'Muslim terror acts' against the country. A member of the group, a colonel in the Indian army, provided technical expertise and explosives from the Army's supply, which were then placed under concrete slabs, bicycle/ motorcycles and tiffin boxes to create mayhem. The conspirators even killed one of their main organisers -- to get rid of evidence of their involvement.

Paradoxically initial suspicion for the attacks had fallen on Muslim groups. For instance, nine Muslims were arrested and continue to be detained for their involvement in one of the blasts that took place in 2006. Experts then had sought to explain the attacks on Islamic places of worship as being driven by the larger objective of Pakistan-sponsored militants to drive a communal wedge between the Hindus and the Muslims in India. Curiously the confessions recorded of the arrested members of Abhinav Bharat justify the death of Hindus in such attacks as collateral damages the majority community must suffer in order to "teach the Muslims a lesson".

Politics over Terror

Persons involved in the attacks have in some way or other been connected to the Hindu right-wing revivalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Swami Aseemanand, arrested in connection with five of these explosions has indicated the direct role played by some of the RSS leaders in the attacks. The RSS, to date, however, remains defiant and characterises investigations into the acts of 'Hindu terror' as attempts by 'anti-Hindu' forces to weaken the efforts to counter jihadi terrorism. The RSS claims that "a Hindu cannot be a terrorist". The main opposition political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is closely connected with the RSS, cautiously remains supportive of the government's actions, but maintains that the government must do more against the jihadi terror.

With 83 percent of its population being Hindu, any reference linking terror acts to the majority group is bound to be controversial and politically sensitive in a country where many political parties use religion to garner votes. That consideration compelled Home Minister P Chidambaram to backtrack from his expression 'saffron terror' in 2010 in parliament. In addition to the BJP, some of his colleagues within the Congress party too objected to raking up the issue.

NIA Investigations

The National Investigation Agency (NIA), set up after the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, is currently probing two cases involving the Hindu extremists. The government in New Delhi is supportive of the NIA examining all the cases wherever the role of the Hindu outfits is evident.

In the first week of March 2011, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) wrote to the state governments and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India's criminal investigative agency, soliciting their views whether they would like to hand over all 'Hindu terror' cases to the NIA. Given the political nature of the issue this step would lead to an impartial and 'single agency' investigation of the cases. Currently, some of the cases are being investigated by individual state-level Anti-Terrorism Squads (ATS) and some by the CBI.

Moreover, giving all these cases involving the Hindu outfits to the NIA makes practical sense, since most of these attacks involve common conspirators. Notwithstanding the objections raised by some of the states, especially those ruled by the right-wing BJP, the NIA Act allows New Delhi to take over from the state police any case with terror linkages, with or without their explicit consent.

India's secular fabric

Effective steps to counter terror acts by the Hindu outfits will have wider ramifications for India's secular fabric as well as its intent to be a part of the global anti-terror efforts. Any dilution in the initiative would not only weaken its claims of being targeted principally by externally-sponsored terror groups, but also would bring to the fore the latent prejudices towards the minority Muslim community. The Indian government would do well to curb the rise of such a trend, through an impartial, objective and professional investigation process, while it is still in its infancy involving fringe elements.

The Congress government in New Delhi, just two years into its five-year term, and thus not facing the communal electoral considerations of an election year, is well positioned to pursue the investigation to its conclusion. It is an opportunity for the Indian government to assure its Muslim citizens and the international community that it is not soft on terror.

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