COMMENTARIES

Strategic Patience of Terror: State has the Clock, Radicals Have the Time

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Following the revelations about the Faridabad and Gujarat terror modules, the media debate is ripe with involvement of educated Indian Muslim youth in religious extremism and terrorism. In fact, this should not surprise anyone because for decades several educated Indian Muslim men have joined terror groups challenging the Indian state and have even shifted base to Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya to serve 'their' Muslim brothers.

In fact, it is the new strategic depth extremism and terrorism have reached in India a serious cause of concern. The initial arrests and revelations about both the terror modules point to an unprecedented level of radicalisation of Muslim youth across India who are not only ideologically aligned, but are strategically working to mass murder civilians. The sheer scale unearthed so far is disturbing. The actual design is yet to be revealed.

The most striking feature of both the terror modules is the practise of patience as a strategic time management tool by them, with a moto – 'the state has a clock, we have time'. Such modules maintain strategic hibernation and wait for favourable political conditions or episodes of social unrest or disturbance manufactured by external factors for them to act. The present dispensation; however, has largely succeeded in maintaining internal peace and keep Pakistan at bay ever since it has come to power in 2014.

Despite this fact; such preparations could not have been possible in absence of an enabling ecosystem comprising of people with ideological match working together for years. These terror modules are glaring examples of them having a hierarchical structure – capable of covering a wide geography across India and penetrate institutions, have subdued conversations to avoid scrutiny by intelligence agencies, maintain a supply chain for constant flow of men, money and material and safe houses to harbour them and organisational discipline.

The Red Fort blast, *Prima facie* appeared to be an act out of desperation following the seizure of explosives and weapons, and arrest of the members of the Faridabad module. The NIA has; however, declared it a suicide strike. The news is all the more worrisome because it is not known how many suicide bombers have been prepared and are still at large. Had the arrests not happened and seizures not made, the module, as history of terrorism in India suggests would have carried out spectacular suicide attacks on the dates they feel are historic. Now that the module has been exposed, the remaining members have surely slipped into hibernation mode – waiting for their ecosystem to reestablish the entire network and wait for the right opportunity. One can just hope that the police and intelligence agencies have seized the entire quantity of the explosives and arms the Faridabad module was in possession of. If not, an attack or two in days to come cannot be ruled out. Whereas the Gujarat module may have succeeded in producing the ricin poison and distributed to cities recced across states and supplied to local members of the module to mix it in water bodies or food prepared by religious places not aligned to their ideology.

There will be an obvious urge to connect the recent developments with Pakistan and ultimately the investigation might very well trace the money and equipment trails to Islamabad and its terror ecosystem; what is of greater importance is the presence of Pakistan-like mindset among a certain section of Indians. Therefore, it is important to understand how Irfan Ahmad Wagay – a school dropout turned religious cleric could manipulate the minds of doctors to turn to religious extremism and terrorism. In view of this, it would be pertinent to get into the details of the conversations the Kashmiri community has been having – especially since the abrogation of the Article-370, the role of the families – the most basic unit of any social structure in countering radical conversations and narrative set by the society there. This holds true for the other parts of the country as well. This is not to suggest or propose any crackdown on any section of the society, but to prevent radicalisation from further spreading.

In short, radicalisation and terrorism are morphing into a challenge larger than ever before. The threat of terrorism would continue to remain physical in nature; however, the new levels of radicalisation suggest severe corrosion of democratic values in the psyche of a certain section of the Indian society. Dialogue is rapidly being replaced by dogma, the us versus them narrative appears to be crystalising like never before and rejection of pluralism for want for absolutism is becoming a reality – thus making extremism a direct assault on India's democratic ideals.

The Faridabad and Gujarat terror modules are glaring examples of confluence of those who have vehemently rejected the Indian state and existence of faiths other than their own. The Indian state would continue to perform its duty of protecting every national; it is, however, the duty of the community to have an honest introspection about where it has gone wrong and the corrective measures it needs to implement. The Indian society does not want a situation where citizens avoid each other out of fear of getting killed or apprehended by the state agencies for their alleged involvement in extremism and terrorism.

The real damage is done before the physical acts of terrorism. The society divided and extremist viewpoint is legitimised. The latest revelations point towards the omissions on the part of the successive governments in carrying out credible counter-narrative to reach out to the various sections of the society.

(The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.)