Editorial

Understanding Terrorism: Role of Social Scientists

With the savage terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, terrorism has suddenly become a point of hot debate. The US-led 'crusade' to avenge the attacks is dividing the international community into a sharply polarised world. The strong and increasing opposition to the US strikes is likely to lead to further consolidation of opposing groups and polarisation. Any intervention to cope with the trauma and fear generated by terrorism and attempts to stem the same must begin with a critical understanding of terrorism. And it is here that the social scientists have a significant role.

Current understanding of terrorism is that it is any organised violence with the intention of causing fear and personal insecurity of citizens and threatening the state authority or achieving other political goals. Terrorism can be internal and domestic or international. Terrorism can be mass terrorism or individual. There are selective and nonselective terrorism. What happened on September 11 was indeed a purposively selected target, though the victims may have been nonselective. We hear of compromise terrorism, meaning the terrorism of a political group or organisation for the purpose of extorting concessions from the authorities of the country with which it is not in direct conflict.

Though terrorism in various forms has been present for centuries, it is considered a contemporary issue, existing in various countries, various forms and demanding immediate attention, for the very survival of the planet. Particularly so because the contemporary forms of terrorism are escalating with unbelievable intellectual prowess and creativity.

The current discourse on terrorism has taken a strong moralistic tone, picturising it as anti-social, anti-humanistic violence. Good and evil are pictured almost in Manichean terms,   the terrorists being hounded out as evil incarnate.

Such naiveté in analysis can be counter-productive. Terrorism is indeed a complex phenomenon with socio-political, economic, religious, cultural and even psychological dimensions. A sense of   history becomes essential in grappling with the phenomenon of terrorism. The greatest harm one can do is to resort to reductionisms in its analysis. Reducing terrorism to any single cause, be it economic, social, political, religious or personal, does not in any way help the situation. While anger of the deprived and hurt, be it the hungry, or the marginalised or the mid-led fundamentalist, is indeed a key factor, what fosters such anger is once again complex structural maladjustments and even sheer 'evil' in a purely narrow use of the term. Life styles, ways of entertainment, and break-down in the basic institutional forms of human living have a role in creating and sustaining violence, especially in the form of terrorist violence.

In the aftermath of the recent attacks, certain other issues also emerge. For instance, the public awareness of the issues behind terrorism. Opinion polls, largely supported, at least initially, the retaliatory attacks by the US on Afghanistan, but based on a naïve logic.

How far are the public challenged to reexamine their own attitudes. In fact, currently there is a strong resentment against anyone who would challenge the logic of retaliatory violence. We need to initiate a debate wherein the logic of handling terrorism with violence is challenged.

The threat to human rights cannot be overlooked. Already the state authority is clamping down with draconian laws and measures. Our own controversial ordinance that replaces the former TADA is being questioned. Certain measures by the US and steps by China and a host of other nation states have been challenged for their implicit dangers. In the name of terrorism, the citizen cannot be denied their basic human rights. But that has become a serious possibility.

The need to be alert to security issues, particularly with the threat of bio-terrorism is another important issue to be considered. We are going to live with security checks and a lot of restrictions on our movements, in lieu of possible terrorism.

We, Indians, have a particularly precarious future. Kashmir has been the hotbed of terrorism, in the recent past. Equally affected are certain other states. And now, with the determination and 'decision' to build the Ram Temple on a pre-determined date, are we in for renewed attacks? Add to that the warnings international terrorist agencies are throwing at the country every now and then.

The nation is in for challenging times. And the social scientists, should not be found wanting.

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Chief Editor