

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF TERRORISM

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism is ubiquitous. Why is it so? A human being needs to be taught in order to become the “Human” from an individual. Here lie all the problems. This teaching is, indeed, a social process. It bestows a certain identity to a particular group of individuals on one hand, and on the other hand it orients the individuals to do, think, and behave in a particular way. It is also to be said here that it is this very social process which at one time led human beings to build some institutions and subsequently led to these very institutions becoming the main bearers of the very process. This article wants to analyze the role of identity and other social institutions/variables like education, media, peers etc. in the origin of ‘terror’ and making it an ism.

KEY WORDS: *Terrorism, Identity, Social Institutions/Variables.*

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has become a serious social malady across the world and has got huge media attention in recent times. The concept of terrorism is not new to us; it has been viewed as a major disruptive force as long as recorded history has gone. But in recent times the events of 9/11/2001 in the USA, the London transport bombings in 2005, attack in Mumbai in 26/11/2008, and terrorist violence in many other places have compelled us to focus our attention on these types of events. The purpose of this article is to comprehend the impact, influence and the role played by various social variables, like identity and other means of socialization in making a terrorist. It should be mentioned over here that there are other ways of analyzing the menace of terrorism, like through psychopathology, and seeing terrorism as criminal and anti-social behavior etc. To deal effectively with the problem of terrorism, it is essential to attempt to understand the terrorists’ actions from sociological perspectives. It is important to formulate responses that address the roots of terrorism rather than responding to its expression. Identification of the social roots of terrorism will help immensely in those formulations.

Human history shows that social progress or evolution of human society is based not only on human co-operations (as functionalism and structuralism would argue for) but on human competitions and conflicts too (as argued by Marxism, Weberian conflict theory and feminism). Human species can think and most interestingly they try to teach themselves to be a thinking

animal and this ability of thinking, unavoidably, leads human species, among other things, to be organized politically. From the very beginning of the political life of human species they were busy with the struggle for land, water, food. With the evolution of time and experiences of political life there emerged new and complex problems like, 1. Just or unjust distribution of power and authority with or without equity and processes of conflict management and mitigation; 2. Safe-guarding and establishing primacy of individual and groups’ identity, dignity, rights and various kinds of beliefs and belief systems over others; not only this, 3. interestingly even people of a certain group who follow certain religious belief are now required to fight with other groups for the supremacy of their GOD and the particular religion belief. These are the issues that breed terrorism. We know that these politico-social issues are being discussed, questioned, legitimized and opposed by socio-political variables. Natures of these variables and discourses or in other words ism they are producing on politico-social issues determine the level of acceptance of terror of a political-society. Among many of those social variables a few are being discussed below. But first let us see how terrorism can be defined.

WHAT IS TERRORISM?

The term terrorist is value laden; it is very difficult to define. It has frequently been stated that: “One person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist.” Notwithstanding that it is useful from the beginning to have a working definition as to what can be considered terrorism. Following Stephen Vertigans (2011: 2), it can be

said that, “the targeted and intentional use of violence for political purposes through actions that can range in intended impact from intimidation to loss of life.” The terrorist is someone who actively and deliberately engages in activities that contribute towards acts of terrorism. This includes individuals whose roles range from bomb maker to the executer of the accompanying bomb blast. From the above definition we can identify a number of basic components necessary in order for a group to be considered as terrorist organization. Like 1. Terrorism involves political aims and motives, 2. It is violent or threatens violence, 3. It is designed to create fear in a target audience that extends beyond the immediate victims of the violence, 4. The violence is conducted by an identifiable organization.

IDENTITY AND TERRORISM

Various individuals have suggested that cultural, social, and personal identity processes underlie terrorism. For example, according to Huntington’s popular and influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Schwartz 2011: 539) identity is referenced on 39% (119 of 302) of the pages of primary text. However, the present article adopts the position not only that all three of these identity dimensions are associated with terrorism, but also that it is the interaction among specific cultural, social, and personal identity configurations that plays the most important role in determining the likelihood whether one will engage in terrorism. Accordingly, one contribution here will be to analyze cultural, social, and personal identity elements to determine the likelihood of participation in terrorism.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Cultural identity represents the specific cultural values a person incorporates throughout his life as guiding principles for behavior, such as collectivism, absolutism in belief, and familism. Collectivism, the ‘US and THEM’ feeling, staunch religious sentiments inculcated through rigorously mechanized religious practices and shrewd use of religion for utopian attainments in afterlife for the followers, by the elite vested interests, in order to control the very mundane, are a few of the cultural elements which can create a conducive environment for emergence of a terrorist mind set.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity represents the self-ascribed significance that is attached to the social groups to which one belongs and with which one interacts directly, along with the feelings associated with participation in these

groups’ activities. Social identity also reflects the beliefs and feelings about those groups that one perceives as standing in opposition to the groups with which one is affiliated, that is, groups that are “not us.” These social identity dynamics form an important topic of conversation within the family and peer group, they are inculcated, overtly or covertly and by private or organized enterprises, through mobilizations, through school curricula and they may be incorporated into religious prayers, sermons, and religiously sponsored activities. These kinds of human conditioning entail intolerance and violence. We have frequently seen, for example, fundamentalist and extremist religious, cultural and political groups in India often claim the pervasive emulations of ‘West’ as a threat to their way of life and belief system, though merits and demerits of those claims should be weighed carefully. And more often than not we can see all causes of socio-political vices are attributed on those very alien/western culture and belief system. It breeds terrorism.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

Personal identity represents both, (a) one’s chosen or ascribed goals, values, and beliefs, and (b) the personal perspectives a person uses to make sense of the world. Within this paradigm, two potential outcomes have particular relevance for the emergence of a terrorist identity: (a) authoritarian foreclosure and (b) aimless diffusion. There is evidence that authoritarian individuals—especially those who perceive themselves as “outside the mainstream”—may be threats to society because they have the ability, the single-minded and unbothered vision, and the desire to attract followers and form groups based on destructive principles. The second identity status is relevant to the development of a terrorist as because aimless-diffused individuals are particularly vulnerable to the allures of terrorism. Aimless, diffused individuals who have turned to terrorism include Westerners who have felt disenfranchised from their societies of origin. The origin of ‘lone wolf’ terrorist attack is vivid example of this.

SOCIALIZATION AGENCIES AND TERRORISM

Along with identity, socializing processes are immensely significant and hence it can be suggested that becoming a terrorist is primarily a consequence of socialization. Hence, the role of socializing agents requires considerable consideration. The following section therefore explores a range of relevant agents such as education, peers, media, family, and religious institutions.

EDUCATION

Education is a very important institution which is responsible for socializing the tender minds to particular skills, values and orientation of group, clan, sect and society. This very institution captures the imagination of the children and places them in the wider socio-cultural-political context by making them aware of their roles and responsibilities. Today the most talked about agencies of education associated with terrorism are madrassas. The dramatic growth of these religious schools across Muslim societies and communities has contributed to the rise of Muslim fundamentalism. Within many schools across the world jihad, the abode of war and martyrdom has been repositioned as a central pillar of faith; other religions and weaker Muslim interpretations are regularly denounced as immoral and are condemned as apostate (Vertigans 2011: 78). All the khariji madrassas (Bhabani 2014) situated in the fringe areas of West Bengal has been linked in connection with the recent terrorist activities in the state.

MEDIA

The media, free as well as covert, are often being used as a tool for recruitment, as an effective means of intellectual and psychological influence, and are integral to contemporary forms of communication by terrorists. Media is also un/intentionally helping terror groups to achieve their aim, that is, to terrorise. Though most media houses seem to be opposed to terrorism as means of solutions to political problems but they cannot ignore the monetary gain they can make out of the news value of an event of terrorist activity. We cannot forget how Indian electronic media, only for the sake of profits/trps, used the newsworthiness of a terrorist activity and had helped those masterminds of 26/11 attack in Mumbai by telecasting live that gruesome incident. Absence of a proper media regulation and freedom of the media in all the democratic societies have helped in the growth of religious television channels, which are playing critical roles in mobilizing and fomenting religious sentiments. On the other hand the advent of the internet has also provided terror groups with 'online terrorism university' as Weiman (2006) has called it. One thing should be told here that effective blocking of communications of terrorist organizations is as important as banning the organizations and their pecuniary transactions.

PEERS

"For the individuals who become active terrorist, the initial attraction is often made by a friend or group, rather than an abstract ideology or to violence" (Crenshaw, 1983). Crenshaw further said "The power of the group over the individual is what's important," and "People may

be more loyal to the group than the cause. The cause is long-term; the group is tangible." (quoted in Vedantam 2001). According to a study by Sageman, (2004) pre-existing friendships were important in 68% of cases of individuals joining terror organization. For instance, the Hamburg cell that was integral in the September 2001 attack on America was radicalized in Germany. Ariel Merari, a psychologist at Tel Aviv University, argued "I don't know of a single case in which an individual decided on his or her own to carry out a suicidal attack. In all cases -- it certainly is true in Lebanon and Israel and Sri Lanka and the Kurdish case -- it was an organization that picked the people for the mission, trained them, decided on the target, chose a time, arranged logistics and sent them." (quoted in Vedantam 2001). Saliha Dagci, a member of the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party), was killed on 27th February 1998 by the military forces. Her diary was found, and in the diary she was talking about how she was deceived by her friends at the university. She wrote: "I regret that I left the university. The two years I spent at the university were the most beautiful years in my life. I cannot forget the days I spent in Istanbul. We had a joyful life in the university dormitory. Hatice, Aysun, Saadet, and I used to go out together ... I am so full of regrets ..." (Özeren 2007). This shocking revelation alone makes us to grapple how peer groups are critical for the recruitment process. At home, Participation of students in Naxal movement in West Bengal is also an example where peers played a significant role. Kashmiri youths too under the influence of their peers joining the Hizbul Mujahideen. (Baweja, Hindustan Times)

FAMILY

The family is the most important agent of socialization and is the first world of a child. Values, norms (religious), belief system and world views of a child are built in the family and they leave almost indelible mark on the human minds. M. Zahab (2008) identified the significance of the family whose explicit blessing was often critical if individuals were to join the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba. Members of other nationalist Islamic groups and transnational global jihadist groups have also reported the importance of family support in their decision-making. We can cite an example from the recent explosion at Khagraghar in Burdwan on 2nd October 2014, where members of many Muslim families were involved in that fatal event. Even in Kashmir family members of the militants are openly supporting the terrorist activities of their children. (Agarwal, December 2016)

RELIGION INSTITUTIONS

Religious institutions have been a controversial agent in formation of terror groups and individual radicalization. At the present Islam is associated with the terrorism and radicalization. The mosque has become integral to perceptions of processes of radicalization and brain-washing (Vertigans 2011: 85). Post September 2001, public spaces associated with Muslims have been subjected to surveillance and numerous militants have been arrested, deported and placed under house detention. In the USA today Islamophobia has been institutionalised to the extent that the President has sought to ban the entry of Muslims into the country. The situation is quite the same in many other countries of Europe and across the globe.

CONCLUSION

As humankind is facing the menace of terrorism from the very beginning of its existence, the moot question remains, will terrorism end anyway? Every sound mind would pray for a positive answer to the question, but the answer is in the negative. This article has tried to discuss the issues of religious fundamentalism and ethnic terrorism, and their social linkages and bases, since these two have claimed the centre stage.

Human identity creates on the one hand subtle and complex mental feelings and on the other it reflects the status of her entity. Human being carries their social, cultural, moral, and religious values with their identities. Multiplicity and diversity, superior-inferior feeling, mutual antagonism are a few fundamental features of these values. Traditional socialization agencies as discussed above have been the machineries to inculcate human being with fragmented and biased group values. In this way they actually widen the hiatus among the human species. In other words we must say that the traditional socio-cultural agencies based on identity, like, religion, caste, language, and creed in reality separate people from each other and have been precarious for them for peaceful co-existence. On the other hand, the advent of modernity and the emergence of impersonal values like liberal democracy, rule of law, human rights and with these, revolution in science and technology, in communication systems have helped people to be nearer and familial, but these too have almost failed to inculcate fellow feeling among us. For peaceful co-existence mankind need to learn two things, first and the foremost is tolerance, and the second one is proverbial 'eternal vigilance.'

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