



Preventing Terror Attacks Role of Human & Technical Intelligence in India

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A study of terrorist attacks would show that a lot of in-depth planning goes into each major attack. Selection of the target in each case would be based on the needs and objectives of the terrorist organization. Then there is the selection of the operatives who would carry out the attack, the modus operandi, the explosive device or the type of weapons to be used in the attack, information required about the target, its accessibility, security of the target, training and motivation of the operatives required to carry out the attack successfully, planting the operatives in the vicinity of the target to make use of the opportunity, whether they can rely on local support, and so on.

In this connection, the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a human bomb, Mumbai serial terror attacks of March 1993, former Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh's assassination, attack on the Indian Parliament, serial attacks on Mumbai trains in July, 2006 and the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks of November, 2008, readily come to mind. Of these major attacks, this essay examines the manner in which the Rajiv Gandhi assassination and the 26/11 attacks were planned and carried out by the LTTE and the Lashkar-e-Tayeba (LeT) respectively.

THE RAJIV GANDHI ASSASSINATION CASE

Once the LTTE decided to eliminate Rajiv Gandhi to achieve their organizational goals, they had to choose the operative, select the venue, and plan the deed and so on. In June 1990, they had assassinated the EPRLF leader, Padmanabha and 12 others in the heart of Chennai. Unfortunately,

this case was not worked out. Investigations later established that this was an operation carried out by the intelligence wing of the LTTE. The LTTE got emboldened by the success of this operation in Chennai, and that it had not been worked out by the police. By mid-1990, the LTTE, which had kept a tab on the latest political developments in India, knew general elections were in the offing, and that Rajiv Gandhi will visit Chennai for electioneering. That was the occasion they chose for the operation to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi. They could not have gone with guns and grenades to the venue like they did in the Padmanabha case, as a large posse of armed policemen would be on duty for a function to be attended by Rajiv Gandhi.

It is believed the LTTE intelligence chief Pottu Amman's deputy, the formidable Akila, came out with the plan of the human bomb to solve the problem of getting close to the target. A woman admirer can try and get access to a VIP to wish and garland him at a meeting site. That was the plan finally chosen by the LTTE to get access to Rajiv Gandhi-the operative would carry an improvised explosive device on the body, and detonate the device while in the close vicinity of the target, eliminating the target, the human bomb itself and anyone else in the killing radius. This is precisely what the LTTE's Dhanu (believed to be Kalaivani, the daughter of a Tamil Nationalist leader of Jaffna, Rajaratnam) carried out at Sriperumbudur. Two of the LTTE operatives used in the Padmanabhaoperation, Raghuvaran(actual name Pakkiachandran) and Santhan (actual name Suthenthiraraja) were selected by the LTTE for the Rajiv Gandhi operation.

As it was not a hit and run operation, the

operational squad had to have a base in or near Chennai where they could camp and wait for the opportunity. For this purpose the LTTE had to set up hide-outs in Tamil Nadu for their intelligence wing. The LTTE already had a major set up in Tamil Nadu to look after their supply, media and treatment for injured cadre wings, called the political group. They had local support too.

Yet, the LTTE decided to keep out this set up from the operation to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi probably because they were aware that this set up was known intimately to the Indian intelligence agencies. They got in touch with a close Indian supporter of the LTTE based in Chennai called Muthuraja in December, 1990, and asked him to introduce his friends to the intelligence wing operative who had been sent to Chennai. They further instructed Muthuraja, who was closely involved with the LTTE's Chennai based political set up, not to disclose the intelligence wing operation matter to anyone. Muthuraja introduced his friends, Bhagyanathan, Arivu and Haribabu to the LTTE's intelligence wing operative, Murugan. This is how Murugan, accused in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case and facing death sentence, came to stay with Bhagyanathan in their house in Chennai, and gradually got close to his sister Nalini.

The mastermind of this operation was Raghuvaran, Murugan's boss. He brought Dhanu, who was to become the human bomb and Subha with him. But they had to stay close to Chennai, where Rajiv Gandhi was expected during electioneering, so that they can get access to him. They therefore needed a base for themselves in Chennai.

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How did this terrorist squad enter India? In June, 1990, the LTTE-Sri Lanka Eelam War II had started, and a large number of refugees had poured into Tamil Nadu through the Coast. They had to register themselves as refugees at the coastal entry points. These records were available to the intelligence agencies. None of the LTTE's intelligence wing operatives would register themselves as refugees. By this one move, they escaped the eye of the Indian intelligence agencies. They arrived from Jaffna in high speed fiber glass boats at pre-arranged locations on the Tamil Nadu coast, and took assistance of friendly smugglers to get into the hinterland.

Raghuvaran, who was one-eyed, had assumed a new operational name, Sivarasan, for the Rajiv Gandhi operation. He set up two secret hide-outs for himself and for Subha and Dhanu, by sending two families from Jaffna with strong ties to the LTTE and with relations in India. These families came in the garb of refugees, registered themselves at the coastal entry points, and set up base in Chennai by renting houses in Chennai suburbs, with the help of their relations in Chennai. Sivarasan used one of these as his base, and used the other for Subha and Dhanu, with none being the wiser. The Sri Lankan Tamils spoke Tamil with a distinct accent different from the Indian Tamils, and can be recognised with ease. Besides, Subha and Dhanu did not know Chennai. They had to familiarise with Chennai. They needed a companion, preferably a lady, who could take them around.

That person was Nalini, Bhagyanathan's sister. The LTTE's mastermind in this operation, Raghuvaran, who was Murugan's boss, introduced Dhanu and Subha to Nalini for taking them on familiarizing trips in Chennai, and for a dry run operation by attending V P Singh's election meeting in Chennai a couple of weeks before Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Nalini spent weekends with Subha and Dhanu showing them Chennai. On the fated day, she accompanied the assassin Dhanu, and her companion, Subha, to the spot where Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated.

Earlier in January, 1991, the DMK'S Tamil Nadu Government had been dismissed on alleged links with the LTTE, and all known LTTE operatives in Tamil Nadu were arrested. Their unit had been infiltrated by the Indian agencies who knew where to locate them. However, these operatives were only from the political group of the LTTE. The intelligence group led by Sivarasan and Murugan

escaped the notice of the agencies, due to the advance step taken by the LTTE of not informing the political group of the assassination plans. The intelligence group quietly went about setting its base, and getting ready to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi.

In the course of these preparations, Sivarasan required certain items like a car-battery to operate their HF wireless set to communicate with his boss in Jaffna, and a motor-bike for his local movements in Chennai. In this, he was helped by the Indian boy, Arivu, who assisted in purchasing these items. Sivarasan's name did not figure in any records of purchase of these items-it was either Arivu or Bhagyanathan who made the purchase. The only record on which Sivarasan himself figured was when he took a learner's driving licence for driving the two-wheeler from the Meenambakkam RTO's office with the help of his Indian contacts. He even got a doctor's certificate for his eye-sight, with no indication that he was one-eyed. Between 19, June, 1990 when Padmanabha was assassinated, and 21 May, 1991, when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, the Indian intelligence agencies were on the look-out for the LTTE's one-eyed Raghuvaran in connection with the Padmanabha case. But Raghuvaran had reappeared as Sivarasan and the Indian agencies continued to grope in the dark for Raghuvaran-they had no photograph of Raghuvaran to help them.

LTTE operatives brought gold biscuits from Jaffna to meet their expenses, and one of their close supporters in Chennai used to convert these gold biscuits into cash. Thus Sivarasan did not need to open a bank account and therefore did not figure in any bank records. He paid no income tax, and so there was neither a pan card nor income tax returns to file. Sivarasan, Subha, Dhanu, Murugan and other LTTE operatives did not figure in immigration records and records like ration cards, Airlines, Railways, electricity, phone etc. There was therefore no chance that this group would have figured in a data base containing the above records. Their presence in Chennai therefore could not have been figured out using a data base of such information.

The NATGRID, which is a data base of such records, therefore would not have been able to prevent the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. How else could we have figured out the presence of the intelligence wing of the LTTE in Chennai? In fact, a combination of tech-int and human-int had given

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one of our agencies the input that the LTTE was setting up a base for its intelligence wing in Chennai, and that Muthuraja, the Indian supporter had been approached by them to introduce his contacts to their intelligence wing operatives. This lead unfortunately was not pursued. In early 1991, Muthuraja left for Jaffna, and in mid-sea was picked up by the Sri Lankan Navy. Thereafter the lead was completely lost.

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THE MUMBAI TERROR ATTACKS, 26/11

The 26/11 Mumbai attacks were unique in a sense. For the first time, a group of terrorists came from the sea into Mumbai and targeted elite hotels, a central railway station thronging with home bound crowds, a hotel known to be patronised by foreigners and a Chabad house giving shelter to Jews. This attack was planned over a period of over two years. The person selected to scout for targets for maximum effect was himself unique.

David Coleman Headley, a swashbuckling American came to Mumbai, set up an office to facilitate immigration into the United States as a cover for his undercover activities, and over a period of two years, identified targets for the LeT to attack. This American was raised in Pakistan by his Pakistani father, and grew to hate India. He spent his adolescent years in the United States, where he could change his name to David Coleman Headley, carrying his American mother's name. This was on the suggestion of the LeT, with which he began his liaison in Pakistan. He went

through several training stints with the LeT, and also came to be noticed by the ISI. Apart from arms training and the usual indoctrination, Headley was trained to spy and video film probable targets in India. He was funded by the ISI on his India projects. Every time he entered India or left India, his name figured in the immigration records but raised no suspicion due to his American passport. Though each time he left India for Pakistan, no one took notice of an American citizen going to that country. That was the advantage of Dawood Gilani changing his name to David Coleman Headley, with his looks helping in the deceit!

One recalls the instance of the great Israeli spy, Eli Cohen, born in Egypt who could speak Arabic like an Arab. He was noticed by the Mossad and recruited for spying in Syria. He infiltrated into Syria in the early sixties, and prised out every defence secret of that State by befriending all the top politicians in the guise of a Syrian expatriate businessman, over a period of four years. No one who helped him in Damascus knew he was an Israeli spy. He acted alone, and used to pass his secret messages to Israel over wireless channels. He was arrested and hanged by the Syrians, but his role was believed to have played a crucial part in the 1967 blitzkrieg of Israel.

From the lone terrorist arrested on 26/11, we know the training that Kasab and the nine others had undergone over a period of several months in different training camps of the LeT. We also know how the ten terrorists were dispatched from Karachi and reached Mumbai after hijacking an Indian vessel in the Arabian Sea, and killing its inmates. From Colaba where they landed, the terrorists only had to hire taxis and go to the predestined targets to open fire on innocent people. Headley had used entry and exit points to get into India and get out of India, and therefore figured in our immigration records.

As a foreigner, he would also figure in hotel records that would be accessible to the intelligence agencies. As an American citizen, these records did not raise any suspicion. His mobile phone connections were not in his name, and would not have raised any alert. His normal banking transactions also would not have raised any alerts on account of his American passport. The ten terrorists who entered Mumbai for carrying

out the attacks did not come with their passports. They were to enter India illegally, and would therefore not figure in any immigration records.

Had Kasab not been arrested by a small team of local policemen led by an intrepid Assistant Sub-Inspector, Pakistan would have denied that the terrorists were from their country. While NATGRID would have Headley's immigration record entries in its data base, along with banking records, it would have only helped post-26/11 investigations, rather than in preventing the attack itself. Terrorist planners take care to avoid figuring in such records as a matter of abundant precaution.

There is no evidence as yet of any Indian having helped Headley knowing that he was spying for the LeT/ISI. Had this been the case, there was a chance that the Indian agencies would have found him out, like it happened when the LTTE asked Muthuraja to introduce his Indian friends to the intelligence wing operative. Unfortunately, this vital lead that the Indian agencies got was not pursued to its logical conclusion.

The NATGRID would be welcomed by all Indian security and investigation agencies, for it is one more data base with records of 21 agencies pertaining to diverse activities of individuals that can be accessed and used by these agencies in the course of their work. But there is no substitute for human intelligence-it is certainly far more difficult and challenging, but far more useful and effective.