



Securing Our Jails: The Context of Naxal Threat

Even while the country grapples with the growing law and order problems throughout the country in one form or the other, the Naxals have been systematically ratcheting up their fight against a so-called bourgeois Indian state. They have found newer ways to organise themselves and make their presence felt. Today, they are not only better motivated and better organised, but are also better trained and better equipped, vis-à-vis a not-so-well motivated, trained and equipped police force.

The former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had termed the Naxalite insurgency as the greatest single threat to country's internal security. The Central government is already busy coordinating with the affected state governments to work out a synergised policy to deal with the Naxal menace including formation of a specialised anti-Naxal force. But the Naxals seem intent on upping the ante and taking the fight to newer levels as it appears from their recent drive for freeing their comrades lodged in different jails of the country.

There have been a string of incidents in recent times wherein the Naxalites have attacked the jails in different parts of the country and have succeeded in freeing a good number of hard-nosed criminals (read Maoists) booked for waging war against the Indian state. What initially appeared to be a one-off incident/accident seems to be becoming a regular feature and definitely reflects very poorly on our prison security system.

While earlier jail breaks used to be examples of dare-devilry by individual prisoners, Maoists seem to be making it a habit and that also in a very well-planned and coordinated manner, pointing at serious lapses in our policing and prison system. This is obvious from some of the most daring instances of jail breaks. In the celebrated Jehanabad jail break in November, 2005, about 1,000 strong, well-armed Naxalites not only successfully managed to set free 341 prisoners lodged in that jail, but also succeeded in killing several Ranvir Sena men and cops.

Again, about 200 armed Naxalites raided a jail in Gajapati town in Odisha in March, 2006 and succeeded in freeing more than 40 prisoners after an extended encounter which lasted for

over two hours and resulted in killing and injuring of some policemen. In March, 2007, there was another jail break in Nizamabad in Andhra Pradesh in which 72 undertrial prisoners including Naxalites escaped the district jail complex.

India's battle against Maoist guerrillas suffered an embarrassing setback in December, 2007 when almost 300 insurgents and their supporters were freed by Naxalites during a mass jailbreak in the state of Chhattisgarh. The Maoists had overpowered the jail guards and personnel at the Dantewada jail, 375km from Raipur before they succeeded in their motive.

Again, in not very distant past, hundreds of agitating Maoist inmates took control of the inner wing of Patna's high-security Beur jail, protesting against alleged ill-treatment by jail authorities. It all started when Maoist inmates attacked police personnel on duty inside the jail, forcing them to flee. The inmates freed two top Maoist leaders, including Ajay Kanu, by breaking open the iron door of the cell where they were lodged.

Official sources said over 300 Maoists were lodged in Beur jail. The Maoist inmates found support from hundreds of other inmates. According to jail officials, there are about 2,400 inmates in Beur jail, almost more than double the capacity of the prison. Maoist inmates accused jail officials of failing to provide prompt medical help to their comrades and also began a hunger strike inside the jail to protest against the lack of basic facilities. That even the most high-profile and heavily guarded Tihar jail has not been immune to this affliction was pointed out by the celebrated jail break involving 'Shamsher Singh Rana' under custody for the murder of the then parliamentarian and ex-bandit Phoolan Devi.

Besides these jail breaks, there have been various reports of recovery of huge cache of cash, arms, mobile phones and other such items as are strictly barred by the jail manuals and if still such things are found in possession of the inmates, the same do point not only to lax security inside the jail, but also connivance and collusion of jail staff and officials.

All these together do point to the ills afflicting our prison system and thereby also drives home the point for taking necessary initiatives and measures for improving not only the security inside our jails, but the need for better training and infrastructure for our prison personnel to be better able to tackle such threats from any quarters including Naxalites.

Of the various security measures for preventing such jail breaks include the installation of a bio-metric system of access control as recommended for installation in all the nine prisons of the Tihar jail complex by S K Cain Committee formed in the wake of Shamsher Singh Rana's famous escape from Tihar. In this system, the fingerprints of all the prisoners and the jail staff have been saved into a database. The entry and exit from the complex will be permitted only if the fingerprints are matched. This system should be installed in all the jails across the country without any exception.

Besides, simple security measures like installation of close circuit cameras, metal detectors and automatic security lock system should also be thought of for better security of our jails and for further pre-empting such daring jail breaks as seen during recent times. Manpower shortage has been another bane of our prison system which needs to be beefed up for better prison management and security. Suitable enhancement of manpower would facilitate better

supervision and monitoring within and without the jail premises, something which should never be compromised.

The prison system is one of the important pillars of our law enforcement architecture and as such deserves more attention than what it has done so far. There is need not only to rethink the security parameters in our jails, but also to introduce the newer and modern methodologies of prison management. If we are really serious about improvement of our law and order and justice system, then we really need to think about it all very seriously before we can think of some really positive outcomes.

Salient Points

- The Naxals have been systematically ratcheting up their fight against a so-called bourgeois Indian state.
- They are not only better motivated and better organised, but are also better trained and better equipped.
- The former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had termed the Naxalite insurgency as the greatest single threat to country's internal security.
- There have been a string of incidents in recent times wherein the Naxalites have attacked the jails in different parts of the country.
- Even the most high-profile and heavily guarded Tihar jail has not been immune to this affliction.
- Simple security measures like installation of close circuit cameras, metal detectors and automatic security lock system should also be thought of for better security of our jails.
- The prison system is one of the important pillars of our law enforcement architecture.

Glossary

Ratcheting: a toothed bar with which a pawl engages

Bourgeois: a member of the middle class

Ante: an amount of money paid in advance to insure an individual's share in a joint business venture