

Need for action plan to counter KLO

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The Kamtapur movement has been simmering for quite some time. The movement, led by the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), formed in 1995, had carried out at least three violent attacks in the latter part of 2013. The last one on December 26 at Paharpur in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, masterminded by Malkhan Singha, military chief of KLO, resulted in six deaths. The KLO is also extorting from traders and industrialists in its area of operations. The organisation is reported to be having a tacit understanding with the Kamtapur Peoples` Party (KPP).

The KPP, formed in 1997, however claims that it demands a unified territory and statehood for the Koch Rajbanshis inhabiting the north West Bengal and west Assam only, and not cessation from India. The KLO is contrastingly clear in its cessationist demand and is campaigning for restoration of the so-called past independence of a notional Koch Kamta kingdom, which existed during the 12th to the 15th century under the control of the Khen dynasty, with capital near Moynaguri in present Alipurduar sub-division of Jalpaiguri district. The KLO`s activities encompass the six districts of north West Bengal and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara districts of west Assam.

The implications of the KLO movement in the sensitive eastern and north-eastern parts cannot but be ominous for India`s security. Though the KLO armed cadre strength has increased from 60 at the time of its formation in 1995 to a few hundred now, the organisation does not have the armed might of outfits like the ULFA, NSCN(IM) and the NDFB (anti-accommodation Songbijit faction). It has, however, developed operational and logistical coordination with these outfits. Nevertheless, the KLO`s potential for disrupting civic life and undermining civil administration, particularly in the six north West Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, North & South Dinajpur and Malda, have been proven.

After Jibon Sigha, Chairman of KLO, was arrested in October 1999, and later released by Assam Police to wean away other KLO cadres from the organization and induce them to surrender, there has been a distinct change in strategy of the KLO. The organization has lurched towards a more violent path once again. While the Centre may be keeping a tab on the KLO`s activities, ground-level coordination towards intelligence sharing and prophylactic operations between the Assam Police and its West Bengal counterparts is

required along with political initiatives by the Tarun Gogoi and Mamta Banerji governments.

Mamta Banerji, West Bengal Chief Minister, has spoken of stern action against the KLO after the latest Jalpaiguri blast. Her ruling Trinamool Congress Party had also taken a public posture in early January, 2014 of confronting the KLO politically in 72 blocks where the latter is active. It is doubtful whether these steps alone will suffice to contain the KLO. There is a dire need to revive state-level police action like `Operation Shadow` which was undertaken jointly by West Bengal and Assam Police in mid-November, 1990 with a measure of success. Coordination with Bhutan will also be a *sine-qua-non* for a successful outcome as was achieved when the latter had carried out `Operation Flush Out` in 2003 to evict the militant outfits from India who were regrouping and training in Bhutan. Since the impact of the KLO`s activities is more in West Bengal, the state government will have to adopt an internal proactive and long-term multifaceted policy to contain the outfit.

On the other and, the KPP`s demands concern among others, cultural protection of the Koch-Rajbanshis – the ethnic group whose interests both KLO and KPP seeks to espouse – and including Kamtapuri (Rajbonshi) language in the Eighth Schedule of India`s Constitution. This demand can be suitably accommodated without affecting the interests of other communities living in the region. Furthermore, a package which enables comprehensive economic development on the lines of the `Saranda Action Plan` drawn up on the initiative of Jairam Ramesh, the Union Rural Development Minister, in respect to Naxalism affected areas in Jharkhand, could also be considered for the affected West Bengal districts.

The management of the problem in the four affected districts of west Assam will, however, have to slightly different. The region is inhabited by different ethnic groups and a convergence of interests of the Koch-Rajbanshis with the others like the Boros may be contentious. Moreover, the issue of according a Constitution schedule-based tribal status to the Koch-Rajbanshis as demanded by the KPP and groups operating over-ground like the Assam-based All Koch-Rajbanshi Students Union (AKRSU), will have to dealt with sensitively. A solution can be worked out which enables benefits to be afforded to this community by specific targetted government investment on upgrading the educational and skill development opportunities of the Koch-Rajbanshis, without having to include them in the list of schedule tribes.

It is important to note that in the earlier years and even now, the Kamtapur movement has been supported by different Koch Rajbanshi groups and politicians. Some of them, particularly in Jalpaiguri district`s Alipurduar sub-division and Cooch Behar district, had even been able to garner 15000 to 25000 votes in the constituencies they contested in the past West Bengal Assembly elections. The economic conditions prevailing in the Dooars and Buxa Reserve areas of north West Bengal, substantially inhabited by this community, are not too ideal. The present West Bengal government though not in a denial mode on the backwardness of this community is still to effectively take up a plan for rejuvenating

the affected area. The West Bengal budget (2013-14) does not have an appropriate area development sub-plan covering the areas inhabited by this community.

Therefore, both from the security perspective and development angle, conscious intervention of the centre in concert with the state governments of West Bengal and Assam and even Sikkim, as well as with cooperation of the Bhutan government to counter the KLO activities is necessary at the earliest.

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