

QUESTIONS FROM SENTINEL

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Population and associated issues incl. Tribes

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John Allen Chau, a 27-year-old US national, was reported to have been killed by members of the protected Sentinelese tribe on the North Sentinel Island in the Andaman and Nicobar group. Efforts to recover his body, without endangering the health of this small pre-Neolithic tribe (estimated to be under 200 members) whose origins go back to more than 50,000 years, have been put on hold.

The North Sentinel Island is a totally out-of-bounds area and is regulated by the Indian restricted area permit (RAP). The Sentinelese have shunned contact with modernity for centuries and any human contact is likely to introduce health hazards that their immune system cannot handle. Hence, strict protection protocols have been put in place to ensure that the island's pristine nature is not disturbed. The fact that a foreign tourist was able to breach the security and surveillance protocols with the assistance of local residents comes as a rude reality check on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack.

On that occasion, the chinks in India's maritime/coastal surveillance were exploited by the adversary and among the many lapses that were identified, poor intelligence gathering and inter-agency coordination emerged as major institutional weaknesses. Ten years later, the Allen Chau incident symbolises the tip of the iceberg by way of the surveillance challenges that continue to bedevil the Indian security establishment. Given India's long coastline and maritime expanse that includes the far flung island territories (Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshwadeep and Minicoy Islands), ensuring 24 x7 zero-error surveillance is a complex challenge. Post 26/11, there have been attempts to enhance the capability of the Indian Coast Guard and the maritime police clusters among coastal states. While these initiatives are welcome, the larger and more intractable challenge is the reform of India's intelligence apparatus .

A brief review of the Indian security experience over the last two decades would suggest that prior to 26/11 — when the nation was taken by “surprise” — the other major setback was in Kargil in 1999, when the “surprise” factor was all too evident. In both cases, the intelligence failure was glaring and while there have been detailed recommendations seeking an objective review and re-wiring of the existing agencies, this has not happened.

An objective review of the events leading up to 26/11 would point to the enormity of the institutional ineptitude, best symbolised by the David Headley case. Headley had made multiple visits to Mumbai prior to 26/11 and was able to evade scrutiny. It is understood that in the current A&N breach, the US tourist had visited the islands at least four times since 2015 and had slipped through various filters, including the one that regulates the entry of foreign nationals to RAP zones.

While more detailed investigations will identify the lapses in North Sentinel Island, the need for a rigorous review of the intelligence grid by a blue ribbon panel cannot be overemphasised. Much the same exhortation was made after the Kargil war and repeated after the carnage of November 2008. But the pursuit of this objective has been cosmetic.

An ontological question that needs to be raised against the backdrop of 26/11 is whether intelligence must be led largely by the IPS? Policing is not synonymous with intelligence management in the modern context. Professional technological competence that spans cyber, IT and space, amongst other disciplines, is the much needed skill-set and specialised cadres need to be nurtured.

India's lead [intel](#) agencies include the R&AW, the IB and the CBI. Control over these agencies is opaque and exercised by the PMO/NSA and the Home Ministry. Post 26/11, then Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#) changed the home minister and the National Security Advisor. Yet the much needed cleaning of the stables did not take place under UPA II, beleaguered as it was by allegations of corruption. The [Narendra Modi](#)-AjitDoval combine could have embarked upon a reform of the Indian intelligence apparatus but the current ignominy that surrounds the CBI is perhaps indicative of why this did not happen.

Hence, the iceberg that the Allen Chau case symbolises will remain unnoticed and the muddy post 26/11 status quo, wherein intelligence remains a handmaiden of political compulsions will prevail — alas.

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