

Deciphering Mob Lynching

What is the issue?

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- The increase in mob lynching in recent days is becoming a concern.
- While the blame is largely being directed towards the messaging platforms, it is very important to recognize the larger social malice that is causing the issue.

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Who is primarily responsible?

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- Mobs tend to take law into its hands if it starts losing trust in the willingness and capabilities of law enforcement agencies to address crimes.
- Hence, law enforcement agencies need to take primary responsibility for this lack of trust, which has caused a spree of mob violence across India.
- It should be understood that lynching, irrespective of whether it was due to WhatsApp forward (or otherwise) is a heinous crime.
- Significantly, mob violence is not a spontaneous act and someone leads the mob and there is often politics behind such acts, perhaps even protection.
- Also, inciting online campaigns are sometimes carried out by paid (or ideologically motivated) groups, who need to be identified by the police.
- Hence, it can be said that while social media could've been the trigger, the aspects that have resulted in this situation lies elsewhere.

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What has been the government's approach?

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- Law enforcement agencies usually shut down the Internet to prevent the forwarding of messages and possible riots.
- Internet shutdown is akin to suspension of free speech, which is a disproportionate act of censorship against the actions of a few miscreants.
- Data suggest that there are no shutdowns in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, while smaller towns bear the brunt of such actions.
- The lack of capacity of law enforcement agencies in smaller towns to deal with these situations is a worrying sign, especially in the run-up to elections.

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Why is it unique to India?

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- India is perhaps the only place in the world where mobile messaging has led to such a widespread mass exodus and lynching.
- One of the reasons is that such behaviour is being engineered by powers with vested interests that are detrimental to India.
- We also have some uneducated, underexposed and gullible citizens who are living in a society with deep fissures and mistrust.
- We also have highly educated people — doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc — who fail to differentiate fact from fiction and also can't see the ensuing chaos.
- The government must also educate the public on the fallouts of inciting malicious online propaganda and the need to be prudent.
- Efforts to undo the underlying social bias and discriminatory attitudes against certain sections will strengthen the social fabric and also reduce mob violence.
- This is because, most of the time, the targets of mob anger are vulnerable people from poor backgrounds or from religious minorities.

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What should the government do?

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- A new law covering lynching will be ineffective if our criminal justice system is incapable of enforcing the law.

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- State governments need to build law enforcement capacity and ensure prosecution in case of mob violence.

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- Enforcement agencies need to develop standard operating protocols to tackle situations that have been created due to panic mongering rumours.

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- In the absence of such a regulation, information intermediaries can neither be triggered to act, nor be held illegal for any acts of omission on their part.

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- The Centre and state government also need to engage more proactively with messaging and social media platforms to address misinformation.

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- It is important for platforms like WhatsApp to not be legally accountable for the messages being sent through them as that isn't logical.

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- However, that doesn't mean that WhatsApp isn't responsible for helping ensure that users are held to account for their messages.

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What should WhatsApp do?

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- **Markers** - WhatsApp needs to change its platform to enable messages to be coded as either "public or private", depending on the user's desire to spread it.

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- Private messages shouldn't be allowed to get forwarded and in case of public messages that can be forwarded, a unique ID to trace the origins is needed.
- Such a setup will allow WhatsApp to shut it down across its network once reported, and identify the creator when a court-directed request is made.
- This will ensure accountability, allow the platform to remain neutral, and ensure that illegal speech is addressed.
- It's important to remember that all incorrect or false information is not illegal and only messages with incitement of violence need to be addressed.
- **Consent** - Adding people to groups on WhatsApp can presently be done even without their consent, which is a major bug.
- While people can always choose to exit, not all WhatsApp users are capable enough of even this basic operation.
- Notably, malicious individuals add naive people (who wouldn't have joined voluntarily) into groups to spread inciting messages and propagate hate.
- **Regulations** - Currently, group admins don't get to control the content posted in their groups, which is another major risk.
- Controls that enable admin discretion before publication in a group could help in making the admins accountable for malicious content in their groups.
- However, the government, law enforcement agencies, and WhatsApp, are presently playing out a blame game, with little futuristic vision.

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What is the way ahead?

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- Blaming social media platforms and abdicating responsibility is a convenient option for the government, but it is not a sustainable solution to the problem.
- Social media and messaging apps have to curtail false and inciting campaigns on its platform, but the larger trend is for the government to address.

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- While tracing the cyber criminals is hard, investigating those responsible for the actual violence that occurred in real life should not be complicated.

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- If the perpetrators are brought swiftly to justice, the message that there is no impunity for mob justice will ring loud and clear.

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- Additionally, law enforcement agencies should also win the trust of masses that tend to take law into their hands in order to prevent/punish crimes.

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Source: The Hindu

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