Deciphering Mob Lynching

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n
- The increase in mob lynching in recent days is becoming a concern.
\n
- 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.
\n

\n\n

Who is primarily responsible?

\n\n

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

\n\n

What has been the government’s approach?

\n\n

\n
- Law enforcement agencies usually shut down the Internet to prevent the forwarding of messages and possible riots.
\n
- Internet shutdown is akin to suspension of free speech, which is a disproportionate act of censorship against the actions of a few miscreants.
\n
- Data suggest that there are no shutdowns in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, while smaller towns bear the brunt of such actions.
\n
- 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.
\n

\n\n

Why is it unique to India?

\n\n

\n
- India is perhaps the only place in the world where mobile messaging has led to such a widespread mass exodus and lynching.
\n
- One of the reasons is that such behaviour is being engineered by powers with vested interests that are detrimental to India.
\n
- We also have some uneducated, underexposed and gullible citizens who are living in a society with deep fissures and mistrust.
\n
- 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.
\n
- The government must also educate the public on the fallouts of inciting malicious online propaganda and the need to be prudent.
\n
- Efforts to undo the underlying social bias and discriminatory attitudes against certain sections will strengthen the social fabric and also reduce mob violence.
\n
- This is because, most of the time, the targets of mob anger are vulnerable people from poor backgrounds or from religious minorities.
\n

\n\n

What should the government do?

\n\n

\n
- A new law covering lynching will be ineffective if our criminal justice system is incapable of enforcing the law.
\n
- State governments need to build law enforcement capacity and ensure prosecution in case of mob violence.
\n

\n\n

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

\n\n

\n
- 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.
\n

\n\n

\n
- The Centre and state government also need to engage more proactively with messaging and social media platforms to address misinformation.
\n
- It is important for platforms like WhatsApp to not be legally accountable for the messages being sent through them as that isn't logical.
\n
- However, that doesn't mean that WhatsApp isn't responsible for helping ensure that users are held to account for their messages.
\n

\n\n

What should WhatsApp do?

\n\n

\n
- **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.

\n
- 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.
\n
- 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.
\n
- This will ensure accountability, allow the platform to remain neutral, and ensure that illegal speech is addressed.
\n
- 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.
\n
- **Consent -** Adding people to groups on WhatsApp can presently be done even without their consent, which is a major bug.
\n
- While people can always choose to exit, not all WhatsApp users are capable enough of even this basic operation.
\n
- Notably, malicious individuals add naive people (who wouldn’t have joined voluntarily) into groups to spread inciting messages and propagate hate.
\n
- **Regulations -** Currently, group admins don’t get to control the content posted in their groups, which is another major risk.
\n
- Controls that enable admin discretion before publication in a group could help in making the admins accountable for malicious content in their groups.
\n
- However, the government, law enforcement agencies, and WhatsApp, are presently playing out a blame game, with little futuristic vision.
\n

\n\n

What is the way ahead?

\n\n

\n
- Blaming social media platforms and abdicating responsibility is a convenient option for the government, but it is not a sustainable solution to the problem.
\n
- 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.

\n
- While tracing the cyber criminals is hard, investigating those responsible for the actual violence that occurred in real life should not be complicated.
  \n
- If the perpetrators are brought swiftly to justice, the message that there is no impunity for mob justice will ring loud and clear.
  \n
- 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.
  \n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n

