Responding to Lynchings

What is the issue?

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There has been a recent series of mob lynching, fuelled by rumours circulated through social media.

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What are the recent happenings?

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- Across the country, more than 20 people have been lynched due to fake news of child lifting.
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- Moreover, dozens of other attacks on strangers, including on 24 individuals in Odisha alone.
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- In Tripura, a man sent by the government to stop lynchings was himself lynched by villagers.
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- Mobs are increasingly driven by viral rumours of child-kidnappers.
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- Free messaging service, the Whats App, provided the platform for spreading disinformation.
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What does it imply?

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- Across the country, lynching and mob vigilantism appear to have got acceptance.
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- This indicates a deep sense of insecurity among so many ordinary Indians.
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- The state’s security apparatus failed to use the same social media platform to

counter the rumours.
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- More than being a law and order issue, the incidents also imply a deeper societal crisis, especially in cases of cow slaughter that emerges from religious intolerance.
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- A sense of "other" is seemed to have gripped the Indian society.
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- There is failure on part of the political establishment to censure such incidents also sends a signal of tolerance towards lynching.
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- It is more pronounced in the case of minorities, tribals and Dalits who are at the receiving end.
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What is the government response?

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- **Centre's directive** - The Centre has advised states and UTs to take steps in this regard by keeping a watch for early detection of such rumours.
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- Home Affairs Ministry has directed states and UTs to initiate measures to counter them.
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- **MEITY** - Ministry of Electronics and IT is holding WhatsApp responsible for such incidents.
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- The platform has been advised to take remedial measures to prevent fake message proliferation.
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- It has asked WhatsApp to ensure that their platform is not used for malafide activities.
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What are the concerns?

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- The government response to go after WhatsApp is misplaced.
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- In WhatsApp, messages are said to be encrypted, which makes it impossible for any to intercept.
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- Given this, methods to limit the spread of sensational messages is unclear.
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- Also, such checks would amount to legitimising surveillance and a loss of privacy.
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- Besides, the messaging medium is not the issue with the recent incidents.
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- The government response seems to be an abdication of responsibility.
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What does the US experience show?

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- In US, the first amendment rejects making any law prohibiting and abridging the freedom of speech.
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- When they had to deal with lynchings in their past, they responded by strengthening the State.
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- They increased policing, bettered law enforcement and invested more in the justice system.
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What is the way forward?

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- Banning news, internet blackouts and letters to WhatsApp may not address the root cause.
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- Factors such as demonisation of communities - Muslims, tribals, outsiders - should be addressed.
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- Stringent condemnation, and timely prosecuting of the perpetrators are essential.
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- Political messaging and administrative alerts are key to stopping the string of lynchings.
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- District administrations and gram panchayats can be asked to reach out to locals to persuade them against falling for rumours.
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Source: Business Standard, The Hindu

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