Shooting the Messenger

What is the issue?

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- There has been a spree of mob lynching in recent times, due to alleged rumours that were spread through the messaging application “WhatsApp”.
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- But pinning the blame solely on WhatsApp for the violence is diversionary tactic to not address the larger malice that is plaguing our society.
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What is wrong with the current public narrative?

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- **Post Truths -** In the age of social media, authenticated news is losing steam and is getting submerged within a mesh of online false propaganda.
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- It is easy to get swept in this wave of sensational social media forwards, which draw neat narratives which ignore factual complexity.
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- Rumours on WhatsApp that child kidnappers are roaming around have led to mob lynching at various places recently, killing about 20 people.
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- This has opened a debate on the growing use of technology by the “ignorant” masses and the responsibilities of a technology platform.
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- **The Blame -** Whatsapp does indeed have to do more for curtailing rumours on its platform and weeding out fake news.
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- But the public opinion, which is largely accusing Whatsapp, seems oblivious of the government’s responsibility to ensure the safety of all.
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- This also distracts us from paying attention to our current polarising political discourse, which is causing the social divide within the society.
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- The long overdue police reforms is another aspect is missing the public eye.

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What are the aspects that need attention?

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- While technology is indeed an enabler for the faster dispersal of rumours, it is only a trigger and the undercurrent lies elsewhere.
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- **Data -** Government maintains no central data on public lynching – thereby making it hard to decipher clear trends, if any.
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- There is also no plan to start such a data collection in the near future and there is no specific legal framework to deal with lynching offences.
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- In the absence of official data or a substantive law, media briefing by the police become the principal source to build a public narrative.
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- For its part, police narratives have been largely simplistic and lacking in substantive data on the incident.
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- **Social Tensions -** Rumours of child kidnappers is the commonly stated reason, which has caused most of the recent lynching incidences.
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- But there seems to have been no realistic analysis on the profile of the victims who were trashed on mere suspicion, which in itself is a revealing tell tale.
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- Most victims were “nomadic tribes and people from religious minorities”, a trend that reflects our pre-existing social tensions and discriminatory outlook.
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- The “political vulnerability (lack of state support) and the ostensible cultural distinction” of the victim from the mob is likely to have precipitated the crime.
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- **Organised Assault -** Some scholars who’ve studies riots (which often involves public lynching), term them to be “organised political productions”.
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- Hence, as an extension lynching is not mere street madness, but there is an element of organization on the lines of some identity to establish dominance.
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- In this context, the current spree of lynching can’t be seen in isolation from

the previous ones that involved rampage by “Gau Rakshaks” (cattle brigade).
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- Notably, a fact-finding report titled “Lynching without end”, documented 24 instances of lynching and vigilante violence between 2014 and 2017.
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- The report finds that, the incidences led to the murder of 34 persons, and that 94% of these incidences were organised and 91% were cow related.
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Source: The Hindu

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