

The background of the image is a dark blue and purple night sky filled with numerous white stars of varying sizes. In the foreground, there is a dark silhouette of a forest of evergreen trees. The overall aesthetic is serene and nocturnal.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

AUGUST'19 (01 to 07 Aug)

In India Is it easy to orchestrate a lynching?

The Rajasthan government on Tuesday introduced bills in the Assembly to prevent caste killings and mob lynchings in the state. The bill also proposes to stop the assembly of a group of people who intend to condemn a marriage on the basis that it has dishonoured a caste or community tradition or brought disrepute to all or any of the persons who are a part of the assembly. The Rajasthan Protection from Lynching Bill, 2019 proposes life imprisonment and a fine up to Rs 5 lakh for those convicted of the offence. The bill places those who conspire or help in the act in the same category as those who commit mob lynching, according to PTI. The punishment in cases where the victim suffers grievous injuries is up to 10 years in prison and a fine of between Rs 25,000 to Rs 3 lakh.

A lynch mob is an angry crowd of people who want to kill someone without a trial, because they believe that person has committed a crime. The verb comes from the phrase "Lynch Law", a term for a punishment without trial. Lynchings took place in the United States both before and after the American Civil War, most commonly in Southern states and Western frontier settlements and

most frequently in the late 19th century. They were performed without due process of law by self-appointed commissions, mobs, or vigilantes as a form of punishment for presumed criminal offences. In India, lynchings may reflect internal tensions between ethnic communities, communities sometimes lynch accused or suspicious convicts. An example is the 2006 Kherlanji massacre, where four members of a Dalit caste family were slaughtered by Kunbi caste members in Khairlanji, a village in the Bhandara district of Maharashtra. Though this incident was reported as an example of "upper" caste violence against members of a "lower" caste, it was found to be an example of communal violence. There have been numerous lynchings in relation to cow vigilante violence in India since 2014, mainly involving Hindu mobs lynching Indian Muslims and Dalits. Some notable examples of such attacks include the 2015 Dadri mob lynching, the 2016 Jharkhand mob lynching, and the 2017 Alwar mob lynching. Mob lynching was reported for the third time in Alwar in July 2018, when a group of cow vigilantes killed a 31 year old Muslim man named Rakbar Khan. In July 2019, three men beaten to death and lynched by mobs in Chhapra district of Bihar, on a minor case of theft of cattle. Lynching is not a

problem that is limited to the US and India. Various UN reports refer to lynching cases from Sudan, Nigeria, Haiti and other countries. India does not maintain a separate data for lynching cases. Reports of lynching have become more common if circumstances are in recent times in India.

For a human being, killing a fellow human is not easy. Experts say that if someone is not a sociopath, psychologically disturbed or doesn't have empathy and moral feeling, there are strong inhibitions against killing others. It requires a special environment to overcome the inhibitions to carry out horrific crimes like a public lynching. However, professor Thomas Homer-Dixon of the University of Waterloo, who developed a model to understand dehumanisation and conflict, explains: "It's unfortunately true that not all of us but most of us have the capacity to behave in such horrific ways appropriately organised". By 'appropriately organised' circumstances, professor Homer-Dixon indicates the process of 'dehumanising' the victim which he thinks is a necessary condition for a severe conflict. Dehumanising happens when someone de-individualises and caricatures members of the out-group and does not regard them as participants of his/her moral community.

In 21st century India, the perpetrators don't collect the body parts of the lynched victims but they film the horror on their smartphones and upload it onto social media. There are several videos of such attacks being circulated in the social media by the attackers themselves. While sharing the horrific videos, the attackers neither have remorse for committing such an inhuman act of violence nor do they fear the law of the land. Rather, they feel proud of their horrendous act and want to keep the memory of the event alive. Lynching and mob violence are no longer just a law and order problem. These are not happening in a political vacuum. It is important to examine why at this particular historical moment, members of one group consider the members of another group as less than human? There is little doubt that lynchings and hate crimes are happening with state approval.

One question still persists – what makes an individual in a crowd commit a murder, even though his/her personal conscience would never allow it. This could be explained through one of the earliest theories of crowd psychology, given by LeBon (1896). He stated that individuals, when they become a part of a crowd, lose their personal identity and merge into the crowd. The role of rumors in

the 'Great Panic', leading to the French Revolution and the seizing of Bastille on 14 July 1789, is well-documented. So too is the role of rumors in the uprising of 1857 in British India. In the 18th and 19th centuries, rumors were largely spread by word of mouth. However, now modern technology is aiding the spread of rumors, leading to unexpected and often brutal outcomes. Over the past year, online rumors have resulted in several people being lynched in India. This has thrown the spotlight on the role of social media and its myriad impact in the country. While the nature and impact of social media in India is complex, the mob lynchings represent the dark underbelly of Internet technology, or what might be called its use for "wrongdoing". The Indian state is not equipped to deal with the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media. Social media companies are loath to take steps on the grounds that it will compromise their business model and freedom of speech. This is a problem that most countries and societies face today. Face book is also under scrutiny, both in India and elsewhere, for its data having been harvested for election campaigns. What is perhaps unique to India are the episodes of barbarity and violence caused by false information on social media. This is

something that is not likely to go away soon. It is incumbent on the state, the technology companies and informed social media users to collaborate to find a solution. Otherwise, lynchings and mob violence will keep taking place with sickening regularity.

While these theories are helpful in understanding the phenomenon, it provides a very grim picture of what is to come. Solution is almost impossible to be arrived at, if indeed violence and self-preservation are ingrained in human beings through evolution and adaptation. History is witness to the fact there have been no such time as the 'peaceful time'. The only remedy that could be thought of is the un-Othering of the out-group. This process of un-Othering comes from a reflexive undertaking, whereby one comes to realize that there is no other, which is not a part of the self; and that self itself has an Other. However, for this to occur at a collective level seems to be close to implausible, unless there is a 'ring-master' which guides the crowd in this direction. But with power often corrupting the ring-master, the possibilities seem bleak.

For reference:-

- <https://scroll.in/latest/932346/rajasthan-government-introduces-bills-against-caste-killing-and-mob-lynching>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynching>
- <https://www.asianage.com/opinion/oped/010718/the-story-of-india-and-its-lynch-mobs.html>
- <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bihar-konkona-sharma-others-face-backlash-criminal-complaint-filed-for-writing-on-mob-lynching-1574330-2019-07-28>
- <https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/07/04/mob-lynchings-in-india-a-look-at-data-and-the-story-behind-the-numbers>

Additional Readings:-

- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/09/the-guardian-view-on-childhood-hope-needed>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/18/the-guardian-view-on-lawns-and-verges-go-wild>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/31/the-guardian-view-on-climate-breakdown-an-emergency-for-all-but-especially-the-poor>
- <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/burning-bright/article28762453.ece>