

## Mob lynching

Irfan Engineer

Mob lynching has drastically increased in recent years, particularly since the election of the BJP government. There has been fourfold increase in cow related violent incidents from less than 5% of incidents communal violence in 2010 to 20% in 2017 (Subramanya, 2017). IndiaSpend web portal claimed that 25 persons were killed in 60 incidents of cow related mob violence between 2010 and 25th June 2017 and 97% of the incidents occurred after the BJP took over reigns of the Central Government in 2014 (Abraham & Rao, 2017). 84% of those killed in cow related mob lynching incidents were Muslims. The remaining 16% lynched on accusation of cow slaughter are dalits and other marginalised sections. While most cases of mob violence are related to cow vigilantism, the other triggers have been rumours of child lifting and allegation of being a witch. In the latter case, victims are women.

Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) has observed in its monitoring of communal violence in India that after the BJP Government came to power, there has been no incidence of major communal violence as witnessed in Ahmedabad (1969, 1984-85, 2002) Bhiwandi (1970 and 1984), Nellie, Assam, (1983) Delhi anti-Sikh riots (1984), Bhagalpur (1989), Kandhamal anti-Christian riots, (2007 & 2008), Muzaffarnagar (2013). In the year 2014 the incidents of communal violence were lesser compared to previous year. However, the communal attitudes were more heightened on account of hate speeches by leaders of ruling party (Engineer, 2015). The incidence of communal violence increased marginally in the year 2015. However, the number of people killed in communal violence in 2015 decreased from 90 to 84. After the present government came in power, there has been a change of pattern in communal violence. Rather than increase in number of spectacular incidence of communal violence, there has been increase in communal incidences which are of low intensity with no or lesser number of deaths (Dabhade, 2016).

According to Paul Brass (The Production Of Hindu-Muslim Riot In Contemporary India, 2004), communal riots are produced by, what he calls, Institutionalized Riot System (IRS) whenever political conditions are conducive. Production of communal riots entails conversion of an ordinary everyday minor conflict into a major riot. The political advantage of communal riots until the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century has always been accrued to party that claims to represent the majority community, namely, the Jan Sangh earlier and the BJP. Jan Sangh earlier and now the BJP has used communal polarization which results after communal violence to its advantage to expand its political influence and political organization. Several Commissions of Inquiry appointed to look into the circumstances that caused communal violence have pointed needle of suspicion towards Hindu supremacist organizations and communal ideologies (Engineer I. , 2013). Of course, Congress too is responsible as it failed to take stern steps to prevent the communal riots and failed to punish those who indulged in producing communal riots.

The Hindu Supremacists now having to come to power do not need spectacular or major communal riots to expand its influence. The same objective can be achieved by hate speeches and broadcasting outrageous anti-minority communal attitudes. Hate speeches stigmatize minorities as compulsive religious converters, terrorists, Pakistan loyalists, separatists, anti-nationals, *tukde tukde* gang out to break the country into pieces, stealing Hindu women through ‘love jihad’, cow slaughterers, oppressors of Hindus in history, demolishers of Hindu temples, etc. That keeps the communal pot boiling without much attracting adverse media attention or attention of International human rights organizations as it does when major riots and pogroms are orchestrated. While hate speeches are broadcasted by highest officials serving in the government and ruling political party, minorities feel powerless and incapable of countering the slander against them because they get lesser space and time in the media, and duty bearers ignore the slander which is a punishable offence. The low intensity communal violence and hate speeches demonstrate two things – one – superior and unchallengeable might of the Hindu supremacists who are above law; and two – inferior political status – second class citizenship of the minorities. The latter undermines democracy and rule of law.

The IRS now does not have to belabour to produce communal riots. To produce a major communal riot, one has to first mount propaganda war and stigmatize minorities as stated above. Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer called this macro-level factors (On Developing Theory of Communal Riots, 1984). Communal riot can be produced when macro-level factor exists, viz., prejudices against the minority community to be targeted. When political conditions are conducive, the IRS works to instil fear of minority community, deepen communal prejudices and consolidate unity of majority community across castes. Continuous propaganda builds up feelings against minority like pus in an infested wound. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Production of communal violence then requires micro-level factor or a triggering issue e.g. Hindu procession taken through a street on which mosque is located and throwing of vermilion on a mosque or a Muslim individual, an interreligious marriage, Muslim hawker beating a cow to shoo it away, any small petty fight between two individuals belonging to different religions, burning of Sabarmati Express in Godhra, etc. The trigger may then set off a riot.

For the riot to be major, other preparations like collection of weapons and ammunitions for inflicting major damage to the ‘other’ community, planning, surveying and marking ‘enemy’ residences and businesses to be targeted, spreading rumours that raise the anxiety of ordinary people and mobilize them on streets to defend themselves. The mobilized crowd then can be misused to attack innocents from the ‘enemy’ community when the anxiety levels are too high.<sup>1</sup>

Mob lynching seems to be continuation of that pattern of low intensity communal violence. The innocuous looking isolated incidents of mob lynching are in fact new pattern of low intensity communal violence. The objectives of sustained communal polarization can now be achieved by this method.

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<sup>1</sup> For more elaborate account of communal riots and its production, read (Engineer I. A., 2013)

## **Mob lynching and communal riots**

Mob lynching and communal riots both rely on rumours to mobilize crowds on streets to carry out violence. Rumours are calculated to make people anxious and convert ordinary human beings into members of lynch mobs. The common rumours during communal riots are – people of the other community have assembled with weapons; Cache of weapons will be landed on Dadar beach, exported by Dawood Ibrahim; weapons are stored in the mosque; milk has been poisoned; drinking water has been poisoned; women of our community have been raped, their breasts cut and bodies thrown on streets; etc.

CSSS in their fact finding have stumbled upon these common rumours. Poisoned milk rumour makes people anxious and mothers do not feed their infants; gullible believers stop drinking water but for how long can they remain thirsty? The rumours of large crowd assembled and marching towards the area with weapons; weapons stored in mosque or to be landed; women raped; etc., draws crowd out of their homes and once on street, can be made to target properties and persons from other communities to vent their anxieties.

Rumours of child lifters on prowl and cow slaughterers are also calculated to make people anxious and bring them out of their homes as in communal riots. People who lynch may be few but large number of spectators intimidate victim into submission and begging for life. The rumours have been carefully designed to mobilize the lynch mob as well – pertaining to innocent child and cow which is worshiped.

The other similarity between communal riot and mob lynching is that both are based on distrust of the state in delivering justice to victims of crime. The rioters and lynch mob want instant justice without investigating into the guilt of the victim and the punishment meted out is as inhuman as possible for the mob, and with the motive of revenge. Qasim in Hapur incident died requesting for water after being lynched. Qasim's body was then dragged by his hands on his stomach behind a policeman. The Dhule mob wanted to ensure that their victims loaded in police vehicle were dead (Rajput, 2018). Might is right is the rule.

Both pit one marginalized and oppressed community against the other. In communal riots, usually dalits are instigated to attack Muslims and Muslims end up attacking dalits. In Kandhamal riots, adivasi community was made to attack dalit Christians. Both further strengthen the powerful elements and increase asymmetry of power. Both are therefore popular with the mighty and powerful and deepen insecurity within the marginalised communities. Both normalize violence in social life. Both normalize disrespect and contempt for the law of the land, putting their beliefs and faith above law. Lynching and riots, both target 'outsiders' – riot targets 'outsider' to nation, lynch mobs target outsider to their village or locality.

However, the distinction between communal riot and lynch mob are interesting. Communal riots are with the leit motif of war with the entire 'enemy' community – all members and their properties. Mob lynching targets particular individuals who are proclaimed by the mob to be

guilty of specific ‘crime’ or ‘wrong doing’. Communal riots mete out collective punishment. All members of ‘enemy’ community are targeted even those innocent and believed to be innocent of any wrong doing other than membership of their community. For example, Muslims in Ahmedabad and other parts of Gujarat can be brutally targeted for wrong doing of burning Sabarmati Express in Godhra. For communal riots, much elaborate preparations and planning are necessary, whereas mob lynching is spontaneous. Targets are not known, even place, region and state where the lynching will be executed is not planned. Broadcasting of rumours using social media platforms and images calculated to arouse anxiety can result into lynching far and wide – Assam, Tripura, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, MP, UP, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Nagaland, etc. Theatre of violence in communal riot is in a defined region where the triggering issue, or as Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer terms, micro-factor has influence.

While rumours of cow slaughter and gangs of cow vigilantes ensured that by and large targets were Muslims – e.g. Mohammed Akhlaq, Pehlu Khan, Junaid, Alimuddin Ansari etc. IndiaSpends report says 84% targets of cow related mob lynching were Muslims. However, only a few Muslims can be targeted through rumours of cow slaughter – those transporting animals or those in possession of beef/meat in public space. To target other Muslims, another rumour was devised – that of child lifter. Carefully chosen rumour. Poison milk and child lifter – both rely on anxiety of parents for their innocent children. It was further rumoured that the child lifters are extracting organs from the body of kidnapped children. The video images of child lifter on prowl were that of a burqa clad individual must have hoped that members of Muslim community will be targeted as child lifters as in case of cow slaughter related mob lynching.

The results in the case of rumours pertaining to child lifters on prowl seem to have gone horribly wrong – even non-Muslim strangers from marginalised sections were easily believed to be child lifters and lynched. The community wise break up of survivors of child lifter lynching incidents show most of them are nomadic tribes – street performers, beggars, etc. While communal riots and rumours of cow slaughter ensure victims are by and large Muslims, rumours of child lifters have not. The state is therefore now taking decisive action – compensation for the survivors of the lynch mobs, booking those involved in lynching after examining video clips and countering rumours in Assam, Tripura and Maharashtra.

### **Role of the state**

In cow slaughter accusation related mob lynchings, the state has played a role of selective enforcer of law – book the survivors of the violence under stringent provision of anti-cow slaughter legislation and a reluctant prosecutor of those involved in serious crime of lynching that has even resulted in murder of the victim. This appears to be so as the targets are primarily Muslims. In Pehlu Khan lynching case in Rajasthan, the state not only did not file any charge sheet against the accused, it actually filed cases against the survivors of the lynching. A Hindu supremacist Kamal Didi encouraged the accused of Pehlu Khan’s murder – Vipin Yadav by comparing him and his act with the great freedom fighter Bhagat Singh! (PTI, 2017). In

Mohammed Akhlaq's case, (Dadri, UP) the state sent the meat found in his fridge for forensic tests to find out whether it was beef or not, although it is not a crime to possess beef in UP.

In spite of repeated calls, police normally arrive after the lynching is over. In some cases, more as an exception rather than norm, the police have done exemplary deed in preventing / rescuing the survivor of lynching. In case of lynching in Hapur, the police not only reached after the lynching had resulted in death of Qasim in spite of repeated pleas from his loved ones, a policeman is seen walking ahead of the mob that is dragging the body of Qasim! Later for strange reason the police claimed that the lynching was in fact road rage when the video clearly show the intent of the mob that is charging Qasim and his friend Samiuddin with cow slaughter.

The BJP leaders and ministers defend those accused of lynching. The 11 who were convicted for murder by the trial court in the case of lynching of Alimuddin Ansari, the Jharkhand State president of the BJP was competing with the Union Minister Jayant Sinha for credit of obtaining bail for the accuse from Jharkhand High Court. Jayant Sinha felicitated the convicts who were enlarged on bail pending their appeal in High Court. With BJP leaders and ministers backing the accused of murder by lynching the police sends a signal to law enforcing agencies as to how seriously they must investigate and prosecute such crimes. People, particularly those sections with some political connection and drawn from dominant sections trust the environment of impunity. They are so fearless that they video graph their act and make it viral and hope to achieve fame. Overall the state seems to be twiddling its thumbs and looking the other side giving the impression that it is alright to indulge in lynching Muslims to death.

It is only now that the lynching is acquiring threatening level wherein non-Muslims are also being lynched that the state has in some cases related to child lifting appearing to tighten its act. Two months before the 5 men from nomadic tribe were lynched to death in Dhule, the Gosavi community had approached police to issue them letters. The rumours were doing rounds for over two months and the administration completely ignored them. A stern warning from the police of booking all violators of law would have sent the message and deterred the mob from lynching the 5 innocent men. But then who knew that the victims are going to be non-Muslims.

## **Conclusion**

Mob lynching is unacceptable in any civilized society. It is rule of might, not right and not rule of law. Lynching of blacks in US from 1877 through 1950 had similar objectives – to assert the hegemony of white people and to terrorize and control black people into submission (Lartey & Morris, 2018). All those lynched were black people on flimsiest of accusation which were false in most cases. To the white people, blacks did not deserve any trial, as they were slaves of yesteryears. They deserved only lynch mob justice. By and large no one was punished for lynching in US for 4,084 known lynchings in southern states and 300 in other states. The lynchings came to an end with civil rights movement.

Savarkar and Golwalkar, the ideologues of Hindutva political ideology, portrayed Muslims and Christians as outsiders of Hindu nation. The Hindu nation was supposed to be at war with the outsiders. Golwalkar in his treatise "*We or Our Nationhood Defined*" canvassed for treating the Muslims and Christians the same way as Jews were by Hitler. Earlier communal riots and now lynching seems to be another war of followers of Hindutva political ideology targeting Muslims.

It is not only death and injuries that should worry us about mob lynching incident. Survival of democracy, rule of law and justice is at stake. Prime Minister's silence in spite of drastic increase in the incidents of mob lynching tells us about the priorities and the direction of his government. Hindu supremacists always ridiculed secularism and openly proclaim that for them, their faith is above law and that the state should be reshaped to uphold not truth and justice, but primacy of their beliefs. The frequency of hate speeches by the ministers and authorities in government targeting Muslim community has built an ecosystem in which lynching and 'might is right' doctrine is thriving. Lynching is encouraged by leaders of the ruling party and even ministers indirectly by garlanding and felicitating those convicted for the crime of lynching and publicly defending them.

Lynching results in increasing asymmetry of power and social capital. It enables the targeted community to be controlled even more by the dominant community. If lynching continues unabated, it would ultimately reduce the Muslim community to accept the status of non-citizens residing at the mercy and sufferance of the majority community, using them as slave labour without any rights. To some this warning may appear to be farfetched. It is for us to arrest the frequency and brutality of lynchings by compelling the state to act against the lynch mobs in accordance with law. Lynching not only dehumanizes the targeted community, but also the entire society. Let us act now before it is too late to uphold human rights, rule of law and democracy.

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