

HALTING THE MARCH OF RUMOURS

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In 1984, just as Delhi was engulfed by a pogrom against the Sikhs, the city was rife with the rumour that they had poisoned the entire water supply. Such rumours are not new. For centuries, European Jews were falsely accused of poisoning wells during wars, epidemics or civic unrest. Late 18th century Paris, witness to deep polarisation along class lines, was replete with the rumour that the rich had distributed lethal, contaminated flour to the poor.

It is no surprise then that during the current [COVID-19 pandemic](#), the rumour mill has Muslims deliberately throwing infected 2,000 notes on the road or Muslim street vendors spitting on vegetables and fruits. Periods of social stress or natural disasters are fertile ground for rumours, which not only spread like wild fire but have grave consequences — scapegoating, social boycott, violence and arson, even lynching and murder.

Where do rumours spring from and why and how do they spread so fast? Why do they thrive in a crisis? Not all rumours are pernicious. Some are potentially harmful, but like meteors in the sky, they disappear without much impact. But the ones that concern us here are toxic, occur with cataclysmic events and have devastating results. How must such rumours be checked?

For a start, a rumour is an untested piece of information, opinion, report or story. Therefore, its veracity is doubtful. This unverified, ambiguous status is at the heart of a rumour, making it largely what it is. The moment an account is publicly demonstrated and accepted to be true or false, it ceases to be a rumour. In a sense then, a rumour's truth or falsity is irrelevant to its efficacy or impact. Yet, every unconfirmed account is not a rumour. To become one, it must have other features. First, it must have a ring of truth. Something in it must make it contextually plausible for the listener or the reader. If an account is obviously bizarre — the sun will freeze overnight — or instantly falsifiable — Sachin scored a thousand runs in an ODI — it cannot become a rumour. Second, it short-circuits reason. Laced with passion, it works by seizing the collective psyche of victims. Suddenly, many start to believe it. This also lends it a third important feature — it circulates rapidly. Fourth, it manifests itself through an event. It is a passing gust, sometimes a tornado that leaves devastation in its wake but is ephemeral. Fifth, even when deliberately planted by only a few, it derives authority largely from the mob. Indeed, expert-authority is helpless against its seductive power. So, a rumour is a useful half-truth with strong emotional overtones that spreads fast, gripping individual minds to create a common consciousness and agency, often with grave social consequences.

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Rumours are efficacious in societies already prepared to receive them. What then are the conditions that beget them? First, a context where there is either an information void or an information overload. Unable to satisfactorily make sense of their world in these uncertain contexts, humans become cognitively unstable and anxious. To meet their cognitive needs, they are forced to rely on bits and pieces of available knowledge, on a patchwork of half-truths, a rag bag of allusions that together provide a fragile, uncorroborated framework for interpreting events. Rumours feed on this mythic framework. Add emotional anxiety to this cognitive framework, and one has a ready-made arena for rumours to flourish. An overheated mind burns all evidence that comes its way and surrenders to rumours, often in the service of emotional needs. Recall how, during demonetisation, amidst despair and anxiety at losing their own money, the poor still found emotional satisfaction in the rumour that crores of rupees secretly

stored in cash by the rich were rendered worthless.

Jamuna Prasad, a psychologist at Ranchi and Patna Universities, was among the first to establish a link between high levels of anxiety and the easy spread of rumours. Typically unrecognised when alive but posthumously celebrated as a pioneer in the social psychology of rumours, he did so by studying the social impact of the deadly Bihar-Nepal earthquake of 1934. Others have shown that, in times of acute crisis, people lean on knee jerk speculation and prejudice. A group consisting of 'outsiders', already distrusted and disliked, becomes an easy target, ready to be blamed for the current mess. Rumours succeed in societies ridden with an us-them syndrome, already polarised. Indeed, by binding people, creating temporary solidarities against a perceived enemy, they only deepen polarisation. No wonder they come in handy to those who benefit from such divisions.

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With uncertainty, fear, and the radical other already firmly in place, the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle is provided by a vivid story of grave wrongdoing by an 'enemy' who has allegedly unleashed the calamity. A rumour *is* that story. And the more horrifying, outrageous and disgusting the story, the greater its emotional resonance and quicker its spread. But as mentioned, to get kickstarted, it must already be believable. Some factual detail needs to be added to the fiction to give it plausibility that it otherwise lacks.

It is a fact that the 1984 carnage compelled Sikhs to go to gurudwaras in large numbers. But then a baseless rumour surfaced that they were stockpiling arms, planning to attack and plunder posh colonies. The truth, altogether different, is that they went there seeking refuge. So, in the entire narrative, one detail was factually correct — and this little truth alone made a giant lie plausible. Likewise, it is a fact that many Muslims have experienced arbitrary violence, stigma and ostracisation in contemporary India. Given this threat, panic-stricken Muslims in Indore unjustifiably beat up a team of doctors who had come to test them for COVID-19. They easily succumbed to the rumour that it was not medical quarantine but needless, malicious separation from their families that motivated the visit.

In polarised societies, fear and vulnerability make rumour-mongering easy. But there are other reasons for why they get widely entrenched. Three of them stand out. First, the desire to conform gets the better of a questioning mind. Rather than face sanction and ostracisation for sticking out, people find it safer to emulate members of their group. Second, ironically, a belief gets entrenched after like-minded people discuss it among themselves. Discussion has a cascading effect; the more one talks about it, the more the biased rumour grows. Third, a denial by a mistrusted outsider, no matter how great her expertise, only ends up solidifying rumours. Group dynamics in polarised societies works with a logic all of its own; every person is necessarily partisan. A neutral ground for impartial voices is simply unimaginable.

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So here in brief is the conundrum: Since societies can never be fully informed or secure, rumours are inevitable and in times of acute crisis, they are a menace. Yet, providing rational rebuttal or furnishing relevant information is unable to stem the tide. Must rumours then be viewed like a tsunami before which we are helpless?

This fatalism is unwarranted. Transforming conditions conducive to rumours can reduce their efficacy. Depolarising society, loosening the grip of prejudice and calmly addressing the collective anxieties and obsessions of a group are deterrents, but, alas, only in the long run. In the short run, regulatory laws to check rumours are imperative. As also, the need to have critical

insiders, those with authority within a community, deny injurious rumours, not least on the ground that eventually they harm even those who propagate, spread and exploit them. Community leaders and democratically elected office holders must play a crucial role in halting the march of dangerous rumours.

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