

Passing the buck: on governments' response to lynchings

The Central government [has finally moved to react to the lynchings](#) reported from across the length and breadth of the country, but its line of action is bafflingly weak. Over the past couple of months, mobs have materialised to beat to kill people they suspect — almost always without basis — of plotting to kidnap children to harvest their organs. Warnings to beware of child kidnappers, sometimes with the rider that they are likely to hail from other parts of India, are mostly circulated on WhatsApp, the Facebook-owned encrypted messaging platform. Since a cluster of such killings in Tamil Nadu in May, deaths have been reported from States as far apart as Assam, Karnataka and Maharashtra. In one recent attack, [five people were clobbered to death in Maharashtra's Dhule's district](#) on child-lifting rumours; the mob numbering hundreds overpowered the few policemen present. And ironically, among three people lynched in Tripura on a single day, June 28, was a man hired by the State government to spread awareness against precisely such rumours.

Now, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology [has told WhatsApp](#) to take “remedial measures... to prevent proliferation of these fake and at times motivated/sensational messages”. WhatsApp is the communication platform of choice in the age of cheap smartphones. One of the USPs of the platform is that the messages are encrypted in a manner that makes it impossible for them to be read. Given this, it is not clear how such a platform can take measures to limit the spread of motivated or sensational messages. Also, whether such checks would amount to legitimising surveillance and a loss of privacy — a rare commodity in this digital age. Even if it can do so without compromising privacy, the problem is not the medium. Rumour has historically found its way around communication walls, and it can only be effectively blocked through old-fashioned information campaigns and administrative alertness. Rumour's potency predates mobile phones, even if there is no denying that smartphones, with their ability to instantly transmit text and images, have a tendency, in this era of fake news, to rapidly spread panic and anger. This happens in different ways across the world, but in India the problem has assumed truly distressing proportions. It is well-known that an unrelated video of an act of violence that went viral was responsible for fuelling communal hatred in Muzaffarnagar in 2013. It is puzzling that district administrations and gram panchayats have not been asked to reach out to locals to persuade them against falling for rumours, and to come to the authorities if they have any fears. The messaging needs to be amplified — merely appealing to WhatsApp is hardly the solution.

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