

Wages of vigilantism: on lynching incidents

The recurring incidents of lynching and targeted mob violence against vulnerable groups reported from various parts of the country are a direct challenge thrown by right-wing groups to political processes, especially electoral processes and the rule of law. According to India Spend, a data-journalism website, [86% of those killed in lynching incidents](#) in 2017 were Muslims. In September 2017 the Supreme Court, responding to a Public Interest Litigation, directed all State governments to take measures to prevent vigilantism in the name of cow protection. However, public lynching or vigilante violence hasn't subsided; in fact, it has spread from Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Haryana to Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. An overwhelming majority of these attacks are bovine related, although there are other reasons for anti-minority attacks, too. Hate violence has also happened around festivals such as Ram Navami (Bihar and West Bengal), provocations over *azaan* and *namaz* (Gurugram in Haryana) and violence against those looking overtly Muslim (U.P. and Haryana trains). The victims in cases of lynching are almost entirely from poor families.

South Asia has a long history of communal violence, but these were primarily big episodes of mass violence. This has now given way to a smaller-scale of conflict and vigilante violence against individuals endorsed by state inaction. One possible reason for this shift could be an attempt to avoid public scrutiny that accompanies mass violence, whilst at the same time ensuring that minorities are continually kept under siege through targeted attacks. India has a poor record when it comes to prevention and punishment of the perpetrators of mass violence and/or lynchings. Each event of violence has hardened community boundaries and widened the divide between Hindus and Muslims.

Wave of lynchings

Citizens Against Hate (CAH), a civil society group investigating and seeking to provide legal help to victims of hate crimes, has documented 50 lynching deaths (Muslims), including three lynched in the last one week — two in Godda, Jharkhand (June 14) and one in Hapur, U.P. (June 18) over rumours of cow slaughter/smuggling. According to the CAH report, 'Lynching Without End', published in September 2017, 97% of [cow-related lynchings had occurred since the Bharatiya Janata Party's \(BJP\) rise](#) to political dominance in 2014.

Most of these attacks were based on rumours sparked by accusations that the victims, almost always Muslims, slaughtered or smuggled cows. The content of these rumours and fears often circulating on social media take the shape of communal stereotypes of victims either eating beef or intending to do so, or showing any form of perceived disrespect for cows, which is broadly claimed as a motivation for lynching. Most actors leading the charge are suspected to belong to, or have connections with, groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, Gau Raksha Dal and Hindu Yuva Vahini. Professing allegiance to Hindu right-wing parties, they feel emboldened by a political regime that has prioritised a crackdown on cow slaughter. The back-end support comes from BJP MPs providing political protection to these organisations and their activities.

What explains the phenomenon and spread of lynchings across several States? Apart from the political reasons alluded to above, the rising trend is directly related to the intensification of communal polarisation and instrumentalisation of prejudice for political ends apparent in various government attempts to infuse religion into politics and education. In the event, these acts seem to have acquired a certain degree of legitimacy in the public mind. Also, it's important to acknowledge the widespread role of violence in Indian politics which is not considered an illegitimate form of politics. Popular anger, outrage and violence are integral features of everyday

politics in contemporary India. The feeling that mobs are exacting Bollywood style justice beyond the procedures of law, with crowds of locals triumphantly watching the gruesome spectacle captured by videos that subsequently go viral, has its own vicarious fascination.

As hate crimes grow, so does the sense of impunity enjoyed by the actual perpetrators of the crime and those who prompt it. Lack of justice for victims further reinforces the vicious cycle of impunity. There is also little condemnation of lynchings by those in positions of authority except in very generalised terms. The strategic silence of the BJP-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leadership works like unspoken approval to carry out the attacks. The tacit endorsement of mob violence may be the most disturbing effect of decades of communal politics in India. The lack of public reaction to recent incidents implies a degree of acceptability of violence as an expression of vengeance against 'injustices' suffered by Hindus in the past. The theory of 'Hindu insecurity' and 'Hindu persecution' comes at a time when political representation of Muslims in legislatures and administration and their presence in the public sphere is at its lowest since Independence.

It's time to enact an anti-lynching law

The police often stand by, careful not to interfere with the actions of the majority community. Both mobs and police have regularly treated victims of cow vigilantism, rather than those indulging in violence, as suspects in ways that de-victimise these individuals. Rather than taking swift action against perpetrators, law enforcement agencies act mostly against the victims themselves, booking them for violating cow protection laws which act as a legitimate cover for taking action against people they suspect of trafficking in cattle intended for slaughter. In these attacks, whether the victim actually possessed beef, or whether cows were actually being transported for slaughter, or even that cows were not involved, is not relevant.

Most of these are not spontaneous acts of violence; there is usually systematic planning behind them. Common to all the episodes of violence is coordination across groups and States and districts, and no other political force masters this better than the Sangh Parivar with its numerous affiliates. Active support of powerful political figures in the current establishment at the Centre and in the States has helped to build networks, gain new recruits, resources and legitimacy that Hindu right-wing groups did not have in the past. The newly acquired organisational capacity, including manpower, money and feet on the ground, has proved crucial for translating dark ideas into concrete action across districts and converting rumour and prejudice into attacks across State borders. Apart from providing employment opportunities to youth belonging to right-wing groups, another big incentive is participation in electoral politics as these foot soldiers double up as campaigners and booth committee members of the BJP during elections.

Lynchings are encouraged by the atmosphere of hate and suspicion created through sustained propaganda. Always ready to refurbish the deep historical archive of anti-Muslim prejudice by focusing on the past to demonise all Muslims, the BJP has weaponised Hindu anger and paranoia into a legitimate expression of a majoritarian nation. Localised violence happening with regularity also serves a political purpose. By allowing lynchings to continue unchecked, the Hindu right boosts its image as the lone protector of Hindu religion and culture in India and this can help expand its social base. Cow vigilantism, which is a pretext to exacerbate social conflicts between religious communities, serves the political purposes of ideologies and political formations that thrive on hate and polarisation. Preventing further atrocities requires respect for the rule of law and legal institutions and strong prosecutions and expeditious punishments. Unless checked, it can cause irreversible harm to the social fabric of our society and to the tenets of democracy that have shaped and sustained the idea of India.

Zoya Hasan is Professor Emerita, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

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