

At the crossroads

This is about footage and photographs of two events, like two strips of memory; cuttings from everydayness. One of them, from Hapur in Uttar Pradesh this month, shows a vigilante group hunting for alleged cow slaughterers and smugglers. It is a blood sport. The mob picks up Sameyddin, a 65-year-old man, and forces him to confess. It then drags a 45-year-old, Qasim, like a sack before it lynches him. He begs for water as he is being beaten up, but the mob refuses.

What is even more terrifying than the violence is the indifference of the policemen in front of the crowd. They don't seem to care, barely registering the event. An apology from the authorities is an ironic addition to the unbelievable tableau.

The second incident occurred in May, at Ramnagar in Uttarakhand's Nainital district. A Hindu woman and a Muslim man get isolated in a temple. The mob drags the man out, hitting him at random. A policeman stands up to the mob, protecting the victim with his body. The crowd around waits in anticipation. All that stands between them and their target is the Sikh policeman.

Two videos, two fragments, two vignettes of violence. How does one react to the chronicler of violence? Every interpretation is an act of risk, and a mediation on violence demands nothing less.

Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher of communication once claimed pithily that 'the medium is the message'. McLuhan's comments may have become textbook clichés but even now the original power of the insight seeps through. We realise more and more that how we communicate determines what we communicate. We sense this as we watch the video.

Violence in India today is always communicated as a video strip; a piece of gossip floating in digital time. Today we feel that the video as a fragment embodies us best. The video presents voyeurism combined with the open bleakness of an anatomy class. The irony is that an instrument that recorded family marriages has now become the archive for the collective violence of the time. Between video and selfie, we write today's history. Mob violence is the new serial of our time.

We have to theorise a little about the video before we analyse the two fragments more specifically. It is not merely that the video/photograph captures every act of public violence, it also makes the private public. The image links violence as an act of production with violence as consumption. It is almost as if it attempts to create a new idea of the social. The old idea of the social around the family or state sounds tired and empty, even stale. The new social is quick to form and quick to dispense. It is represented by the mob. Today the social, or the sense of the collective, is constituted around the mob and its violence.

Three terms then become critical: the mob, the spectacle and the spectator. It is as if the mob has taken over history and myth, combining the worst of nature and culture. There is no equivalent of the hero in history, as in the warrior or the *satyagrahi*. There is no concept like class or state, just the mob waiting for a random trigger. The mob's double is the crowd. There is little to choose from — one plays the perpetrator and the other the spectator. Both are hungry for the spectacle. The only reminder that we live in a society subject to constitutional rules is the policeman. The policeman too can merge into the background and play the spectator indifferent to spectacle. His indifference, his boredom have an edge as he sits as if waiting for his favourite serial. The victim, by the very label Dalit, Muslim or woman, is the only social category; the scapegoat marked for violence. The indifference of the police in the video appears both surreal and slapstick. It spooks justice, the concept of duty, the Constitution as they let the violence go on. Of course, it all occurs

in U.P. but U.P. could be any place on earth. The lynch mob has not only overtaken law and order but also overwhelmed history and civics. The only humanity might be with the victim, in his vulnerability, in his desperation to communicate, in his scream, in his powerlessness, protests against brute force and against the fact that law, morals, language, rules, prayer are all helpless. A god might listen out of pity or even habit, but not a mob. Depraved human behaviour makes savage animal behaviour look tame. Animals rarely demand excess, but excess is the first signal of the mob.

Violence today lacks a sense of myth or even metaphor. There is no sense of the epic to the events — banality literally dogs them. It is as if it is in the Hobbesian world that the digital domain finds expression. The history of man with the mob in control is 'nasty, brutish and short'. The body is devoid of any sense of sacrament. It is dispensable. The Indian cosmos is like a butcher's shop, and it is no longer Picasso or Goya who are relevant. One remembers the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. His painting, 'The Scream', is more relevant as it captures violence and sheer primordiality of pain. It captures the brutality, the sheer barbarism of man against man.

The two events in a way create a fable, an Indian version of The Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan as a story does not only belong to the Bible. Like all great religious tales, it is universal, producing vernacular variations everywhere.

The fable asks, who is the stranger, the other? It answers, the other is an extension of the self. Society, it argues, cannot be made of similarity and uniformity but it crucially needs difference and the celebration of difference to keep society alive. As the South African philosopher A.C. Jordan advised, "One needs to reinvent the stranger constantly to keep society alive." Gagandeep Singh, the policeman at Ramnagar, plays the good Samaritan. At a time when police brutality is at its prime as in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, the policeman and the citizen become "others" to each other. To this we add the distance between a fundamentalist mob and its victim. When a policeman like Gagandeep Singh rescues a victim, the fable of the Good Samaritan is enacted once again.

The first picture, from Hapur, displays the standard indifference of society to its other. Citizenship and authority come alive when the other becomes part of the creative self. Society in this fable is born when one creates civility. Gagandeep Singh's act shows that society has to care to continue. The two pictures become 'before' and 'after' pictures of one narrative. It is up to us as seekers of meaning to read it. One exemplary act shows what is possible with a bit of courage and a touch of patience. The policeman protects the victim but does nothing to imitate the crowd. It is also a reminder that a social contract does not come alive because of formal rules. It comes alive when someone is ready to sacrifice for it.

We need a new testament for our society to keep exemplary events alive beyond constitutional clichés. Our law and order history must capture it in a more memorable way. This is the ethical and narrative challenge of our time.

Shiv Visvanathan is an academic associated with the Compost Heap, a group in pursuit of alternative ideas and imagination

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