The Dark Side of Social Media:
Mob Lynchings in India

Over the past year, online rumours have resulted in several people being lynched in India. This has thrown the spotlight on the role of social media and its myriad impact in the country. The state, the internet companies and social media users are yet to come up with an effective policy to combat the spread of false information and its unfortunate impact.

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In the last one year, 28 people across nine Indian states have been lynched in separate incidents, which have been triggered by rumours spread on social media. Of these, more than 20 people were victims of mob lynching in the last two months alone. The latest such incident occurred on 15 July 2018 in Karnataka when a software engineer was beaten to death on the suspicion of being a kidnapper.[2] The earlier incidents have occurred in different parts of the country, from Assam in the northeast to Maharashtra in western India. The common thread in these gruesome incidents has been child lifting rumours circulated on the social media.

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[2] On 20 July 2018, a Muslim man was killed in Rajasthan by vigilantes on the suspicion that he and a companion were smuggling cows. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that this incident and earlier ones involving cow vigilantes were caused by online rumours.

Rumours are an age-old phenomenon and have played their part in momentous events. The role of rumours in the 'Great Panic', leading to the French Revolution and the seizing of Bastille on 14 July 1789, is well-documented. So too is the role of rumours in the uprising of 1857 in British India. In the 18th and 19th centuries, rumours were largely spread by word of mouth. However, now modern technology is aiding the spread of rumours, leading to unexpected and often brutal outcomes. In nearly all the incidents of mob violence, the rumours were circulated by WhatsApp, a free messaging application owned by Facebook. It is not a coincidence that India is WhatsApp's biggest market worldwide, with more than 200 million users.

The Scale of the Problem

While the victims of the mob attacks have ranged from software professionals to migrant workers, the attacks have usually occurred in rural and remote areas. Another common strand has been the composition of the perpetrators who have usually been unemployed and poor. Neither rural India nor the poor is usually associated with heavy Internet usage. However, according to the *Internet in India 2017* report published by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and Kantar IMRB, the number of Internet users is growing across India. While there are an estimated 295 million Internet users in urban India, the corresponding number for rural India is also substantial at 186 million. Internet penetration though is still much lower in rural India at 20 per cent of the population, compared to 65 per cent in urban India.

The preferred device for using the Internet is the cellphone, which is ubiquitous in both urban and rural India. Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron have documented how the number of cellphone subscriptions exploded in less than a decade from 34 million in 2004 to 900 million in 2012.[3] By the end of 2017, the number had crossed 1.1 billion.[4] Accessing Internet on

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[3] "Morality and Mobile Phones in India", Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey, *The New York Times*, 29 October 2013. https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/29/morality-and-mobile-phones-in-india/. Accessed on 23 July 2018. See also Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron, *Cellphone Nation: How Mobile Phones Have Revolutionized Business, Politics and Ordinary Life in India* (New Delhi: Hachette, 2013), 3.

[4] "India's mobile phone users rise 4.97 mln to 1.17 bln in Dec", *Reuters*, 16 February 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/india-telecoms-users/table-indias-mobile-phone-users-rise-4-97-mln-to-1-17-bln-in-dec-idUSL4N1Q61KZ. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

cellphones is a global trend with a study predicting that, in 2018, mobile devices will account for 73 per cent of time spent using the Internet.[5]

While in all the incidents, rumours of child lifting went viral in a matter of minutes or even seconds, the police were ill-equipped to deal with the situation. It is well known that the ratio of policemen to population in India is one of the lowest in the world.[6] The police are also not equipped to deal with crime triggered by social media. Moreover, rumours spread on WhatsApp is particularly difficult to track since everything on the platform is encrypted from end to end at the device level.

The Response

While the information technology ministry has asked WhatsApp to take immediate action against the spread of misinformation, the company has expressed its inability to tackle the problem on its own. However, it has put in place some measures to curb the spread of false information. The company has said that it will limit how many times messages can be forwarded in India. Groups on WhatsApp can have a maximum of 256 people. Many of the messages that are believed to have triggered violence were forwarded to multiple groups, which had more than 100 members each. Under the new rules a single person would be able to forward one message only five times.[7] WhatsApp also intends to remove in India the quick forward button placed next to media messages. Whether these steps can curb the spread of false information remain to be seen.

The government also wants to set up a Social Media Communications Hub, which would allow it to track all social media platforms. Amid concerns about surveillance and privacy rights, the government has maintained that the social media hub would only monitor public

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[5] "India set to have 530 million smartphone users in 2018: Study", *The Indian Express*, 24 July 2018. https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/india-set-to-have-530-million-smartphone-users-in-2018-study-4893159/. Accessed on 20 July 2018.

[6] "India's ratio of 138 police personnel per lakh of population fifth lowest among 71 countries", *The Economic Times*, 13 July 2018. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indias-ratio-of-138-police-personnel-per-lakh-of-population-fifth-lowest-among-71-countries/articleshow/48264737.cms. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

[7] "WhatsApp is adding new restrictions as killings continue in India", Rishi Iyengar, *CNN*, 20 July 2018. https://money.cnn.com/2018/07/20/technology/whatsapp-india-mob-lynching/index.html. Accessed on 22 July 2018.

sentiments. However, the proposed hub has already been legally challenged and the Indian Supreme Court has observed that it would lead to the creation of a "surveillance state".[8] In 2015, the Supreme Court had also struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act which was meant to punish a person for sending "any information which he knows to be false…for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, or ill will". The Supreme Court had said that this provision was "open-ended, undefined, and vague".[9]

The Supreme Court has also stepped in while hearing a batch of petitions related to vigilantism by groups professing to protect cows. The Supreme Court is, however, not restricting itself to cow vigilantism alone. On 18 July 2018, it said that the "horrendous acts of mobocracy cannot be permitted to inundate the law of land". Indeed, a recent study finds that there has been a rise in mob violence, particularly cow vigilantism, since the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government took over in 2014.[10] The Supreme Court has not only passed a series of measures to check mob violence, but also recommended that the parliament creates a special law to deal with such offences. Among the measures the Supreme Court has directed to be put in place is a nodal officer in each district to take steps to prevent mob violence; to "curb and stop dissemination of irresponsible and explosive messages, videos and other material on various social media platforms"; and to set up fast track courts to hear cases related to lynching and mob violence. The government has responded by setting up a Group of Ministers under the Union home minister, and a high-level committee under the Union home secretary, to make recommendations for a separate penal provision for incidents of mob violence.

[8]   "Surveillance state, says Supreme Court on Centre's plans to monitor social media", Anusha Soni, *India Today*, 13 July 2018. https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/we-seem-to-be-moving-towards-a-surveillance-state-says-supreme-court-1284678-2018-07-13. Accessed on 22 July 2018.
[9]   "If Whatsapp Were to be Put on Trial, What Would Its Offence Be?", Aditya Prasanna Bhattacharya and Siddharth Sonkar, *The Wire*, 25 July 2018. https://thewire.in/tech/if-whatsapp-were-to-be-put-on-trial-what-would-its-offence-be. Accessed on 25 July 2018.
[10]   "Has India become "Lynchistan"?" Rupa Subramanya, *ORF Online*, 1 July 2018. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/has-india-become-lynchistan/. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

Conclusion

Mob lynchings, fuelled by online rumours, is only a small part of the ever-increasing role played by social media in Indian society and politics. Analysts have noted the role of social media in the 2014 national election, particularly in the BJP's electoral campaign.[11] The BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are extremely active on social media, with Modi among the top three global leaders followed on Twitter. Indeed, Twitter is Modi's favourite mode of communication.

Some have contended that the BJP orchestrates an army of volunteers who troll critical voices.[12] The Aam Aadmi Party was also quick to spot the potential of social media. The other political parties are now playing catch up and all of them are now using social media, in varying degree, to connect to voters. It is telling that Congress president Rahul Gandhi got a Twitter account only in 2015.[13] In the 2017 Assembly elections in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the BJP had created 6,000 WhatsApp groups to gets its message across to voters, whereas the opposition parties were caught napping. In contrast, in the 2018 Assembly elections in Karnataka, the Congress and the BJP together claimed to have set up around 50,000 WhatsApp groups.[14]

While the nature and impact of social media in India is complex, the mob lynchings represent the dark underbelly of Internet technology, or what might be called its use for "wrongdoing".[15] The Indian state is not equipped to deal with the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media. Social media companies are loath to take steps on the grounds that it will compromise their business model and freedom of speech. This is a problem that

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[11] Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy ed., "Modi and the Media: Indian Politics and Electoral Aftermath", *Television and New Media* 16: 4, May 2015.

[12] Swati Chaturvedi, *I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016).

[13] "The social media wars have begun", Rajdeep Sardesai, *Hindustan Times*, 19 July 2018. https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/the-social-media-wars-have-begun/story-WXrxETZ6WWZWVP dmoo0t3L.html. Accessed on 22 July 2018.

[14] "In India, Facebook's WhatsApp Plays Central Role in Elections", Vindu Goel, *The New York Times*, 14 May 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/technology/whatsapp-india-elections.html. Accessed on 22 July 2018.

[15] Jeffrey and Doron, *Cellphone Nation*, 185-208.

most countries and societies face today.[16] Facebook is also under scrutiny, both in India and elsewhere, for its data having been harvested for election campaigns.

What is perhaps unique to India are the episodes of barbarity and violence caused by false information on social media. This is something that is not likely to go away soon. It is incumbent on the state, the technology companies and informed social media users to collaborate to find a solution. Otherwise, lynchings and mob violence will keep taking place with sickening regularity.

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[16] "Here's what the world is doing to tackle fake news. India can learn", Daniel Funke *The Print*, 25 July 2018. https://theprint.in/opinion/heres-what-the-world-is-doing-to-tackle-fake-news-india-can-learn/88195/. Accessed on 25 July 2018.