

Collective Rage: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Mob Violence in Society

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ABSTRACT

Mob violence or mob lynching is now a prime concern in Indian society, where incidents of lynching, vigilantism, and public punishment become a threat to human rights and challenge the rule of law. Such violence is often seen as sudden and spontaneous, but in reality, it usually develops from shared anger, fear, and a loss of trust in the formal justice systems. This paper explains mob violence through the idea of collective rage, showing how personal grievances turn into group aggression. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, sociology, and law, the study develops a conceptual framework to explain how people's grievances transform into mass hostility. It highlights the influence of rumours, social media, identity politics, moral panic, and social inequality in triggering violence. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and conceptual approach, using doctrinal analysis, review of existing literature, and media reports to examine patterns of mob behaviour. The paper also examines how gaps in governance and delayed justice encourage people to take the law into their own hands. This article offers a clear understanding of mob behaviour that incites them to be part of mass violence and provides suggestions to combat it for a stable society.

Keywords: mob violence, collective rage, group behaviour, socio-legal analysis, Indian justice system

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, mob violence threatens democracy and the rule of law. Mob lynching, vigilantism, and public punishment in India are alarming, signalling a disturbing shift from institutional justice to crowd-based enforcement. (Samadhiya & Mishra, 2023). These actions are not only crimes; they also highlight broader social problems rooted in fear, rage, identity politics, and a lack of trust in the law. When people gather in emotionally charged situations, personal grievances can turn into group antagonism, making violence seem normal and the actions of the crowd seem justified. (Jha & Sengupta, 2026). Mob behaviour is not spontaneous or random; it is, in fact, produced and nourished under circumstances. (Banaji et al., 2019; Mukherjee, 2020). Recent socio-legal and criminological research indicates that mob violence flourishes in certain political, economic, and cultural settings where rumours spread quickly, authority seems weak, and group identity is more important than personal accountability. The growth of digital technology has accelerated the spread of false and inaccurate information, allowing it to spread within seconds and prompting ordinary people to quickly group against those they believe are guilty.

In India, mob violence is often linked to issues of caste, gender, religion, land, and social status, and mostly

the marginalised people become the easy target, where they are being punished beyond what the law allows. Surprisingly, this act of lynching is being justified, and society begins to accept collective violence as normal, whereas such acts go against constitutional values, human rights, and public trust in institutions. (Akhtar, 2024; Mathew, 2024). This study addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual framework based on the idea of collective rage. It argues that mob violence does not arise only from personal anger, but from shared emotions, fear, anger, politics, and a sense that the government has failed. By bringing together ideas from sociology, criminology, psychology, and law, the research explains how crowds form, how anger is justified, and how violence becomes accepted in public life. The study proposes institutional measures to prevent mob violence and rebuild faith in the rule of law.

2. OBJECTIVES

1. To explain mob violence in Indian society through the concept of collective rage.
2. To ascertain the social, legal, and psychological determinants that facilitate the escalation of mob violence in India.
3. To propose strategies for mitigating mob violence and reinforcing the rule of law.

3. COLLECTIVE RAGE OF THE MOB

Collective Rage within a mob is not merely a product of individual anger; it is a socially constructed phenomenon deeply influenced by socio-economic inequalities, pervasive misinformation, and a significant lack of trust in governing institutions. In India, the manifestations of mob violence frequently reflect and exacerbate entrenched disparities associated with caste, religion, and social standing. These societal factors can transform collective apprehension into a form of public violence perceived as morally justified.

In many instances, individuals hailing from regions that have previously endured similar episodes of mob violence tend to normalize aggressive mob behavior. The collective memory within these communities reinforces the belief that mobs can operate without facing any serious repercussions for their actions. Furthermore, when influential figures—such as political leaders, local elites, or narratives propagated through social media—subtly endorse acts of violence, mobs are more likely to feel socially sanctioned to engage in aggressive behavior. One particularly alarming trigger for collective rage in India has been the unchecked dissemination of rumours and misinformation via platforms such as WhatsApp and other social networks. This has led to horrific acts of lynchings predicated on false allegations of child abduction or theft. For instance, during the Karbi Anglong lynching in Assam in 2018, the rampant spread of false claims regarding child theft incited a large mob to kill two men without basis or justification. Similarly, the Palghar mob lynching in 2020 saw villagers acting on unverified and malicious WhatsApp rumours about organ harvesters, culminating in the brutal attack and murder of three individuals, including two sadhus. These tragic incidents powerfully illustrate how misinformation can rapidly catalyse collective violence with devastating consequences. Social norms and digital politics significantly affect how violent acts are perceived and justified by observers, often making aggressive behavior seem acceptable. (Sahana Udupa, 2018).

The lynching of Tabrez Ansari in Jharkhand provides another disturbing example of how communal suspicion and ingrained biases can incite brutal group attacks against marginalized individuals. In this case, the mob's collective outrage was rooted in shared fears and prejudices. Spurious narratives—ranging from accusations of child lifting, theft, cow slaughter, witchcraft, to immoral behaviour—spread swiftly,

particularly through WhatsApp and local communication networks. These baseless rumours cultivate a climate of fear and moral panic that can rapidly escalate into overwhelming anger directed toward a perceived offender. (Social Legal Information Centre, 2019).

Mobs often act with the intention of "protecting" their group identity. When sentiments associated with caste, religion, or community pride are particularly strong, violence is often perceived as a justified means of defending honour, tradition, or deeply held beliefs, making certain groups particularly vulnerable to violent backlashes. Additionally, when individuals perceive law enforcement and the judiciary as ineffective, corrupt, or indifferent to their grievances, they lose faith in the legal system. This pervasive belief that "justice will not be served" can intensify feelings of rage, prompting crowds to take the law into their own hands. Underlying issues such as poverty, unemployment, land disputes, and systemic social inequality contribute to widespread frustration within communities. This accumulated sense of frustration is often misdirected towards scapegoats, allowing mobs to channel their pent-up anger into acts of violence against perceived threats. In a group dynamic, emotions can spread like wildfire. Fear can swiftly escalate into anger, which may trigger violent actions. Individuals within a mob often experience a loss of personal accountability—an effect known as deindividuation—and may follow the crowd's lead without questioning the morality of their actions. Mobs are inclined to believe that their victims are threats to social order, frequently labelling them as child kidnappers, cow smugglers, or witches. Such beliefs moralize their rage, framing acts of violence as protective rather than criminal. This moral justification further entrenches the cycle of violence and intensifies tensions within and between communities.

4. SOCIO-LEGAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS

Indian society is profoundly influenced by caste and religious identities, which, when politicized, often frame violence as a means of protecting community honor, faith, or tradition. This dynamic leads to the emergence of symbolic "outsiders," which heightens their vulnerability to mob attacks. The rapid spread of misinformation through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and local networks worsens this issue. False accusations—such as child lifting, cow slaughter, and witchcraft—can quickly incite communities to engage in violent actions.

Moreover, disputes over land, employment stress, and poverty contribute to a pervasive sense of frustration, leading mobs to redirect this anger toward individuals or groups serving as scapegoats.

In some areas, vigilantism is becoming normalized, with mob punishment seen as quicker and more effective than traditional legal remedies. Previous incidents that lacked punitive consequences reinforce this behavior. From a legal perspective, the justice system's inefficiencies—characterized by slow investigations, low conviction rates, and delayed trials—diminish public trust, prompting many to believe that legal institutions cannot adequately protect them, thus resorting to self-help justice. Compounding this issue is the weak policing and local authority presence, which allows crowds to gather and act before proper intervention is possible (Menon, 2019). The absence of a specific central anti-lynching law further weakens the legal framework, diminishing both deterrence and the symbolic condemnation of mob violence.

Furthermore, the political landscape plays a critical role; when leaders fail to condemn mob violence vehemently, their silence indirectly legitimizes such behavior and reduces the perceived consequences for offenders.

Emotional contagion in crowds leads to the rapid spread of feelings, with fear often transforming into anger. This shift can create a tense environment where individuals begin to mimic each other's reactions.

As the excitement builds, the initial fear can escalate into collective violent actions, demonstrating how easily crowds can be influenced by shared emotions and the effects of imitation in high-stress situations. In a crowd, individuals often feel anonymous, which reduces personal responsibility and leads to actions they might not take alone. This phenomenon, coupled with moral disengagement, allows the mob to convince itself that the victim deserves punishment, as violence is reframed as justice or a necessary duty. Lastly, social anxiety and frustration are often projected onto a single individual or group, which becomes the default scapegoat for broader societal issues, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence and unrest.

5. SUGGESTIONS

Mob violence rooted in collective rage needed a comprehensive response that addresses social emotions, legal frameworks, and governance structures.

A pivotal element involves enacting robust legal reforms, such as a comprehensive anti-lynching law in India, which would mandate fast-track trials, victim compensation, and witness protection, while holding public officials accountable for negligence to assert that mob justice is intolerable.

Furthermore, enhancing policing through the establishment of rapid response units and community intelligence networks, alongside mandatory protocols for rumor control, can mitigate emotional escalation and ensure swift intervention.

Equally important is the governance accountability of district administrators and police officers for not preventing violence when forewarned. In the realm of digital governance, collaboration with social media platforms is crucial for managing misinformation, which includes flagging harmful content and penalizing those who deliberately spread fake news.

Additionally, public campaigns aimed at improving digital literacy will empower citizens to verify information and recognize manipulative narratives. On a community level, fostering trust through police-citizen forums and intercaste dialogues, alongside establishing local mediation cells for conflict resolution, will promote collective responsibility and emotional regulation.

The integration of civic education addressing law, crowd behavior, and constitutional values at educational institutions, as well as counter-narratives to delegitimize vigilantism, will help shape public perception of justice, reaffirming that it is the courts, not mobs, that should deliver it.

Politically, leaders must adopt a zero-tolerance message towards lynching, while addressing socio-economic grievances, such as land insecurity and welfare access, to diminish the rage that fuels such violence.

Ultimately, an integrated model combining strong legal frameworks, effective information governance, community engagement, emotional education, and just governance is essential, as failing to rebuild institutional legitimacy will only displace violence to other settings.

6. CONCLUSION

Strengthening the rule of law in India requires not only the prosecution of perpetrators of mob violence but also a transformation of the social and emotional conditions that fuel collective anger. This can be achieved through comprehensive legal reform to ensure justice, digital governance for transparency and accountability, community engagement to foster dialogue, psychological education to teach conflict resolution and emotional intelligence, and ethical political practices that promote responsible leadership. By implementing these interconnected strategies, we can mitigate collective rage and cultivate a more peaceful and just society.

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