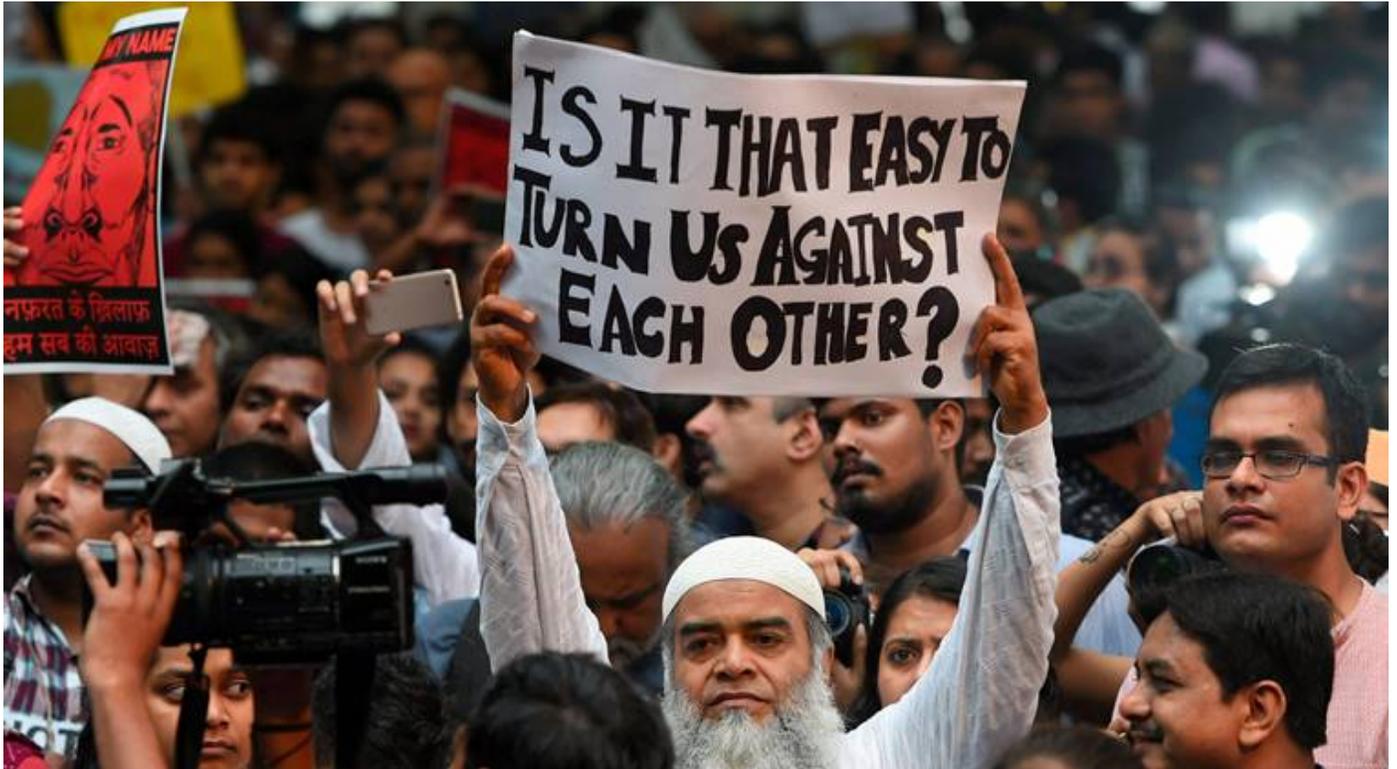


Crime and context

Lynchings draw upon the master narrative of cow protection promoted by the current political elites



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Is India's past, so marked by communal riots, transmuting itself into an era of lynching? Of immense political significance, this question is now squarely in front of us all. How should we answer it? Let us start with some background.

When the NDA regime came to power in 2014, many asked if Hindu-Muslim riots



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would return. Since Independence, especially during 1977-1993, as I statistically demonstrated in my book, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, communal riots, though unevenly spread geographically, had become a common feature of India's national life. But after 1993, though small incidents continued, big riots declined, a pattern broken only twice, first in 2002 in Gujarat and next in September 2013 in Muzaffarnagar. Because of its size and destruction, the latter raised alarms in 2013-14. Moreover, even as it exhilarated many quarters, the rise of [Narendra Modi](#) to power aroused anxiety in other circles.

Responding to the anxiety and using probabilistic reasoning, I argued that big riots were unlikely to come back (IE, October 30, 2014). Of the various reasons, two deserved registration. First, worldwide data show that at higher levels of income, which India has relative to 1993, rioting becomes highly episodic, as opposed to occurring repeatedly. Central tendencies, of course, don't apply to each case, but they are worth noting as correlations.

Second, while Hindu-Muslim polarisation would be in the political interest of the BJP, widespread rioting was not. Riots would be too disruptive of order, likely to upset those who voted for the BJP for economics, governance and Modi's leadership, not for its Hindu nationalist ideology. According to Lokniti data, as much as a fourth of all BJP voters in 2014 did not vote for Hindu nationalism. That was too big an electoral bloc to antagonise via riots.

Thus, instead of riots, I argued, one should expect a standard transmutation of prejudice witnessed elsewhere, too: In particular, communalisation of the state's everyday practices on the one hand and hate crimes committed by citizens on the other. What form hate crimes would take was unclear, but I certainly did not anticipate lynchings. It was too ugly and alarming a prospect. Social science defines hate crimes as mostly one-on-one hate-driven violence; lynchings represent perpetration of mob violence against one person or a few. There are countries where lynching, as a form of collective violence, is common, and has been studied. India was not one such country.

The larger literature points to two categories of lynching. The first aims at restoring routine order via mob violence. Studies of lynching in Indonesia show that until recently, most of it was aimed at punishing theft, hit-and-run accidents, rape, adultery and witchcraft (Bridget Welsh, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, September 2008). Instead of using the police, many Indonesians used mob violence as a disciplining mechanism. It had no ethnic or religious core.

The second category of lynching aims at enforcing a majoritarian ethnic/racial/religious political order. During 1880-1930, especially in the American South, white mobs lynched black Americans if they crossed a certain historically embedded hierarchical boundary (Marilyn K. Howard in *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots*, 2007). In her song, *Strange Fruit*, Billie Holiday immortalised the crushing pain of such violence. Its haunting opening verse was: "*Southern trees bear a strange fruit/ Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze/ Strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree.*"

Billie Holiday - Strange Fruit



Is India going the Indonesian, or the late 19th century American, way? It is unquestionably the latter. To be sure, Muslims are not the only target of lynching. But they are its primary object. Recently constructed datasets on lynching show a qualitative increase in the incidence of lynching after the BJP's rise to power in 2014. The big new issue is not anomic, ordinary criminality, built around traffic deaths, robbery and theft, which India has certainly witnessed, though not as much as Indonesia. The new issue is beef and cattle trade, both explicitly connected to the Hindu nationalist project.

Unlike blacks and whites, Muslims are not racially different from the Hindus. But the more observant Muslims can be easily identified by their dress, as in the case of Junaid Khan; intimate knowledge of where they live can also make mob attacks on Muslims precise, as in Dadri; and while beef eating or cattle

trade in India is not confined to Muslims, they are among the biggest practitioners of both, and can be easily targeted as such, as the killings in Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Haryana show.

Some commentators suggest that routine criminals are the instigators, not Hindu nationalists. This statement may be partly right on the surface, but is awfully wrong at a deeper analytical level. Over the last two decades, the vast research on riots, to which I have been a contributor, and civil wars, whose best interpreter is Stathis N. Kalyvas (Yale University), has repeatedly argued that routine criminality, calculations and jealousies have often been inserted into the master narrative of riots and civil wars.

Correspondingly, if the master narrative of cow protection were not so systematically promoted by the current Indian political elite, regular criminals would not have that narrative to plug into. The larger ideological ecosystem enables them to go rampant.

Prime Minister Modi has spoken against lynchings only twice thus far. His social base also knows that he picked Yogi Adityanath as UP's chief minister. Adityanath created the Hindu Yuva Vahini, a vigilante force; led the campaign against "love jihad"; and formed "anti Romeo" youth squads. How would, then, Modi's base read his recent anti-lynching statement? The answers would be available soon.

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