

A Continuum of Post-Truth Phenomenon: A Study of the Karbi Anglong Mob Lynching in Assam

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Abstract

Given the recent spate of mob violence in India, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of such mobilisations and the ways in which social media, as a purveyor of post-truth narratives, frames and legitimises such actions. Taking the case study of the Karbi Anglong mob-violence of Assam on 8 June 2018, the essay will analyse how the phenomenon of “post-truth” follows a path of continuum. That is, while the prevalence of a “post-truth” may incite violence, the discussion around the violence also often revolves around the discourse of post-truth. Unlike the conventional understanding of post-truth as a “performance by the powerful”, this essay will attempt to reveal how the source/instigator of post-truths may shift to include anonymous individuals who gain power through social media. Through an analysis of media reports and the larger public discourse on the Karbi Anglong lynching incident, the paper will deal with the inter-linkages between social media, post-truths, and mob-violence.

Keywords: post-truth, social media, mob lynching, Karbi Anglong, Assam

Introduction

The term “post-truth” refers to situations where we tamper with the truth and “routinise dishonesty” in a way that apart from “truth” and “lies” now, there exists another category of “ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie” (Keyes 2004: 16). It was after Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States in 2016 that the term “post-truth” was declared the “Word of the Year” by the Oxford English Dictionary. It is believed that Trump won the election not based on facts but an appeal to emotions and personal beliefs. The large-scale discarding of objective facts was witnessed for the first time in a manner that stunned the entire world. Interestingly, the situation in India was, and is still, not much different. The cult status of our political leaders; work precisely on these emotional pleas where the public is wooed to believe some of their statements as *the* truth. Apart from the function of

the charisma of a particular individual in position, the ever-increasing power of the media (including social media) also plays an integral role in dissipating post-truth in our everyday lives. Therefore, the politics of developing post-truth claims rely heavily on journalistic devices that corroborate those claims along with psychological mechanisms that use emotions and sentiments to persuade the public. The social construction of post-truth is blatantly evident in the Indian context, which makes this essay quite relevant for our time. The environment of post-truth has several political, social, and economic implications, one among them being mob-violence. For instance, the Karbi Anglong's mob lynching of Nilotpal Das and Abhijeet Nath on 8 June 2018, on which this essay is based, was a consequence of fake news/rumours being circulated on WhatsApp about them being "child-lifters". Hence, this essay will attempt to essentially draw this link between post-truth and mob violence.

Mob Lynching: How Has It Become a Phenomena?

Alex Alvarez and Ronet Bachman (2008: 224) have defined mob lynching as "a type of collective violence in which a group of individuals circumvent the law and punish individuals for real or imagined crimes". After the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the 1860s, extra-judicial killings of African Americans by White Southerners became common, and so did lynching (Alvarez and Bachman 2008: 226). This historical context affirms the fact that lynching often has a social, economic, or political goal.

In contemporary India, mob lynching has become a common phenomenon since the last decade. Visuals of men being beaten up by an unruly mob are routinely visible. Such forms of barbaric violence make it difficult to comprehend the level of atrocities that humans can bestow upon others. Over the past six years, mob lynching has increased at a tremendous rate. An *IndiaSpend* analysis of news reports of mob violence across India has shown 4.5 times rise in attacks and a two-fold rise in deaths from 2017 to 2018 (Saldanha, Rajput, and Hazare 2018). In a report compiled by *The Quint*, a total of 113 people have been lynched from 2015 to 2019.¹ The first incident of lynching that was reported in national media and garnered widespread attention was the Dadri mob lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in September 2015. Largely citing the reason for cow-slaughter, Akhlaq was dragged from his house by a mob and killed in cold blood among the gaping spectators (Kumar 2017). This pattern of "cow vigilante" killings, targeting marginalised communities like the Muslims and the Dalits for cow slaughter, has become particularly dreadful.

¹ <https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/lynching-in-india/> [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

Between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 people, including 36 Muslims, were killed in such attacks. In fact, the commonality of such incidents prevents us from belittling or ignoring this phenomenon. Accordingly, the Supreme Court of India issued a series of preventive and punitive directives in July 2018 to address lynchings, such as fast-track courts, victim compensation system, and designation of police officers in every district to prevent mob violence (*Human Rights Watch* 2019). Currently, only three states of India—Manipur, West Bengal, and Rajasthan—have enacted laws against mob lynching (Deswal 2020). Given the communal pattern of such violence, lynching is often considered a corollary of religious fanaticism. However, apart from religion, several other factors like ethnicity and nationality may also induce such forms of violence which require further introspection. Penetration of social media and the widespread apathy of both politicians and the common masses have multiplied such crimes manifold.

Interestingly, some of the events of mob lynching are not the direct effect of “performance by the powerful” but rather set ablaze by the common men. The Karbi Anglong mob lynching of June 2018 points precisely toward this form of post-truth play where the perpetrators belonged to a marginalised ethnic community while the victims belonged to a middle-class family from an urban cosmopolitan city of Assam. In theories of collective violence, while “violence ‘from the bottom up’ by socially subordinate groups tends to be portrayed as reasonable and possibly even worthy of sympathetic understanding, that ‘from the top down’ by dominant or majority groups against minorities, the poor, or members of labor movements, is not” (Roche 1996: 99). However, it is important to theorise and understand the political economy of even “bottom-up” violence and develop a broader understanding of the issue.

Based on textual analysis of news reports and social media (Facebook) posts and WhatsApp forwards that were published in the aftermath of the killings, the broader public discourse on the incident will be brought to the fore. Accordingly, through a case study of the Karbi Anglong mob lynching incident in Assam, this essay will attempt to locate such violence within the purview of social media and the discourse of post-truth. By exploring what happened before and after the incident, the connection between post-truth, social media, and mob violence will be drawn.

Karbi Anglong: A District in the Margins?

Before examining the lynching of June 2018 in detail, it is important to first explore the district of Karbi Anglong to understand the socio-political history of the district and its people itself. Such

exploration will help us to contextualise the violence within the space of the district (See Figure 1).

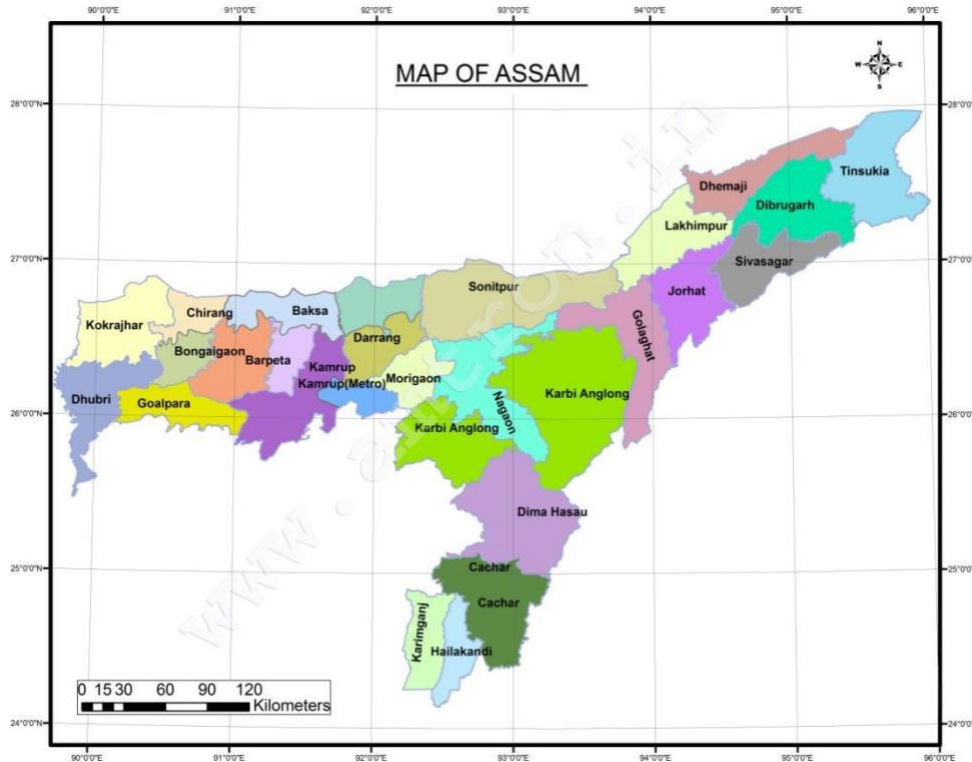


Figure 1: District map of Assam

Source: assam.gov.in/assam-maps

Situated in central Assam, Karbi Anglong is the largest district in the state of Assam. While the Karbi community forms the majority group in the district, several other ethnic communities (earlier known as “hill tribes”) reside in the district, including Karbis, Dimasas, Bodos, Kukis, Tiwas, Garos, etc. The formation of the Karbi Anglong district has a long history of struggle among the people residing in the area. Before British colonisation, the hill tribes of Northeast India neither belonged to India nor Assam. They managed to maintain their independent identity. It was after the colonisation of the whole of Northeast that the British separated the hill tribes from the plainsmen of Assam under the Government of India Act of 1935 (Hussain 1987: 1329). According to P. K. Nath (2014: 125), “Under the colonial scheme of classifying peoples and geographies, the Karbi settlements were initially subjected under the policy of *Inner Line Permit* in 1873 and finally segregated as *Partially Excluded Areas* in 1935.” The Government of Assam had no jurisdiction over

these excluded areas which were administered under the special power of the governor (Hussain 1987: 1329). The advent of Christian missionaries into the Karbi hills during the latter part of the nineteenth century led to the rise of a small minority of educated tribal people who led social and political change in their society. These educated elites began to realise the “underdevelopment” and “backwardness” that is characteristic of the region. Hence, the Karbis eventually began to raise demands for a separate district. Ultimately in 1951, a separate district under the name of the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was established. Later in 1970, this district was bifurcated into Mikir Hills and the North Cachar districts. Following this bifurcation, in 1976 the Mikir Hills district was renamed Karbi Anglong. In accordance with the 1935 Act, the Indian Constitution, after Independence, provided each hill district an autonomous district council with large autonomous powers under the 6th Schedule (Hussain 1987: 1329).² Under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution, Karbi Anglong is currently administered by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

However, the demands did not stop at the separate district being formed. Gradually demands for a separate state began to emerge. The rise in Assamese sub-nationalistic tendencies since the middle of the nineteenth century proved to be an important factor in determining the political history of Karbi Anglong. Assamese sub-nationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century with the assertion to establish Assamese language and culture as distinctive and autonomous, against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal (Baruah 2005: 127). This project of micro-nationalism got exacerbated with Assam finding itself in a turbulent relationship with Bangladeshi immigrants since the partition. Identity crises, resource over-use, alienation, and economic concerns ultimately paved the way for increased regionalism and the rise of insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that started fighting for an immigrant-free Assam (Hazarika 2000). Neglect from the centre and its location at the periphery also kept these micro-nationalist sentiments alive. These sub-nationalist practices led to several homogenising practices like the introduction of the Language Bill in 1960 that established Assamese as the state language. With policies such as this, the ethnic community in Assam began to gradually feel marginalised (given that they adhered to completely different languages and

² Passed by the Constituent Assembly in 1949, the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution helps the tribal population of the country to maintain their autonomy. This autonomy is provided through the constitution of Autonomous District Councils (ADC) that are empowered with civil and judicial powers.

cultures and followed diverse ethnic practices). Therefore, demand for a separate hill state began to rise in the Karbi Anglong district around the 1980s.

Apart from Assamese hegemony, the Karbi community also started recognising the inadequacies of the 6th Schedule. The KAAC, for instance, has failed in developmental efforts. Along with a lack of transparency and accountability in the functioning of KAAC, even the limited budgets prepared by them are seldom met (Sharma 2016). These issues too led to a demand for a separate state among Karbis (although the non-Karbi dominated areas of the district have led several protests against separate statehood). Along with democratic movements, armed struggle also emerged in Karbi Anglong with the formation of Karbi National Volunteers and Karbi People's Force in 1994. Eventually, they entered a ceasefire with the Indian government in 2002 and laid down their weapons. Nonetheless, a section from them, called the Karbi People's Liberation Tigers (KPLF), was formed in 2010 to keep the armed struggle for a separate state going (Sharma 2016). Interestingly, the other ethnic groups living in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts formed their own insurgent groups leading to several ethnic clashes happening within the district as well. For instance, several clashes happened between Karbis and Kukis between October 2003 and March 2004, along with similar clashes ensuing between Karbis and Dimasas in 2005 (Nath 2014). As Nath (2014: 148) argues, "The present political scenario in this hill district of Assam is marked by fragmented activities, both violent and non-violent, by various groups of this kind which are multiplying in number."

Apart from such political instability, the remote areas of Karbi Anglong lack access to even basic amenities like health, education, connectivity and have an extremely slow rate of development (Sharma 2016). As per the 2011 Census, only 73 percent of the population was literate.³ Apart from that, according to the Assam Human Development Report of 2014, the value of the Employment and Livelihood Quality Index (that considers employment and income parameters to reflect on the sustainability of livelihoods) is one of the lowest in Karbi Anglong i.e. 0.09. In fact, it has been observed that the EQLI has a strong negative correlation with the proportion of the population being SC/ST in a particular area (which is also the case with Karbi Anglong, given the majority of hill tribes belong to the category of Scheduled Tribes (ST)). Karbi Anglong is also one of the districts with the highest rates of poverty, standing at 42.5 percent.⁴

³ https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/assam/Paper-1-I.pdf [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

⁴ <https://sita.assam.gov.in/portlets/assam-human-development-report-0> [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

It is within such a socio-economic and political scenario that we need to locate the 2018 incident of mob lynching in Karbi Anglong. The identity conflict in the region, the lack of education, and the “tribal” versus “non-tribal” dynamic are some of the pre-conditions leading to lynching. As written by Sampurna Bordoloi and Pinak Pani Dutta, it is as if the “spectre of the ‘other’ is veritably created to lynch” (Bordoloi and Datta 2018). One must understand that the rumours of child-lifting might essentially be a function of misrecognition or threat that the tribal population feels towards an “outsider”.

It is also important to mention that this isn’t the first instance of mob lynching in Karbi Anglong. Jhankar Saikia, a 16-year-old college student, was similarly lynched in front of his father by a few auto-rickshaw drivers after they refused to pay INR 30 instead of the regular fare of INR 20 in 2013. It is only in February 2020 that 12 people of the 16 accused have been convicted and awarded life imprisonment for the same (Nath 2020). The history of delayed justice, therefore, might also lead to the perpetration of similar events. Hence, as suggested by Miguel Das Queah, a Guwahati-based child rights activist, “Ghettoisation of the communities, fear of the outsiders and the real issue of trafficking of children may have all contributed to the lynching” (Naqvi 2018).

A Brief Insight into the Event of 8 June 2018

On 8 June 2018, two Assamese youth, Nilotpal Das and Abhijeet Nath, travelled from the city of Guwahati to Kangthilangso waterfalls in Karbi Anglong. News reports later conveyed that the two had gone to enjoy a peaceful evening amidst beautiful nature and collect some ornamental fish. Apparently, while in their adventure, a young man from the Panjuri Kachari village identified them as *xopadhora*⁵ or child-lifters. There were rumours doing rounds for the past couple of weeks in the area that five child-lifters or *phankodongs*, the Karbi term for child-lifters, from Bihar were on a kidnapping spree and have already attacked a few children in the district capital of Diphu (Saikia 2018). Not completely baseless, government records reveal that Karbi Anglong accounts for one of the highest cases of child trafficking in Assam, which itself has routinely recorded the highest number of child and women trafficking cases in India (Baruah 2018). Accordingly, the young man informed others in the village to stop their car and attack them. Based on WhatsApp forwards and Facebook posts, a mob of around 200 people gathered in the area and stopped their black Scorpio

⁵ *Xopadhora* is a mythical character that figures in Assamese folk tales and it literally means “to gag and kidnap” in English. Apart from being in the folktales, the character was often used in the day-to-day conversations to generate fear among children and keep them away from strangers. Hence, it essentially began to be understood as “child-lifters”.

car. After attacking their car, they pulled both Das and Nath out and brutally thrashed and killed them (Naqvi 2018). A senior police official later remarked that two musical instruments were found in the car, both of which might have been alien to the village people. The video of the lynching went viral on social media right after the incident, which, along with the violence, also showed Das pleading for mercy the whole time.

Rumour and Its Corollaries

Based on how the event unfolded, there is a need to understand the social function of rumour in a critical way. Until quite some time, the story remained that the incident was sparked by WhatsApp rumours (that were in circulation for a few months in 2018 up to the time of the lynching) of child-lifters (xopadhora) roaming in the area. The rumours were largely precautionary and centred around how xopadhoras look, what do they do, when do they emerge during the day, among others. The tales of xopadhora often exist within a “ghastly imagination”. Quintessentially male and belonging to a different community than the host community, a xopadhora is believed to have long braided hair and large shining eyes and kidnap children. Coincidentally, one of the victims of this lynching, with his Rastafarian dreadlocks, aligned perfectly with the “imagined” image of the xopadhora. This immediately marked him out as the “other”, ultimately leading the mob to identify the youth as child-lifter.

Here, one can gauge the power of rumours within the overarching reach of social media. It also shows how rumours and myths can come together to create deadly possibilities. Mythical imaginations then tend to get a renewed significance within a digital environment spewing hate and uncertainties. As Ralph Keyes (2004: 153) has rightly suggested, “Human beings have always used myths to counter anxiety, but the internet expands exponentially our ability to disseminate fables and do so fast.” Hence the result is, as Anne P. Mintz calls, an “age of misinformation” (cited in Keyes 2004: 152). In this age of misinformation, when a rumour is circulated as “truth” via social media, it may result in the eruption of violence. This has been seen in many other instances like the “Northeastern exodus” of 2012 when thousands of people from Northeast India left from Bangalore following fake social media posts insinuating violence against them (Srivatsa and Kurup 2012), or the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 triggered by fake videos circulating on social

media.⁶ In fact, a wave of mob attacks and lynching occurred in 2017 and 2018 based on “fake news” of child abductions circulated via WhatsApp (IndiaSpend 2018). These lies/rumours shared on social media platforms with *intent* can easily take the shape of post-truth and “fan a medieval barbarity within us” (Mitra 2018). Hence, it is especially important to tackle the issue of rumour in the world of post-truth where “rumour” often equals “truth”. Since a mob may revel in anonymity and get empowered by this anonymity, it becomes imperative to trace the source that sets off a mob. In other words, the origin of inflammatory messages and the motivation behind them must be studied (Anima 2018).

In this case of “constructing the other” one can realise how deviation from ideas of “normalcy”, in terms of appearance, can also result in such grievous occurrences. However, it is worth noting that these “norms of appearance” come into play largely through news and social media. Thus, we can see how post-truth often feeds on the “normalcy” quotient and stems from an attack on “cultural deviance”. “Collective violence, then, is commonly a moralistic response to deviant behaviour” such that it often gets termed as “popular justice” (Roche 1996: 98). Can this violence be attributed to both social media as well as circulation of particular discourses through other facets of the media?

Social Media and Anonymity

As rumours were the primary reason for the incident, we must consider who or how these started in the first place. Popular understanding of post-truth often attributes its genesis to “modern institutions of truth-telling (the courts, the press, universities, and laboratories) which no longer serve as universally acknowledged store of reliable knowledge” (Rider and Peters 2018: 5). However, lack of education, poverty, sensationalised news, and gullibility of citizens with excess information also leads to post-truth conditions being promulgated by ordinary citizens belonging to all strata of the society. This is especially true now when social media has become one of the major players in the contemporary political economy that guarantees anonymity. It has been found that social media has been widely used in the dissemination of misinformation in India. With over 200 million registered WhatsApp users and 250 million registered Facebook users, the situation becomes even more distressing (Gupta 2019: 154).

⁶ The fake video that was found instrumental in spreading the violence claimed to depict the lynching of two Jat (a dominant caste group of North India) boys by a Muslim mob in Kawal village, Uttar Pradesh. Later, the video was found to be an old one shot in Pakistan (see Trivedi 2019).

The traditional gatekeepers of information flow, which included editors of newspapers, radio, and television, are no longer present in the new media technologies. As a result, WhatsApp messaging services have frequently been the cause of several instances of mob violence. “Lynching incidents sparked by ‘WhatsApp forwards and messages’ are so common that the term ‘WhatsApp Lynching’ is now used to collectively refer to such incidents” (Gupta 2019: 168). The primary cause for this is anonymity and a lack of information regarding the source of a particular message. Interestingly, though, this anonymity does not work in a vacuum but functions precisely because the anonymous individuals are aware of other anonymous individuals who will help them reach their cause. In other words, the possibility of “networked anonymity”, a concept introduced by Tzlil Sharon and Nicholas John (2018), enhances the use of social media as a purveyor of post-truth politics. According to them, networked anonymity “account for the ways that anonymous actors imagine one another as ‘someone, rather than as an unknown ‘anyone’” (Sharon and John 2018 4177). It is the existence of familiarity within the veil of anonymity that post-truth politics survives and sustains itself. As Alfred Hermida (2012: 311) argues, social media technologies “empower users to interact with each other, and participate and collaborate in the making of media, rather than just consuming media”. The difference between producers and consumers is fast narrowing in this digital environment and post-truth narratives feed on this contracting gap. Although WhatsApp limited its forwarding of messages to five chats at a time in July 2018 to curb rumours leading to lynching (Pathak 2018)⁷, not much has been achieved even after that. Given that the source remains anonymous still, fake news and rumours continue to circulate in a digitally mediated world.

Anonymous instigators in the world of social media raise several other complexities. Such incidents turn the very idea of post-truth as “performance by the powerful” on its head, while still perpetuating violence. Post-truth is, therefore, also a weapon for the marginalised to draw attention and take justice onto their hands, which may prove deadly. Putting up the video on social media by the perpetrators themselves and hence, *claiming* the brutality, has shown how the perpetrators do not deny their responsibility in the incident. Such claims have also been possible due to the opportunity of creating fake accounts on social media platforms. Thus, it is important to theorise post-truth from the perspective of the “voice-less” to prevent such kinds of violence in the future.

⁷ This limitation is different in India than the rest of the world. While one can forward messages to up to 20 chats globally, in India, it is limited to five.

Violent Visuals: An Addition to the Post-truth Narrative

The very fact that the video of the mob attack of Karbi Anglong went viral on social media right after the incident shows how “violent video sharing”, which is also a violent act, has become a means to address justice and hence, showcase the “truth”. In the early twentieth century, literary and political texts by Black Americans often expressed their fear by portraying lynching in graphic ways (McTaggart 2014: 793–4). In these visual depictions, the people who support the lynch mobs (in this case the mute spectators and policeman present at the scene) are seen to enjoy voyeuristic pleasure, re-affirming the atrocity and complacency of the mob. Although visuals are considered necessary to represent the heinous crimes as closely as possible, one must understand that these photographs and videos are much more than just an aesthetic element. They help in telling stories in a way that might overpower all other variations in a narrative. It is imperative to pay attention to the way the visuals are utilised by the mainstream media in framing these stories to “manufacture consent” (Herman and Chomsky 1988) among the public. Almost all the news channels that were covering the lynching were constantly playing this video in the background to repeatedly ‘confirm’ the occurrence of the incident (Prag News 2018). Such forms of reiteration might also be a way to imprint the Karbi Anglong lynching in the “national collective memory” (Kurian 2015: 25). This visual was also shared widely by social media users through WhatsApp and Facebook. Repeated watching also leads to a kind of “owning” of the victims to empathise with them. As written by Jenni and Loewenstein, “identifiable victims seem to produce a greater empathetic response, accompanied by greater willingness to make personal sacrifices to provide aid” (cited in Kurian 2015: 26). The repeat telecast of the lynching accompanied by a close focus on the faces of the perpetrators as well as the victims, also aided in confirming the stereotypes of the tribal perpetrators here as “wild” and “barbaric”. The tone of the news anchors too unambiguously expressed their judgement (Prag News 2018).⁸ What does this whole fiasco tell us about the circulation and consumption of violence in television as well as social media? In the post-truth environment, it is crucial to consider how visuals of brutality may operate in critical ways to keep the post-truth continuum running, by not letting the appeals to emotion subside in the public discourse.

Lynching and the Question of Identity

⁸ In this news announcement of lynching at Prag News (a popular Assamese news channel), the anchor’s tone reek of disappointment, shock, and judgement. Words like “animalistic” and “barbaric” are a part of the bulletin.

Given the socio-political history of the region, the threat of such post-truth mechanisms became almost immediately imminent. Questions of ethnic identity eventually started getting tied to this event of mob lynching. Several studies have looked at the connection between rumours and ethnic violence. In a 2009 study by Ravi Bhavnani, Michael G. Findley, and James H. Kuklinski, they argue that rumours are a prerequisite to ethnic violence and violence-promoting rumours are often similar across time and contexts. They note that such rumours are, “extreme and threaten individuals through their group identities” (Bhavani, Findley, and Kuklinski 2009: 877).

Such an explanation can be linked to the Karbi Anglong lynching as this violence has also been tagged as “ethnic” in its epistemology by both news media as well as social media discourses. It is the socio-political construction of the discourse around this lynching that identity markers began to be associated with all those involved. In the viral video of the lynching, one of the victims is seen pleading for his life by saying “*Moi Axomia boi*” [I am an Assamese]. This phrase was repeatedly brought to focus by the media such that a binary between “us” and “them” was constructed. The narrative, “How was an ‘Assamese’ killed within Assam?”, became the dominant narrative in discussions among the public. Therefore, this act of lynching was increasingly viewed as an act of ethnic conflict by many in Assam. The protest marches held in Guwahati after the incident also saw similar placards hinting at the question of Assamese identity (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Thousands of Protesters in Guwahati on 10 June 2018

Source: <https://scroll.in/latest/882130/assam-protests-in-guwahati-against-lynching-of-two-men-on-suspicion-that-they-were-kidnappers> [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

In the picture above, the placard says, “I am an Assamese. My father’s name is Gopal Das and my mother’s name is Radhika Das”, the very words that one of the victims kept on uttering to save himself from the mob. Re-iterating the exact phrase within the space of a protest march has a symbolic value of insinuating the “ethnic clash” narrative that was being established through media technologies and everyday conversations. A WhatsApp group called “*Aami Axomiya*” [We Are Assamese] was formed with nearly 1,000 participants to gather people for the protest (Agarwala and Saha 2018), which in itself is exclusionary in character. It is also important to pay heed to the “everyday” while talking about post-truth contexts. It is through the medium of everyday conversations that identities get solidified and discourses tend to form. Karen Tracy and Jessica Robles have looked at this link between everyday talk and identity work. They define “identity work” as the “process through which talk makes available to participants and observers who the people doing the talking must be” (Tracy and Robles 2013: 7). So, through the person’s choice of how to talk, identity work is accomplished. In several of my conversations with Assamese people in Guwahati city after the incident, I could observe a hyper-nationalist Assamese identity being hailed while condemning the incident. This tendency to bring in markers of ethnicity in some cases while religion in others, can spark off rumours that may prove fatalistic in nature.

Aditya Sharma has aptly pointed out how the “act” of this lynching gets social significance by associating “identity” to it. With the predominance of identity markers that separate “us” versus “them”, the act of lynching stands to become a “slayer of ‘x’ and the slain of ‘y’” (Sharma 2018). Rumours and mob mentality benefit most from such ascription. Connecting one’s identity to either the victim or the perpetrator also results in stereotyping the entire community to which either belongs. This, in turn, can easily fuel other acts of violence rather than bring justice to the original act of violence. For instance, after the news of the Karbi Anglong lynching became public, several Assamese youths sought to seek “revenge” by targeting the “perpetrator community”. According to an *Outlook* report on 11 June 2018, a group of youngsters also went “live” on Facebook as they drove through the town of Nagaon in Assam looking for Karbi and Bodo people (Bordoloi 2018). Social media was flooded with posts that started abusing and stereotyping the Karbis as *jungles* [wild]. An analysis of Facebook posts and the comments therein, showcases a sense of “shared blame” that implicated the Karbi community as a whole, as the incident happened in the district

of Karbi Anglong (The perpetrators, however, included people from both the Karbi and Bodo communities) (see Figures 3 and 4). In Figure 3, a screenshot from a Facebook post, the first comment reads, “They look like drug addicts, I have heard that many people in Karbi Anglong are drug addicts because drugs are cheaply available in the form of tablets.”



Figure 3: Screenshot from Facebook post

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/guwahatipus/posts/1807553632643741>



Figure 4: Screenshot from Facebook post

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/guwahatipus/posts/1807553632643741>

Such comments describing the perpetrators lead to a publicly shaming of the community in social media platforms. Bringing in the “tribal versus non-tribal” rhetoric also creates divisions within various communities in Assam. Such incidents of “community shame” bring forth an identity politics that is re-moulded with changing circumstances (see Figure 3).

Therefore, although Keyes (2004) has described “community” as making dissembling difficult, this incident reveals something quite different. In the world of social media, the community as a whole can often get entrenched in the discourse of post-truth and make mob violence possible. In this case of lynching too, the community did not lead to any deterrence in the lynching and rather gave in to the rumours operating in this post-truth environment where social media dominates. In fact, the sense of shared community values, which was responsible for the lynching, was later re-emphasised while talking about the incident on different media platforms.

Media and Post-truth

According to Ralph Keyes, media is one of the most important forums through which the post-truth condition may dissipate. He argues, “With its insatiable appetite for colourful copy and high-profile writers, the media are a primary enabler of post-truthfulness” (Keyes 2004: 124). Through an analysis of news reports and social media posts, it is evident that the narratives circulating in the media regarding the *why* of the incident have been extremely varied. Some have spoken of a political motive to incite ethnic violence between the Karbis and so-called “mainstream” Assamese people while some others argue that the killings happened as the duo got an inkling of the illegal granite smuggling of Karbi Anglong, involving several political personalities (see Figure 5).

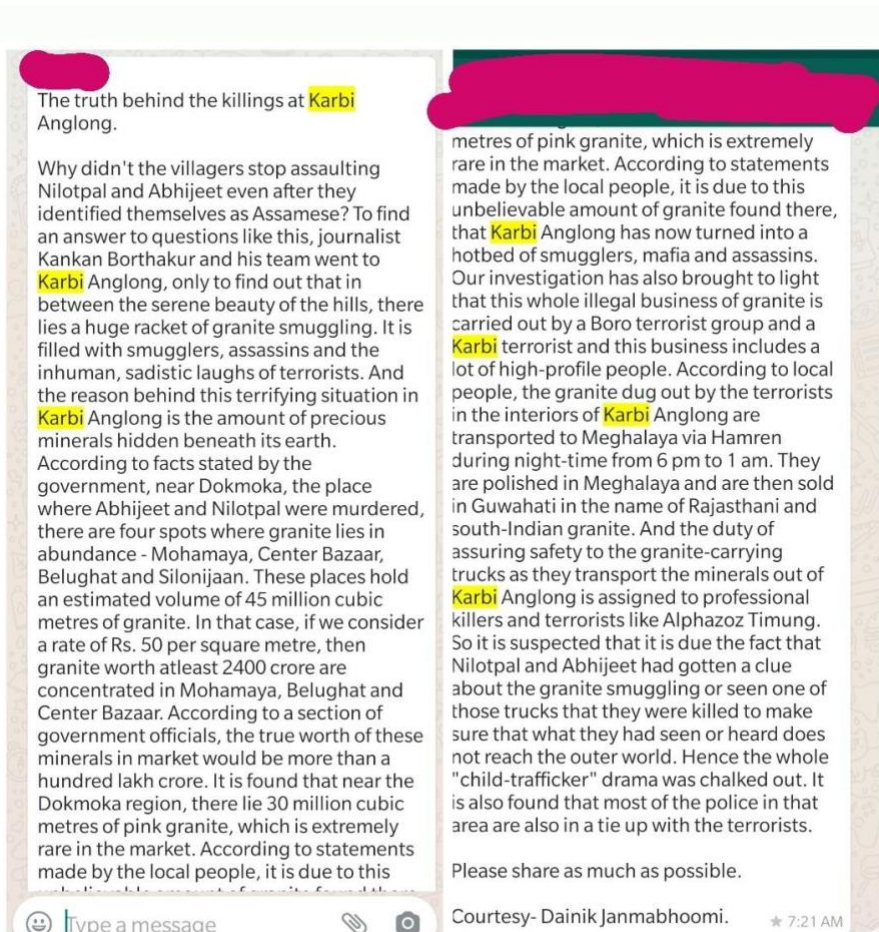


Figure 5: Screenshot of a WhatsApp message doing rounds during that period

Source: WhatsApp.

This news was fuelled by the presence of a policeman in the viral video where he was seen taking video of the lynching rather than trying to stop the violence. In the WhatsApp message shown above, there are details of such a syndicate and the source given is of *Dainik Janambhoomi*, an Assamese daily. Another news report suggested that Alphajoz Taimung, the principal accused in the mob attack, had a fight with the men in the car near the waterfall and stoned their car before calling in the villagers for help (Choudhury 2018). Despite these speculations, media reports on the issue often start with the words, "Truth behind the Karbi Anglong incident". Such an emphasis on the term "truth" shows that there is a re-assertion by various groups to establish certain plausible reasons as *the* truth. What is the reality though? "Reality", as it were to mean in a situation like this, becomes extremely important. To consider "truth" as a social construct from a post-modernist perspective does not give us the right to take away justice that only "objective facts" can sometimes provide. As Jeff Malpas (1992: 295) writes:

Post-modern abandonment of truth...is not itself essentially relativistic. The post-modern reaction is more radical than this. It is a crucial mistake to treat post-modern truth as relativised truth. The mistake is in the very idea of such a thing as “post-modern truth”. The post-modern reaction does not relativise truth, for that suggests that there is a notion there to be relativised. Instead, it rejects the very possibility of the notion.

In other words, post-modernists believe that there is no notion of “truth”. What is present is a play of power, discourse, and meaning. In this power-play, we must, therefore, look for “deliberate falsehoods propagated consciously with intent to deceive” (Keyes 2004: 103). That is, the eruption of violence does not necessarily take away the “post” from post-truth. Speculations continue to thrive in this socially mediated world. That is, information disseminated through social media and those broadcasted in news media tend to go hand-in-hand. Both assist one another in formulating news and transferring information to the citizens. It is this “double-trap” that helps spread fake news resulting in deadly consequences. As Hermida (2012: 309) argues:

Powerful digital communication tools, often identified by the catch-all phrase of social media, are transforming the way media is gathered, disseminated, and consumed. A generation of Internet technologies, collectively described as Web 2.0, has facilitated the involvement of citizens in the observation, selection, filtering, distribution, and interpretation of events. It has become commonplace for the citizens caught up in the news to provide the first accounts, images, and video of events unfolding around them, sharing their media on services such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

The politics of post-truth, therefore, emerge and sustain due to the socio-political environment within which we live making it thrive within a circle of continuum.

Conclusion

To conclude, the essay has attempted to bring forth how the Karbi Anglong mob-lynching incident was sparked by rumours on social media. Trying to provide a basis for the rumours (in terms of the socio-political scenario) before the lynching, the essay has shown that these rumours still run profusely in the post-truth environment, even after the lynching. In other words, the occurrence of the violence has not been able to do away with post-truth politics as numerous speculations continued on the incident for a long time. So, the question that needs answering is, where do we

seek justice? By repressing the former or solving the latter or both? As Nandana Dutta argued, it is only in the narrative existence within people's consciousness that any event becomes accessible. That is, any event becomes accessible to us based on how it is mediated in particular ways by particular individuals, such that the reality might sometimes get lost. With the multiple narratives that have emerged after the Karbi Anglong lynching, speculations remain high. Social media adds fuel to these speculations resulting in a continuum of post-truth phenomena. This is a very perilous situation to be in where the media and the public become both the victims as well as the instigators of this culture. To remove ourselves from this conundrum, it is imperative to place stricter policies on digital sharing, increase quality education among people so that one can comprehend the difference between "real" and "fake"⁹, improve the legal machinery to quite an extent, and make media more and more ethical. As Petar Jandric (2018: 109) points out:

Post-truth ignores truth at all levels: data is falsified, information is misprocessed and knowledge is distorted. Post-truth data, post-truth information and post-truth knowledge inevitably lead to post-truth wisdom... However, wisdom provides guidelines for human behaviour—it looks straight into the future. Therefore, post-truth is a poisonous public pedagogy oriented towards raising future generations of people with distorted worldviews, opinions and ethical judgements.

Now that we are aware of how a post-truth condition can result in real violence, we must be wary of such situations. It is important to understand that post-truth does not operate in a social vacuum. Recognising these situations is an important task at hand and given the current political climate, we can expect a surge in such post-truth claims which needs to be strategically dealt with for a better future.

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⁹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2019/11/11/whatsapp-vigilantes-an-exploration-of-citizen-reception-and-circulation-of-whatsapp-misinformation-linked-to-mob-violence-in-india/>

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