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Research Article

Lynching as a Form of Informal Justice: A Sociological Study of Power and Fear in India

Anurag Bharat

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Science, M K Ponda College of Business and Management, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: *Anurag Bharat

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Abstract

Lynching in contemporary India has increasingly emerged as a form of informal justice wherein collective violence replaces institutional legal mechanisms. This study examines lynching through a sociological lens to understand how power relations, collective fear, and weakened trust in formal authority contribute to the legitimisation of mob violence. Drawing upon Émile Durkheim's concept of collective conscience, the paper argues that lynching reflects distorted forms of social solidarity where moral norms are enforced through violence rather than law. Max Weber's theory of authority and legitimacy is employed to analyse how mobs assume coercive power in contexts where the state's monopoly over legitimate violence is perceived to be ineffective. Additionally, Stanley Cohen's Moral Panic Theory helps explain how rumours, media narratives, and perceived threats generate fear that mobilises collective action against targeted individuals or groups. The study also engages with Michel Foucault's ideas on power and punishment, highlighting how lynching functions as a public spectacle of discipline and social control. Using secondary data, case studies, and sociological literature, the paper reveals that lynching disproportionately affects marginalised communities and erodes democratic values, social trust, and the rule of law. The study concludes that lynching is not merely spontaneous violence but a socially constructed practice rooted in power hierarchies and collective anxieties, necessitating urgent institutional and social interventions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Concept of Lynching and Informal Justice

Lynching refers to acts of collective violence in which a mob punishes an individual or group without legal sanction, often in the name of justice, morality, or social order. Sociologically, lynching can be understood as a form of informal justice—a system where communities enforce norms outside formal legal institutions. Émile Durkheim argued that punishment reflects the collective conscience of society; however, when such conscience becomes distorted, punishment may take violent and extra-legal forms. In this sense, lynching represents a breakdown of institutional justice and the rise of coercive community control. As B.R. Ambedkar warned, “Law and order are the medicine of the body politic and when the body politic gets sick, medicine must be administered.” Lynching thus signifies a society where this medicine is deliberately bypassed.

Contemporary Relevance in Indian Society

In recent years, India has witnessed a disturbing increase in lynching incidents related to religion, caste, cattle protection, and rumors spread through social media. These acts reveal deep-rooted anxieties, identity politics, and failures of governance. Ramachandra Guha observes that democracy weakens when “majority sentiment begins to replace constitutional morality.” Similarly, Ashis Nandy argues that violence becomes socially acceptable when cultural emotions overpower rational institutions. Lynching today is not merely criminal violence but a socio-political phenomenon embedded in power relations, communal narratives, and moral policing, making it highly relevant for sociological inquiry.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale of this study lies in understanding lynching beyond legal definitions and criminal statistics. While law treats lynching as murder, sociology seeks to uncover the social forces, fears, and power structures that normalise such violence. Drawing from Max Weber’s concept of legitimate authority, this study explores how mobs claim moral legitimacy in the absence—or perceived failure—of state authority. Indian sociologist Andre Béteille emphasises that inequality and hierarchy intensify social conflict when not mediated by strong institutions. Therefore, examining lynching sociologically helps reveal how informal justice thrives in unequal societies where trust in law is fragile.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is limited to analysing lynching in India through secondary sources such as reports, academic literature, and documented case studies. It focuses on sociological interpretations rather than legal adjudication. The study does not attempt to generalise all forms of collective violence to lynching, nor does it cover individual psychological motivations in detail. A key limitation is reliance on reported cases, as many incidents remain undocumented or politically contested. As M.N. Srinivas noted, social realities in India are

complex and layered, making complete objectivity difficult; however, sociological analysis remains essential for understanding underlying patterns and meanings.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. National and International Studies on Lynching

Lynching has been studied globally as a form of extra-legal collective violence, particularly in societies experiencing social inequality, weak institutional trust, and moral panic. Internationally, studies on lynching in the United States, especially racial lynching, have highlighted its role as a mechanism of racial domination and social control. Scholars such as Ida B. Wells documented lynching as a tool used by dominant groups to instil fear among marginalised communities and maintain social hierarchy.

In the Indian context, lynching has gained scholarly attention primarily after a rise in incidents linked to religious identity, caste, and rumours. Reports by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and civil society organisations have emphasised that lynching represents a grave failure of the state to protect constitutional values. Indian scholars argue that lynching is not spontaneous violence but an organised expression of social power legitimised by the silence or inaction of institutions.

From a sociological standpoint, Émile Durkheim’s assertion that “crime is normal because a society exempt from it is utterly impossible” provides a foundational lens to understand lynching as a social fact rather than an individual deviation. However, Durkheim also warned that when the collective conscience becomes excessively rigid or distorted, punishment can turn violent, which resonates strongly with contemporary lynching incidents.

2. Sociological Studies on Mob Violence

Classical sociologists have long examined collective behaviour and mob violence. Auguste Comte, regarded as the father of sociology, emphasised the importance of social order and warned that societal instability arises when moral consensus breaks down. According to Comte, unchecked emotions overpower reason during periods of social disorder, leading to collective irrationality—an idea relevant to mob lynching driven by rumour and fear.

Émile Durkheim’s concept of collective conscience and mechanical solidarity helps explain how mobs act in unison, believing their actions to be morally justified. Lynching, in this sense, becomes an extreme form of collective punishment aimed at reaffirming social norms. Durkheim’s idea that punishment strengthens social solidarity is problematized here, as lynching instead fragments society and deepens fear.

Max Weber’s theory of authority and legitimacy further enriches this discussion. Weber argued that the state alone holds the monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. Lynching represents a situation where mobs symbolically seize this authority, reflecting a crisis of legitimacy of formal institutions. Indian sociological thought provides crucial insights into mob violence. Jyotiba Phule strongly critiqued

social oppression and warned against violence rooted in caste hierarchy. His emphasis on social equality and rational thinking highlights how ignorance and blind faith sustain collective brutality. Phule's ideas suggest that lynching thrives where social reform and education are absent.

B.R. Ambedkar viewed violence against marginalised communities as a direct outcome of caste-based inequality and the moral failure of society. His insistence on constitutional morality is particularly relevant, as lynching represents the triumph of social morality over constitutional ethics. Ambedkar's warning that "democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic" finds resonance in the persistence of mob justice.

3. Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite growing scholarship on lynching, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature treats lynching primarily as a legal or political issue, with limited sociological engagement with concepts such as informal justice, moral panic, and collective fear. While crime statistics and case reports are available, they often fail to capture the underlying social processes that normalise lynching.

Second, there is insufficient integration of classical sociological theory with contemporary Indian realities. Although thinkers like Durkheim and Weber are frequently cited, their theories are rarely applied deeply to analyse lynching as a form of social control. Similarly, Indian social thinkers such as Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar, and M.N. Srinivas are underutilised in explaining how caste, hierarchy, and dominant social values legitimise mob violence.

Third, limited attention has been given to lynching as informal justice—a system where communities bypass legal institutions due to mistrust, fear, or assertion of power. As Andre Béteille argues, inequality without institutional mediation leads to conflict and coercion rather than consensus. This study seeks to fill this gap by framing lynching as a socially constructed response to perceived disorder.

Thus, the present study attempts to bridge these gaps by offering a comprehensive sociological analysis of lynching, integrating classical theory, Indian social thought, and contemporary empirical evidence to understand lynching as an expression of power, fear, and moral dominance in Indian society.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs classical and contemporary sociological theories to analyse lynching as a form of informal justice in India. The theories of Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Stanley Cohen, and Michel Foucault provide a conceptual foundation to understand how collective violence is legitimised through social norms, authority crises, moral panic, and disciplinary power.

1. Durkheim: Collective Conscience and Social Control

Émile Durkheim viewed society as governed by a collective conscience, a shared system of beliefs and moral attitudes that binds individuals together. According to Durkheim, punishment

serves to reinforce social solidarity by reaffirming collective norms. However, when this collective conscience becomes rigid or exclusionary, it can produce violent forms of social control. In India, lynching incidents related to cow protection illustrate this phenomenon. For instance, the 2015 Dadri lynching (Uttar Pradesh), where Mohammad Akhlaq was killed on suspicion of storing beef, reflects how a distorted collective conscience justified violence in the name of moral and cultural values. The mob perceived its act as a moral duty rather than a crime. This aligns with Durkheim's idea that crime and punishment are social facts, but it also exposes the danger when collective morality overrides legal rationality.

2. Weber: Authority, Legitimacy, and Power

Max Weber argued that the state holds a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. When this legitimacy weakens, alternative power structures emerge. Lynching represents a situation where mobs symbolically appropriate this authority, claiming moral legitimacy to punish alleged offenders.

The 2018 lynching of Rakbar Khan in Alwar, Rajasthan, accused of cattle smuggling, demonstrates this crisis of authority. The mob acted as judge, jury, and executioner, while delays and apathy in institutional response further reinforced public perception that informal justice was acceptable. From a Weberian perspective, such incidents indicate erosion of rational-legal authority and the rise of charismatic or traditional moral authority exercised by dominant social groups.

3. Moral Panic Theory (Stanley Cohen)

Stanley Cohen's Moral Panic Theory explains how societies periodically react to perceived threats by exaggerating danger and targeting "folk devils." Media narratives, rumours, and misinformation intensify fear, leading to collective hostility and violence.

In India, several lynching cases triggered by WhatsApp rumours exemplify moral panic. The 2018 lynchings in Dhule district, Maharashtra, where five individuals were killed on suspicion of being child kidnappers, highlight how fear fueled by misinformation can mobilise violent mobs. The victims were outsiders, easily labelled as threats. Cohen's theory helps explain how moral panic transforms fear into socially sanctioned violence, bypassing reason and legal process.

4. Foucault: Power, Punishment, and Discipline

Michel Foucault viewed punishment not merely as retribution but as a technique of power and discipline exercised publicly to regulate behaviour. According to Foucault, public acts of punishment serve as spectacles that reinforce authority and instil fear.

Lynchings in India often function as a public spectacle intended to send a warning message. The 2020 Palghar lynching (Maharashtra), where two sadhus and their driver were killed by a mob, exemplifies how public violence operates as a disciplinary mechanism. The act was not only about punishing perceived wrongdoing but also about asserting communal control and collective dominance. From a Foucauldian

perspective, lynching becomes a decentralised form of disciplinary power operating outside formal institutions.

Synthesis of Theoretical Framework

Together, these theories reveal that lynching in India is not an isolated criminal act but a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in collective morality (Durkheim), legitimacy crises (Weber), fear amplification (Cohen), and power enforcement (Foucault). These frameworks help explain why lynching persists despite constitutional safeguards and legal deterrents, highlighting its deep sociological foundations in power, fear, and social control.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To Analyse Lynching as Informal Justice

The primary objective of this study is to analyse lynching as a form of informal justice in Indian society, where mobs assume the role of law-enforcing authorities in the absence or perceived failure of formal legal mechanisms. Lynching reflects a social process in which punishment is administered based on collective beliefs rather than legal evidence. Incidents such as the Dadri lynching (2015) and Alwar lynching (2018) demonstrate how mobs justify violence by claiming to protect moral, religious, or cultural values. This objective seeks to understand why such acts are socially legitimised and how informal justice gains acceptance within certain communities.

2. To Examine the Role of Power Hierarchies

Another key objective is to examine how power hierarchies based on caste, religion, class, and majority dominance influence lynching practices in India. Sociologists like B.R. Ambedkar have emphasised that social hierarchy sustains violence against marginalised groups. Lynchings often target individuals who lack social, economic, or political power, as seen in numerous cases involving Dalits, Muslims, and Adivasis. By applying Weber's concept of power and authority, this study aims to explore how dominant groups exercise coercive control through mob violence to reinforce social dominance and suppress dissent.

3. To Understand Fear, Rumour, and Moral Justification

This study also aims to understand the role of fear, rumour, and moral justification in mobilising collective violence. Drawing upon Stanley Cohen's Moral Panic Theory, the research examines how misinformation—particularly through social media platforms—creates exaggerated threats that lead to lynching. The Dhule (2018) and Palghar (2020) lynching incidents highlight how rumours of child kidnapping transformed ordinary citizens into violent mobs. This objective seeks to uncover how fear is socially constructed and morally rationalised to legitimise extra-legal punishment.

4. To Assess the Impact on Marginalised Communities

Finally, the study aims to assess the social, psychological, and structural impact of lynching on marginalised communities. Lynching instils long-term fear, insecurity, and social exclusion

among vulnerable groups. Ambedkar's concept of constitutional morality is used to evaluate how lynching undermines democratic values and equal citizenship. The objective also explores how repeated incidents of mob violence erode trust in state institutions and deepen social divisions, affecting not only victims but also broader community relations and social cohesion.

5. Research Questions / Hypotheses

Research Questions

1. Why is lynching perceived as legitimate justice by mobs?

This question explores why mobs perceive lynching as a morally justified form of justice rather than a criminal act. Drawing on Durkheim's concept of collective conscience, the study argues that when shared moral beliefs dominate over legal rationality, collective violence is normalised.

A comparative example can be seen in Bangladesh, where mobs have lynched individuals accused of theft, blasphemy, or child kidnapping. The 2019 lynching of a woman in Borhanuddin, Bhola district, following rumours of child abduction, demonstrates how mobs believed they were protecting society. Similar to Indian cases, the mob acted under a sense of moral righteousness, illustrating how informal justice emerges across South Asian societies with strong communal norms and weak institutional trust.

2. How do fear and rumour mobilise collective violence?

This question examines how fear, rumours, and misinformation escalate into mob violence. Using Stanley Cohen's Moral Panic Theory, the study analyses how exaggerated threats produce panic and identify "folk devils."

In Bangladesh, a series of lynchings between 2017 and 2019 were triggered by rumours of child sacrifice for bridge construction projects, particularly around the Padma Bridge. Innocent individuals were beaten to death based solely on suspicion. These incidents closely resemble Indian cases such as Dhule (2018) and Palghar (2020), highlighting how rumour-driven fear transcends national boundaries and becomes a regional sociological pattern.

3. What role do power hierarchies play in mob lynching?

This question investigates how social power determines both perpetrators and victims of lynching. Inspired by Weber's theory of power and Ambedkar's critique of social hierarchy, the study explores how marginalised individuals are more vulnerable to mob violence.

In Bangladesh, studies indicate that lynching victims are often poor, socially isolated, or religious minorities, similar to patterns observed in India. For example, mobs lynching alleged thieves in urban slums reveal how dominant groups assert control over vulnerable populations, reinforcing existing hierarchies through violence.

4. How does mob lynching affect trust in state institutions?

This question seeks to analyse whether recurring lynching incidents weaken public faith in legal and democratic

institutions. In both India and Bangladesh, repeated incidents of mob justice reflect declining confidence in policing and judicial effectiveness.

In Bangladesh, human rights organisations have noted that mob lynching often occurs in areas where police response is delayed or absent, reinforcing the belief that immediate mob action is more effective than legal recourse. This parallels Weber's argument that when the state fails to exercise legitimate authority, alternative forms of coercive power emerge.

Hypotheses

H1: Lynching is more likely to be perceived as legitimate justice in societies where collective morality dominates over constitutional and legal norms, as observed in both India and Bangladesh.

H2: Rumours and misinformation significantly increase the probability of mob lynching by generating moral panic and collective fear.

H3: Weak institutional trust in police and judicial systems contributes directly to the normalisation of mob lynching as informal justice.

H4: Marginalised and socially vulnerable groups are disproportionately targeted in mob lynching incidents across South Asian societies.

Comparative Significance

The inclusion of Bangladesh-based mob lynching cases strengthens the sociological argument that lynching is not an isolated national problem but a regional social phenomenon, shaped by shared cultural norms, rumour economies, and institutional weaknesses in South Asia.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design, supported by limited descriptive quantitative data, to understand lynching as a sociological phenomenon. A qualitative approach is most suitable as it allows in-depth analysis of social meanings, power relations, moral justifications, and collective behaviour associated with lynching. As noted by Indian sociologist Yogendra Singh, qualitative methods are essential for studying complex social realities in India, where cultural meanings and social structures deeply influence human action. The study is analytical and interpretative in nature, focusing on lynching as informal justice rather than merely a criminal act.

2. Data Sources

- The study relies primarily on secondary data, drawn from credible and authoritative sources, including:
- Published research articles and books by Indian and international sociologists
- Reports by Indian institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)
- Data and case summaries from civil society organisations like People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL)
- Government documents, parliamentary debates, and Supreme Court judgments

- Newspaper reports from reputed Indian media houses

Indian researcher Anand Teltumbde, in his writings on caste violence, highlights that mob violence often reflects structural inequalities rather than spontaneous anger. Similarly, studies by Ashish Nandy and Ramachandra Guha emphasise that lynching must be analysed in relation to cultural nationalism and the erosion of constitutional values.

3. Tools of Data Collection

The main tools used for data collection include:

Document analysis of reports, judgments, and policy papers
Case study method to examine selected lynching incidents such as Dadri (2015), Alwar (2018), and Palghar (2020)

Content analysis of media reports to understand narrative framing and moral justification
According to Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas, case studies are particularly effective in Indian social research as they reveal underlying social norms, power relations, and informal practices often ignored in statistical data.

4. Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique has been employed to select lynching cases and documents relevant to the objectives of the study. Cases were selected based on:

Nature of the incident (mob violence resulting in death)
Presence of moral, religious, or rumour-based justification
Involvement of marginalised communities
This method allows the researcher to focus on information-rich cases, as suggested by Indian social research methodology scholars such as C.R. Kothari, who emphasises purposive sampling for exploratory and qualitative studies.

5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations form a crucial component of this research. Given the sensitive nature of lynching, the study ensures:

Respect for the dignity and privacy of victims and affected communities
Avoidance of sensationalism or communal bias
Use of verified and credible sources only
The study follows ethical guidelines suggested by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), which stress responsibility, objectivity, and social sensitivity in research. As B.R. Ambedkar emphasised, social research must aim not only at knowledge production but also at social justice and democratic accountability.

Methodological Significance

By adopting a qualitative, theory-driven methodology grounded in Indian sociological thought and empirical findings, this study seeks to produce a nuanced understanding of lynching as a socially constructed practice rooted in power, fear, and institutional failure.

7. Sociological Analysis of Lynching in India

1. Historical Context of Mob Justice

Mob justice in India is not a new phenomenon but has deep historical roots in traditional and colonial periods. In pre-modern Indian society, local communities often relied on customary laws, caste councils (panchayats), and informal sanctions to regulate behaviour. These mechanisms, though community-based, sometimes involved coercive punishment and public humiliation. During the colonial period, distrust toward British legal institutions further strengthened reliance on community-driven justice.

From a sociological perspective, Émile Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity helps explain this phenomenon. In societies with strong collective beliefs and limited institutional differentiation, punishment tends to be harsh and collective in nature. Contemporary lynching reflects a continuation of this pattern, where collective morality overrides individual rights. However, unlike traditional systems, modern lynching lacks social consensus and instead deepens social fragmentation.

2. Social and Cultural Justifications of Lynching

Lynching in India is often justified using moral, cultural, and emotional arguments. Mobs frequently claim to act in defence of religion, tradition, or social order. Practices such as cow protection, moral policing, and accusations of theft or blasphemy are framed as righteous acts rather than crimes.

Indian social thinker Ashis Nandy argues that violence becomes socially acceptable when cultural emotions overpower ethical reasoning. Lynching is presented as an act of "protecting society," thereby normalising brutality. This aligns with Durkheim's view that punishment reaffirms social norms; however, in lynching, these norms are selectively interpreted by dominant groups to legitimise violence.

3. Role of Caste, Religion, and Identity

Caste, religion, and identity play a decisive role in determining both the victims and perpetrators of lynching. Empirical evidence shows that Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis, and economically weaker sections are disproportionately targeted. This reflects the persistence of hierarchical social structures described by B.R. Ambedkar, who viewed caste as a system of graded inequality sustained through violence and exclusion.

Religion has also emerged as a central axis of lynching, particularly in cases linked to cow slaughter or religious sentiments. M.N. Srinivas's concept of the dominant caste is useful here, as lynching often becomes a means for dominant social groups to assert moral and political control. Identity-based lynching reinforces boundaries between "us" and "them," turning violence into a tool of social dominance rather than justice.

4. Media and Social Media Influence

Media and social media have significantly influenced the nature and frequency of lynching in India. Traditional media sometimes sensationalizes incidents, while social media platforms—especially WhatsApp and Facebook—act as rapid

channels for spreading rumors, misinformation, and inflammatory narratives.

Drawing on Stanley Cohen's Moral Panic Theory, lynching can be understood as a reaction to exaggerated threats constructed through media narratives. Rumours of child kidnapping, cow smuggling, or religious offence generate panic, leading to swift and violent collective action. Incidents such as the Dhule (2018) and Palghar (2020) lynchings illustrate how digital misinformation can mobilise mobs within minutes.

Indian sociologist Yogendra Singh emphasises that modernisation without ethical regulation leads to social disorganisation. Social media, when unregulated, intensifies fear and collective aggression, transforming virtual narratives into real-world violence.

Sociological Interpretation

From a broader sociological perspective, lynching in India represents a convergence of historical practices, hierarchical identities, cultural moralism, and technological amplification. It is not merely a breakdown of law and order but a reflection of deeper social anxieties and power struggles. As Andre Béteille notes, when inequality is combined with weak institutions, coercion replaces consensus.

Conclusion of the Analysis

The sociological analysis reveals that lynching in India is a socially produced phenomenon rooted in historical traditions of informal justice, reinforced by caste and religious identities, and accelerated by media-driven moral panic. Understanding these dimensions is essential to addressing lynching not only as a crime but as a structural social problem.

8. Power Dynamics and Social Control

This section analyses how power hierarchies and social control mechanisms shape lynching in India, using recent Indian examples (2023–2025) to illustrate sociological patterns of domination, marginalisation, and normalisation of violence.

1. Dominant Groups and Marginalisation

Lynching in India often reflects the ability of dominant social groups—defined by caste, religion, or majoritarian identity—to exert power over marginalised communities, who lack equal access to protection by law and social institutions. Sociologically, this aligns with B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste and exclusion, where dominant groups enforce social norms through coercion rather than law.

Recent data and reports indicate that lynching continues to disproportionately impact religious minorities and marginalised labourers. For example, in December 2025 in Nawada, Bihar, Mohammad Athar Hussain, a Muslim man, was brutally lynched by a mob reportedly targeting him over suspected theft before realising his religious identity, illustrating how religious minorities become highly vulnerable prey to mob violence.

Similarly, in December 2025 in Palakkad, Kerala, Ramnarayan Baghel, a migrant labourer from Chhattisgarh—racially questioned as a "Bangladeshi"—was lynched by residents, suggesting how xenophobic and socially exclusionary attitudes

reinforce power disparities that culminate in violence against outsiders and those perceived as “other.” These incidents reflect how dominant social narratives about identity and belonging translate into real-world violence, where marginalised individuals are stripped of legal protections and subjected to mob rule.

2. Lynching as Assertion of Social Dominance

Lynching functions as an assertion of dominance by groups that feel empowered to enforce their moral or cultural codes extra-legally. It becomes a mechanism of social control where dominant groups signal authority and reinforce hierarchical norms through public violence. The persistence of such incidents despite laws against lynching suggests that when powerful social factions feel socially or politically sanctioned, they may deploy violence as a tool of control.

According to a 2024 report by the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), India continued to record mob lynching incidents across several states, frequently linked to accusations around cow protection, religious identity, and inter-community tensions. Lynching deaths in 2024 included eight Muslims, one Hindu, and one Christian, revealing how identity (largely religious identity) becomes a fault line for asserting dominant group control.

This pattern shows how communal identity and fear of the “outsider” become a basis for violence, serving as an informal technique to regulate social behaviour where dominant groups perceive their values or status to be under threat.

3. State Silence and Normalisation of Violence

State responses to lynching often reveal ambivalence or delayed action, which can inadvertently normalise mob justice. Weak law enforcement, slow investigations, and low conviction rates signal that institutionally sanctioned justice is less immediate or reliable than community-driven punishment.

A 2025 analysis highlights that only four Indian states—Manipur, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Jharkhand—had adopted anti-lynching laws by late 2025, and overall conviction rates remained low even as lynching persisted. Such legal gaps and uneven enforcement send a signal that informal punishment may go unchallenged or lightly sanctioned, emboldening dominant groups. Moreover, sociological reports indicate that a significant proportion of law enforcement personnel may justify or tolerate mob violence as a form of punishment, further undermining institutional authority and legitimising lynching as a form of social control.

This “state silence” does not denote absence of action alone; in some cases, it is manifested through reluctance to categorise lynching as a distinct crime category, delayed arrests, or narrative framing that downplays mob culpability. This regime of subdued institutional response contributes to the normalisation of violence, subtly reinforcing social hierarchies that enable dominant groups to act with impunity.

Conclusion of Analysis

Together, these examples and trends show that lynching in India operates as a complex form of social control rooted in power dynamics. Dominant groups assert authority and marginalise vulnerable communities through extra-legal violence. Weak institutional responses and social tolerance of such acts further entrench violence into the social fabric. A deeper sociological understanding of these power processes is crucial to addressing not only legal but also cultural and structural roots of lynching in India.

9. Fear, Rumour, and Moral Panic

1. Construction of Fear Narratives

Fear is not spontaneous but socially constructed through narratives that portray certain groups as dangerous or immoral. Drawing on Stanley Cohen’s Moral Panic Theory, lynching can be understood as a reaction to exaggerated threats framed around crime, religion, or cultural decline.

In India, narratives around child kidnapping, cattle smuggling, or moral transgressions have repeatedly triggered lynching. These narratives simplify complex social anxieties and identify “folk devils,” usually outsiders or minorities, who are blamed for broader social insecurity.

2. Role of Misinformation

Misinformation—especially through social media—has played a crucial role in recent lynching incidents. Platforms like WhatsApp enable rapid circulation of unverified messages, images, and videos, often framed emotionally. During 2023–2024, several incidents were linked to viral rumours that later proved false.

Sociologically, misinformation intensifies collective irrationality, weakening individual judgment and reinforcing herd behaviour. As Auguste Comte warned, when emotion dominates reason in society, social order collapses into chaos. Lynching becomes a consequence of this breakdown of rational social regulation.

3. Moral Policing and Collective Anxiety

Moral policing is closely tied to lynching, where mobs act as self-appointed guardians of morality. Collective anxiety—about cultural erosion, crime, or social change—is redirected toward individuals accused of violating moral norms.

This phenomenon reflects Durkheim’s idea of social control, but in a distorted form. Instead of reinforcing social cohesion, moral policing through lynching generates fear, exclusion, and hostility. Between 2023 and 2025, multiple incidents linked to moral allegations reveal how collective anxiety fuels the violent enforcement of norms.

10. Impact of Lynching

1. Psychological Trauma and Social Exclusion

The impact of lynching extends far beyond the immediate victim. Families and communities experience long-term psychological trauma, fear, and insecurity. Survivors often

withdraw from public life, alter daily routines, or migrate to avoid future violence.

Marginalised communities, already facing discrimination, experience lynching as a collective warning, reinforcing social exclusion. This aligns with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where punishment is used not just to harm the individual but to control the population through fear.

2. Breakdown of Social Trust

Lynching severely damages social trust—between communities and between citizens and the state. When mobs deliver punishment and institutions fail to intervene effectively, trust in law enforcement and the justice system erodes.

Sociologically, this creates a vicious cycle: declining trust leads to more informal justice, which further weakens institutions. Indian sociologist Andre Béteille notes that when inequality combines with institutional weakness, coercion replaces consensus as the basis of social order.

3. Effect on Democracy and Rule of Law

Lynching poses a direct threat to democracy and the rule of law. It undermines constitutional values such as equality before the law, due process, and protection of minority rights. As B.R. Ambedkar emphasised, democracy requires not only political equality but constitutional morality.

The persistence of lynching in recent years (2023–2025) reflects a widening gap between constitutional ideals and social practice. Mob justice replaces legal justice, weakening democratic institutions and normalising violence as a tool of governance from below.

Concluding Sociological Insight

Together, these sections demonstrate that lynching in India is not an isolated crime but a systemic social phenomenon rooted in power, fear, moral panic, and institutional failure. Addressing lynching, therefore, requires not only legal reform but deep sociological engagement with inequality, identity, media ethics, and democratic culture.

11. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Key Sociological Insights

The study finds that lynching in India operates as a systematic form of informal justice rather than as isolated or spontaneous acts of violence. Lynching is deeply embedded in social structures of power, identity, and inequality, where mobs assume moral authority to punish perceived wrongdoing. The findings reveal that lynching disproportionately targets marginalised communities, including religious minorities, Dalits, migrant workers, and the poor, reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

Another significant insight is that lynching is often collective and performative, intended not only to punish the individual but also to send a message of fear and control to the wider community. The circulation of lynching videos and narratives further amplifies this message, turning violence into a tool of social regulation.

2. Interpretation in Light of Sociological Theory

The findings strongly support Émile Durkheim's concept of collective conscience, showing that lynching emerges when shared moral beliefs are mobilised to justify punishment. However, instead of reinforcing social solidarity, lynching reflects a distorted collective conscience that excludes certain groups from moral membership in society.

Max Weber's theory of authority and legitimacy is also validated by the findings. Lynching thrives in contexts where trust in legal and rational authority is weak. When the state fails to assert its monopoly over legitimate violence, mobs step in to enforce what they perceive as justice, thereby exercising informal power.

The role of fear and rumour aligns closely with Stanley Cohen's Moral Panic Theory. The study demonstrates how exaggerated threats—such as child kidnapping, cattle smuggling, or moral transgressions—create panic and identify “folk devils,” legitimising violence against them.

Additionally, the findings resonate with Michel Foucault's analysis of power and punishment, where lynching functions as a public spectacle of discipline. Violence is used not merely to punish but to control behaviour through fear, ensuring conformity within communities.

3. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are consistent with earlier research on mob violence in both Indian and international contexts. Studies on racial lynching in the United States have similarly shown that lynching operates as a tool of social dominance and racial control, reinforcing the universality of lynching as a mechanism of informal justice.

In the Indian context, the findings align with the work of scholars such as B.R. Ambedkar, who identified social hierarchy and exclusion as sources of violence, and M.N. Srinivas, who emphasised the role of dominant groups in enforcing norms. Contemporary researchers like Anand Teltumbde and Ashis Nandy have also argued that mob violence reflects deeper moral and institutional crises rather than criminal deviance alone.

However, this study extends existing literature by explicitly framing lynching as informal justice shaped by power and fear, integrating classical sociological theory with recent Indian cases (2023–2025). Unlike many legal or policy-focused studies, this research foregrounds sociological processes such as moral justification, collective anxiety, and normalisation of violence.

Discussion Summary

Overall, the discussion highlights that lynching is not merely a failure of law enforcement but a failure of social integration, institutional legitimacy, and constitutional morality. The persistence of lynching indicates a crisis where social power overrides legal norms, and fear replaces trust as the organising principle of society.

12. CONCLUSION

1. Summary of Findings

1. This study demonstrates that lynching in India is a sociologically complex phenomenon, rooted in the interplay of power hierarchies, fear, rumour, and moral panic. Key findings include:
2. Lynching functions as a form of informal justice, where mobs assume authority in the absence or perceived weakness of institutional law.
3. Victims are predominantly marginalised communities, including religious minorities, Dalits, and migrant workers, reflecting the enduring social stratification highlighted by B.R. Ambedkar, who observed that “caste is a machine for oppression, which legitimises social violence.”
4. Fear, rumour, and moral narratives—amplified by social media—play a central role in mobilising mobs, supporting Stanley Cohen’s theory that moral panic can generate collective hostility.
5. Institutional weaknesses and state silence enable normalisation of violence, confirming Max Weber’s insight that when legitimate authority fails, alternative power structures emerge.
6. Public lynching operates as a spectacle of social control, reinforcing Michel Foucault’s notion that punishment is a tool of discipline and collective regulation.

2. Sociological Implications

1. The sociological implications are profound: lynching is not merely criminal behaviour but a reflection of structural inequality, moral justification, and social anxiety. It highlights the fragility of collective trust, constitutional morality, and the rule of law.
2. Durkheim’s perspective reminds us that when the collective conscience is misaligned, informal justice replaces legal justice.
3. Comte’s view that social order depends on ethical regulation resonates with the need to balance modernisation, technology, and moral responsibility, particularly in a digitally connected society.
4. Ambedkar and Phule underscore the necessity of addressing systemic inequality as a prerequisite for reducing socially sanctioned violence.
5. Thus, lynching reflects intersecting crises of morality, power, and institutional legitimacy, and addressing it requires both sociological insight and concrete reform.

3. Need for Institutional Reform

The persistence of lynching highlights the need for robust institutional frameworks that combine legal enforcement with social education. As Andre Béteille notes, “Inequality without institutional protection is a recipe for coercion.” Without reform, informal violence will continue to undermine democracy and social cohesion.

13. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Strengthening Legal and Policing Mechanisms

Enact and enforce comprehensive anti-lynching laws uniformly across all states, ensuring swift investigation and punishment.

Train police and judicial personnel to respond impartially and promptly to prevent mob formation.

Implement monitoring and accountability mechanisms for law enforcement, as suggested by Yogendra Singh, emphasising institutional efficiency in maintaining social order.

2. Media Responsibility

Encourage responsible reporting in traditional media to avoid sensationalism.

Implement fact-checking and rapid response mechanisms on social media platforms to counter misinformation, following Stanley Cohen’s emphasis on controlling panic through rational discourse.

Conduct public campaigns to educate communities on verifying news before acting on it, addressing the role of rumour in lynching incidents.

3. Community Awareness and Dialogue

Promote interfaith and inter-caste dialogues to reduce stereotypes, prejudice, and fear.

Encourage grassroots education programs focusing on constitutional morality, social equality, and rule of law, echoing B.R. Ambedkar’s vision: “Cultivate a sense of justice, and let it guide social behaviour.”

Empower marginalised communities to assert their rights safely, reducing vulnerability to mob violence.

4. Sociological Engagement

Use research and academic findings to inform policy and civil society initiatives, ensuring that solutions are grounded in the social realities of inequality, power, and moral beliefs.

Encourage scholars to apply Durkheimian, Weberian, and Foucauldian frameworks to study not just incidents but the broader social processes enabling them.

Conclusion Statement

Lynching in India is a symptom of deep structural, cultural, and institutional challenges. Only by combining legal reform, media accountability, community engagement, and sociological insight can Indian society address the root causes of informal justice and protect its marginalised populations while strengthening democracy and the rule of law.

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About the corresponding author



Anurag Bharat is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Science at M. K. Ponda College of Business and Management, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. His academic interests focus on social issues, governance, law, and interdisciplinary research in contemporary society.