

HALTING THE MARCH OF RUMOURS

Community Leaders And Democratically Elected Office Holders Must Play A Key Role In Preventing Dangerous Rumors

In 1984, just as Delhi was engulfed by a pogrom against the Sikhs, the city was rife with the rumour that they had poisoned the entire water supply. Such rumours are not new. For centuries, European Jews were falsely accused of poisoning wells during wars, epidemics or civic unrest. Late 18th century Paris, witness to deep polarization along class lines, was replete with the rumour that the rich had distributed lethal, contaminated flour to the poor.

It is no surprise then that during the current COVID-19 pandemic, the rumour mill has Muslims deliberately throwing infected ₹2,000 notes on the road or Muslim street vendors spitting on vegetables and fruits. Periods of social stress or natural disasters are fertile ground for rumours, which not only spread like wild fire but have grave consequences — scapegoating, social boycott, violence and arson, even lynching and murder.

The anatomy of rumours

Where do rumours spring from and why and how do they spread so fast? Why do they thrive in a crisis? Not all rumours are pernicious. Some are potentially harmful, but like meteors in the sky, they disappear without much impact. But the ones that concern us here are toxic, occur with cataclysmic events and have devastating results. How must such rumours be checked?

For a start, a rumour is an untested piece of information, opinion, report or story. Therefore, its veracity is doubtful. This unverified, ambiguous status is at the heart of a rumour, making it largely what it is. The moment an account is publicly demonstrated and accepted to be true or false, it ceases to be a rumour. In a sense then, a rumour's truth or falsity is irrelevant to its efficacy or impact. Yet, every unconfirmed account is not a rumour. To become one, it must have other features. First, it must have a ring of truth. Something in it must make it contextually plausible for the listener or the reader. If an account is obviously bizarre — the sun will freeze overnight — or instantly falsifiable — Sachin scored a thousand runs in an ODI — it cannot become a rumour. Second, it short-circuits reason. Laced with passion, it works by seizing the collective psyche of victims. Suddenly, many start to believe it. This also lends it a third important feature — it circulates rapidly. Fourth, it manifests itself through an event. It is a passing gust, sometimes a tornado that leaves devastation in its wake but is ephemeral. Fifth, even when deliberately planted by only a few, it derives authority largely from the mob. Indeed, expert-authority is helpless against its seductive power. So, a rumour is a useful half-truth with strong emotional overtones that spreads fast, gripping individual minds to create a common consciousness and agency, often with grave social consequences.

Rumours are efficacious in societies already prepared to receive them. What then are the conditions that beget them? First, a context where there is either an information void or an information overload. Unable to satisfactorily make sense of their world in these uncertain contexts, humans become cognitively unstable and anxious. To meet their cognitive needs, they are forced to rely on bits and pieces of available knowledge, on a patchwork of half-truths, a rag bag of allusions that together provide a fragile, uncorroborated framework for interpreting events. Rumours feed on this mythic framework. Add emotional anxiety to this cognitive framework, and one has a ready-made arena for rumours to flourish. An overheated mind burns all evidence that comes its way and surrenders to rumours, often in the service of emotional needs. Recall how, during demonetisation, amidst despair and anxiety at losing their own money, the poor still found emotional satisfaction in the rumour that crores of rupees secretly stored in cash by the rich were rendered worthless.

Why they circulate

Jamuna Prasad, a psychologist at Ranchi and Patna Universities, was among the first to establish a link between high levels of anxiety and the easy spread of rumours. Typically

unrecognised when alive but posthumously celebrated as a pioneer in the social psychology of rumours, he did so by studying the social impact of the deadly Bihar-Nepal earthquake of 1934. Others have shown that, in times of acute crisis, people lean on knee jerk speculation and prejudice. A group consisting of 'outsiders', already distrusted and disliked, becomes an easy target, ready to be blamed for the current mess. Rumours succeed in societies ridden with an us-them syndrome, already polarised. Indeed, by binding people, creating temporary solidarities against a perceived enemy, they only deepen polarisation. No wonder they come in handy to those who benefit from such divisions.

With uncertainty, fear, and the radical other already firmly in place, the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle is provided by a vivid story of grave wrongdoing by an 'enemy' who has allegedly unleashed the calamity. A rumour is that story. And the more horrifying, outrageous and disgusting the story, the greater its emotional resonance and quicker its spread. But as mentioned, to get kickstarted, it must already be believable. Some factual detail needs to be added to the fiction to give it plausibility that it otherwise lacks.

It is a fact that the 1984 carnage compelled Sikhs to go to gurudwaras in large numbers. But then a baseless rumour surfaced that they were stockpiling arms, planning to attack and plunder posh colonies. The truth, altogether different, is that they went there seeking refuge. So, in the entire narrative, one detail was factually correct — and this little truth alone made a giant lie plausible. Likewise, it is a fact that many Muslims have experienced arbitrary violence, stigma and ostracisation in contemporary India. Given this threat, panic-stricken Muslims in Indore unjustifiably beat up a team of doctors who had come to test them for COVID-19. They easily succumbed to the rumour that it was not medical quarantine but needless, malicious separation from their families that motivated the visit.

In polarised societies, fear and vulnerability make rumour-mongering easy. But there are other reasons for why they get widely entrenched. Three of them stand out. First, the desire to conform gets the better of a questioning mind. Rather than face sanction and ostracisation for sticking out, people find it safer to emulate members of their group. Second, ironically, a belief gets entrenched after like-minded people discuss it among themselves. Discussion has a cascading effect; the more one talks about it, the more the biased rumour grows. Third, a denial by a mistrusted outsider, no matter how great her expertise, only ends up solidifying rumours. Group dynamics in polarised societies works with a logic all of its own; every person is necessarily partisan. A neutral ground for impartial voices is simply unimaginable.

Unwarranted fatalism

So here in brief is the conundrum: Since societies can never be fully informed or secure, rumours are inevitable and in times of acute crisis, they are a menace. Yet, providing rational rebuttal or furnishing relevant information is unable to stem the tide. Must rumours then be viewed like a tsunami before which we are helpless?

This fatalism is unwarranted. Transforming conditions conducive to rumours can reduce their efficacy. Depolarising society, loosening the grip of prejudice and calmly addressing the collective anxieties and obsessions of a group are deterrents, but, alas, only in the long run. In the short run, regulatory laws to check rumours are imperative. As also, the need to have critical insiders, those with authority within a community, deny injurious rumours, not least on the ground that eventually they harm even those who propagate, spread and exploit them. Community leaders and democratically elected office holders must play a crucial role in halting the march of dangerous rumours.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

1. **march** (noun) – progress, advance, development, continuance.
2. **engulf** (verb) – overwhelm, overtake, overrun, affect powerfully.
3. **pogrom** (noun) – (planned) mass slaughter, mass killing, mass murder (of a particular ethnic group).

4. **rife with** (verb) – overrun by, full of, replete with, overflowing, awash/flooded, overfilled.
5. **epidemic** (noun) – widespread disease/illness; outbreak, plague, scourge.
6. **civic** (adjective) – public, community, communal.
7. **unrest** (noun) – disruption, agitation, turmoil, chaos.
8. **polarisation** (noun) – separation of two contrasting groups (based on different opinions/ beliefs).
9. **lethal** (adjective) – fatal, deadly, toxic, life-threatening.
10. **contaminated** (adjective) – poisonous, polluted, adulterated.
11. **flour** (noun) – powder (made by grinding grain like wheat, rice, etc.,).
12. **it is no surprise** (phrase) – as expected, as anticipated, as predicted.
13. **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
14. **deliberately** (adverb) – intentionally, purposely, knowingly/wittingly.
15. **fertile ground** (noun) – a condition which generates/produces a lot of something (opportunities, results etc.,).
16. **grave** (adjective) – terrible, awful, dreadful.
17. **consequence** (noun) – outcome, ramification, repercussion.
18. **scapegoating** (noun) – a person blamed for the wrongdoings/faults that someone else has done.
19. **social boycott** (noun) – the act of intentionally refusing to deal with a person by the majority of society.
20. **arson** (noun) – setting fire intentionally to damage/destroy public properties, particularly buildings.
21. **lynching** (noun) – an act of punishing/killing someone by hanging for claimed offence by the group of people without legal trail.
22. **anatomy** (noun) – structure, composition.
23. **spring from** (verb) – arise from, stem from, originate from.
24. **thrive** (verb) – grow, develop, progress, advance (vigorously).
25. **pernicious** (adjective) – harmful, damaging, destructive.
26. **meteor** (noun) – falling star, shooting star.
27. **cataclysmic** (adjective) – disastrous, catastrophic, devastating, destructive.
28. **for a start** (phrase) – to introduce a first point of a series of points to be discussed/ mentioned.
29. **veracity** (noun) – truthfulness, accuracy, correctness.
30. **ambiguous** (adjective) – arguable, debatable, equivocal, doubtful.
31. **at the heart of** (phrase) – basically, fundamentally, essentially.
32. **account** (noun) – narrative, rendition, explanation, interpretation.
33. **cease** (verb) – bring to an end/halt/stop, conclude, terminate.
34. **falsity** (noun) – untruthfulness, inexactness, hollowness.
35. **efficacy** (noun) – effectiveness, efficiency, power/ability to give estimated results.
36. **a ring of truth** (phrase) – used to refer to a statement as true.
37. **contextually** (adverb) – in a manner that relates to the circumstances surrounding something.
38. **plausible** (adjective) – convincing, effective, influential, strong.
39. **bizarre** (adjective) – strange, unusual, unconventional/eccentric, ridiculous.
40. **falsifiable** (adjective) – verifiable, confirmable, checkable.
41. **short-circuit** (verb) – stop working, trip, break.
42. **be laced with** (verb) – mix/blend, fortify, strengthen.
43. **seize** (verb) – take hold of, snatch, grab, capture.
44. **psyche** (noun) – soul/spirit, essential nature/ persona, individuality.
45. **manifest** (verb) – indicate, show, display, exhibit.
46. **gust** (noun) – a sudden strong wind.
47. **tornado** (noun) – cyclone, typhoon, storm; something as a violent & devastating action.
48. **in someone's wake** (phrase) – used to say what is left behind by someone.
49. **ephemeral** (adjective) – transitory, short-lived, momentary/brief.
50. **authority** (noun) – plausibility, believability, acceptability, tenability.

51. **mob** (noun) – a large, disorganized, and often violent crowd of people.
52. **seductive** (adjective) – attractive, appealing/inviting, provocative.
53. **half-truth** (noun) – fabrication, deception, falsehood.
54. **overtone** (noun) – connotation, hidden meaning/implication, association.
55. **consciousness** (noun) – awareness, knowledge, attention/observation.
56. **efficacious** (adjective) – effective, successful, powerful.
57. **beget** (verb) – cause, give rise to, lead to, result in, bring about.
58. **void** (noun) – emptiness, nothingness, blankness; becoming inoperative, ineffective, useless.
59. **overload** (noun) – surplus/excess, overabundance, excessive load, too much.
60. **make sense** (phrase) – be accepted, be practicable, be convincing.
61. **cognitively** (adverb) – reasonably, coherently, logically, sensibly.
62. **rely on** (phrasal verb) – depend on; resort to, have recourse to.
63. **bits and pieces** (phrase) – partially, bit by bit, small things of different types/kinds.
64. **rag bag** (noun) – collection of something (mishmash, mess, confusion).
65. **allusion** (noun) – reference, remark, mention, citation, hint/intimation.
66. **fragile** (adjective) – weak, shaky/risky, unreliable, feeble/unsound.
67. **uncorroborated** (adjective) – flawed, inaccurate, misguided.
68. **framework** (noun) – structure, scheme, system, organisation.
69. **interpret** (verb) – explain, clarify, make clear.
70. **feed on** (phrasal verb) – to gain strength, energy, or support from (something).
71. **mythic** (adjective) – traditional.
72. **flourish** (verb) – raise; increase, multiply.
73. **demonetisation** (noun) – the act of deprive currency unit (note/coin) of its status as money.
74. **amidst** (preposition) – amid, in the middle of; during.
75. **despair** (noun) – hopelessness, depression, distress.
76. **render** (verb) – make, cause to be, cause to become.
77. **posthumously** (adverb) – happening after the death (of a person).
78. **pioneer** (noun) – innovator, groundbreaker, pathfinder, front runner.
79. **lean on** (phrasal verb) – depend on, rely on.
80. **knee-jerk** (adjective) – unthinking, unintentional, unplanned.
81. **speculation** (noun) – prediction, guesswork, opinion/thought.
82. **prejudice** (noun) – preconceived idea, preconception; intolerance.
83. **outsider** (noun) – non-member, newcomer, stranger.
84. **(be) ridden with** (verb) – be full of, be dominated by.
85. **solidarity** (noun) – unity, harmony, mutual support.
86. **come in handy** (phrase) – to be useful.
87. **uncertainty** (noun) – unpredictability, unreliability, riskiness/precariousness.
88. **radical** (noun) – revolutionary, progressive, reformer.
89. **in place** (phrase) – established, set up.
90. **jigsaw puzzle** (noun) – a puzzle to assemble/arrange cut pieces of a picture together.
91. **vivid** (adjective) – striking, strong, powerful, realistic, energetic.
92. **allegedly** (adverb) – supposedly, purportedly, reportedly.
93. **unleash** (verb) – let loose, release, set free.
94. **calamity** (noun) – disaster, catastrophe, tragedy.
95. **outrageous** (adjective) – shocking, excessive, appalling, disgusting.
96. **resonance** (noun) – reverberation, power/ability (to evoke memories/emotions).
97. **kickstart** (verb) – revive, renew, rekindle/regenerate.
98. **plausibility** (noun) – credibility, reliability, believability, soundness.
99. **carnage** (noun) – massacre, mass murder, mass destruction.
100. **surface** (verb) – emerge, arise, appear, come to light, loom.
101. **stockpile** (verb) – collect, gather, store up.
102. **plunder** (verb) – steal (goods), take illegally, loot, rob.
103. **seek** (verb) – try to find, try to obtain.

104. **refuge** (noun) – protection, shelter, place of safety, place of security.
105. **narrative** (noun) – a representation of a particular situation; portrayal/account.
106. **arbitrary** (adjective) – random casual, capricious; oppressive, domineering, high-handed, unmotivated/unreasonable.
107. **stigma** (noun) – disgrace, dishonour, stain.
108. **ostracisation** (noun) – banishment/expelling from a society or group.
109. **contemporary** (adjective) – modern, present-day, current, present-time.
110. **panic-stricken** (adjective) – alarmed, frightened, scared, frantic.
111. **succumb** (verb) – fall victim to; give in, submit, surrender, capitulate.
112. **malicious** (adjective) – harmful, pernicious, destructive.
113. **rumour-mongering** (noun) – an act of spreading rumour intentionally.
114. **entrench** (verb) – settle, establish, embed, install.
115. **stand out** (phrasal verb) – be noticeable, be visible, be obvious.
116. **conform** (verb) – comply with, abide by, obey, adhere to.
117. **get the better of** (phrase) – gain a victory over, triumph over, prevail over.
118. **sanction** (noun) – permission, approval, consent (official).
119. **stick out** (phrasal verb) – stand out, be noticeable, be obvious, catch the eye.
120. **emulate** (verb) – imitate, follow, take as an example.
121. **ironically** (adverb) – paradoxically, unexpectedly, strangely.
122. **cascading reaction/effect** (noun) – an inevitable and sometimes unforeseen chain of events due to an act affecting a system.
123. **end up** (phrasal verb) – come/arrive, turn up (a specified situation finally).
124. **solidify** (verb) – make stronger, reinforce, consolidate.
125. **dynamics** (noun) – basic/fundamental cause or force which triggers change within a system.
126. **of one's own** (phrase) – belonging to oneself only/alone.
127. **partisan** (adjective) – biased, prejudiced, one-sided.
128. **impartial** (adjective) – unbiased, unprejudiced, neutral, fair.
129. **unwarranted** (adjective) – unjustified, unpardonable, uncalled for, unnecessary.
130. **fatalism** (noun) – acceptance; belief that all events are unpredictable/unavoidable as fated.
131. **conundrum** (noun) – problem, difficulty, quandary.
132. **inevitable** (adjective) – unavoidable, sure to happen, unpreventable.
133. **menace** (noun) – threat/danger, risk/peril, hazard.
134. **rational** (adjective) – sensible, logical, reasoned.
135. **rebuttal** (noun) – negation, denial, disproving.
136. **stem the tide** (phrase) – stop the increase of something.
137. **conducive** (adjective) – helpful, favourable, beneficial/advantageous.
138. **depolarise** (verb) – deduce the polarisation.
139. **obsession** (noun) – fixation, craze/addiction; phobia, complex.
140. **deterrent** (noun) – restraint, discouragement, dissuasion.
141. **alas** (exclamation) – unluckily, sadly, regrettably, unhappily.
142. **in the long run** (phrase) – eventually, in the end, ultimately.
143. **regulatory** (adjective) – organizational, governmental.
144. **insider** (noun) – member, staff member, employee.
145. **imperative** (adjective) – vitally important, crucial/critical, essential.
146. **on the ground** (phrase) – in a situation/place where things are happening really/practically.
147. **propagate** (verb) – grow, generate, reproduce/breed.
148. **exploit** (verb) – take advantage of, make use of, utilize.