

Mass Hysteria – Narratives and Impact

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Abstract - Countless episodes of mass hysteria have occurred throughout history in different time frames and across different cultures. Mass hysteria is an exceptional psychological phenomenon in which large groups of people began to feel the same symptoms as felt by the index case and show irrational behaviour. It has no plausible pathological cause but can be influenced by factors such as fear, anxiety, stress etc.

This paper is written with an objective to examine the phenomenon of collective hysteria in the Indian context. It revisits the cases of mass hysteria that occurred in India, particularly Delhi from the start of the 21st century to 2017 and examines the role of cultural factors and media in influencing the outcome of mass hysteria. It interprets how the narratives of the masses and authorities on mass hysteria impact the day – to day lives of the people.

Keywords – Mass Hysteria, Mass Sociogenic Illness, Mass Psychogenic Illness, Mass social media Induced Illness, collective obsessional behavior.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Flipping through the pages of history, one gets to know about abundant instances where people had some kind of delusions which lasted for a short period of time but had the capability to spread to far – flung areas. Various episodes of such occurrences have been observed in numerous countries and a large volume of literature has been produced.

India is no exception to such incidents. Some similar instances happened in a number of states of the country but there were three of them which attracted a lot of limelight, namely The Monkey Man or The Kala Bandar (2001), The Onion Witch (2005) and The Phantom Barber (2017).

Researchers and various other medical experts have named such cases as the cases of Mass Hysteria.

2. MASS HYSTERIA – AN UNEXPLAINED PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLNESS

Mass hysteria is a very extraordinary and controversial phenomenon in which a large number of people start to exhibit abnormal, irrational behavior like laughing, screaming, dancing, fainting, causing harm to self and others etc. while experiencing fear, anxiety, excitement and other intense emotions without any identifiable organic cause. It is known by different terms like collective behavior, mass psychogenic illness, epidemic hysteria, conversion disorder etc. However, DSM-III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – III of

Mental Disorders) removed hysteria as a diagnosis and the usage of the term ‘hysteria’.

To avoid any negative connotations, experts have advised the usage of terms like “collective obsessional behavior” for referring to mass hysteria. [1]. This generally begins with an index case and spread to otherwise sound people, in which media, in present times, social media acts as a major catalyst [5]. This is referred to as Mass social media Induced Illness (MSMI). Before this, face to face interaction and communication was considered as the contagion. In 1907, girls at a school in London felt paralyzed and were unable to move their left arm after witnessing the come back of a girl who recovered from polio and a fracture (Yan*, 2023). Matching situation occurred in 2003 in a village of West Bengal, India where the death of two family members on the same day triggered an epidemic in the entire village. As a result, many villagers and other members of the family started showing the symptoms that the two deceased individuals had.

3. UNVEILING MASS HYSTERIA – INDIAN CASE REPORTS, NARRATIVES AND IMPACT

The period we are particularly interested in extends from c. 2000 to 2017. However, it's not like that such cases of mass hysteria have not happened in India before. It might be possible that some of the cases of mass hysteria would not have been recorded. Those

recorded might not have been named as mass hysteria.

One of the first cases in India which was classified as mass hysterical was related to an idol of a Hindu God Ganesha, which happened in 1995 in Uttar Pradesh when people gathered and lined up in long queues in hope of seeing the idol of lord Ganesha sipping the milk through his snout. Later the experts revealed that it happened due to the capillary action and surface tension.

Many such incidents have happened in India like the Red Rain in Kerala (1957), case of Telephone exchange building in Calcutta (1987), mass hysteria in a tribal village in Tripura (1992), the Muhnochwa in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh (2002), Epidemic hysteria in a West Bengal village (2003), Sweet Water of Mahim Creek in Mumbai (2006), Blood – sucking Vampire in Tamil Nadu (2012), 'Black Man' in Kerala (2015), Uttarkashi government school and many more.

The above-mentioned cases of mass hysteria took place outside the national capital, Delhi. The famous tales related to mass hysteria in Delhi are limited to just three cases which attracted a lot of attention of Indian media and had a far – stretched impact on the everyday lives of the people. The cases are as follows:

3.1 The Monkey Man

In the summer of 2001, between May and April, a mysterious case of a Monkey man caught the attention of the entire nation when news reports on television and newspapers were mostly about a hairy monkey-like creature which inflicted a lot of terror amongst the people of Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh and East Delhi. Majority of the victims belonged to East Delhi. As mentioned above, there was a preponderance of male population. Males were three times more affected than the females [4].

Anil Gopal was one of the first persons who reported being attacked by part monkey, part man like attacker in the night while he was sleeping on the terrace. He showed scratches on his legs and arms to the media and the people who lived in the area. Similar scratch marks were visible on the victims' bodies at the time of 'Muhnochwa' case in Delhi which happened in 2002. Anil was not able to see the attacker clearly because of the dark but gave a bizarre description about the assailant. Later a man called Raihasuddin got severely injured by the attack after which the terror of the Monkey man spread like a wild fire and the cases increased.

Upon being asked in an interview about the looks of the Monkey man, Anil Gopal said that it had fair complexion and blue eyes with facial features resembling Chinese people. According to other people, the Monkey man had red – eyes, metal claws and wore a helmet. When more and more people were interviewed by the Media, the description began to vary. Some people believed that it was an alien and hyperbolized it with theories related to UFOs. Some

firmly opined the monkey man was none other than lord Hanumaan and started worshipping in the temples. A 35 years old housemaid in Noida named Deepali Kumari said, "it has three buttons on its chest. One makes it turn into a monkey, the second gives it extra strength, the third makes it invisible. He touches a lock and it breaks but he is afraid of the light."

The then Joint Commissioner of Police, Suresh Roy said, "People are in a state of terror. This creature attacks people who sleep on rooftops or out in the open. It strikes when there is a power cut in the area."

3.1.1 Impact

Many people had several fractures after falling off their roofs in terror and panic after hearing unusual sounds or shadows. According to the news reports three people along with an unborn life came to an end. Two died by falling off the roof in fear. A pregnant woman who was sleeping on the terrace, ran down the stairs in fear of the Monkey man and slipped, which eventually led to her death. The people ceased to go outside after dark. Shops were shut down before the usual time which was affecting the business of people. The people were having sleepless nights. There were some instances when people end up beating the innocent and even their own family members upon hearing unusual sounds. Raghunath Patnaik who belonged to East Delhi was beaten by his own brother. Police began to patrol the streets and ensured that the areas affected by the Monkey man do not suffer from power cuts at night. The Chief Commissioner of Police, Ajay Raj Sharma declared a reward of 50,000 rupees for the one who would catch or provide essential clues related to the Monkey man. The police also arrested people who were spreading false information. A committee was formed which had members from the Central Forensic Laboratory (CFL) and the National Institute of Human Behaviour (NIHB). The committee came up with a report that concluded that such events could be attributed to psychiatric disorder, stress, mental retardation and alcohol – related illness.

Soon, the interest of the people and media fizzled out with no more happenings.

3.2 The Onion Witch

In 2005, another thrilling account appeared before the capital city dwellers in the form of an onion witch. Some people claimed that there was only one witch while others claimed that there were three witches who were roaming the streets of Delhi, asking for onions in the guise of an old woman. The witch would ring the doorbell, pretend to be hungry and ask for an onion. On getting the onion, she would cut in half and blood would flow out of it. Whoever used to give the onion, instantly met with a tragic end followed by the death of the family members in the time interval of two days. The rumors spread mostly by the word of mouth.

3.2.1 Impact

Even the natural deaths were attributed to the action of onion witch. Chattisgarh was also engulfed in the fear of the onion witch. People in Sagarpur painted auspicious signs and yellow and maroon palm prints of henna and turmeric on their doors and walls to drive away the witch and the effect of her black magic. Alike occurred when people of Tamil Nadu were housebound due to the fear of a blood – sucking vampire and they painted signs on their houses to ward off the vampire.

According to an article published in the Indian Express, a Congress MLA also used cow dung on his doorsteps for protection against the onion witch. Sometimes, people would mistakenly lash out at each other in fear of the onion witch.

3.3 The Phantom Barber (2017)

In 2017, over a decade later, people of Delhi were again panic – stricken with the stories of the Phantom Barber. The first incident of braid chopping occurred in Rajasthan. According to the victims, they first experienced a headache followed by they becoming unconscious. On waking up, they found their braids chopped off. Braid cutting became very common and women were terrified. A 45-year-old woman named Kamlesh who lived in Gurgaon's Vishwa Mohalla in Delhi-NCR region, became one of the first victims of the braid cutting case. She recalled seeing a black silhouette. She got informed about such incidents a few days before by her brother who lived in Rewari . The braid cutting incidents were not confined to Delhi and Rajasthan only, the nearby states like Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh etc. also reported such occurrences. Hundreds of cases related to braid chopping were reported to the police.

The victims offered varied descriptions about the culprit as in the previous case. Some said that it was a cat that used to turn into a man and cut the hair of women at night. Others claimed that the man wore yellow and red clothes. Every woman was coming up with a different description of the events. In some cases, the women said that there was a man who roamed around the streets with a razor in his hand. An Indian politician and former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Mehbooba Mufti said that these incidents were attempts to create the conditions of mass hysteria and asserted that such instances were happening to undermine the dignity of women. However, police and experts believed that women themselves were cutting their braids, either consciously or in an altered level of consciousness. As reported by The Hindustan Times, Dr Sudhir

Khandelwal, former head of the department of psychiatry at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) said, "From all the available evidence, it seems the women are cutting their own hair either consciously or in an altered sensorium, likely to seek attention." Altered sensorium refers to a medical condition of altered consciousness or difficulty in thinking clearly. An investigator asked, "How else does one explain these cases that are happening behind closed doors, in the presence of family members?"

3.3.1 Impact

Separatist groups blamed the security agencies and became successful in evoking the public to strike against such instances on 9th October.

In Agra, the fear of the braid cutting witch led to a very violent activity when a mob in a village lynched a 65 years old Dalit women called Maan Devi on suspicion of her being the braid cutter. In Mewat, a cat was killed when someone had visions that it was the braid chopping witch.

Police formed special teams for investigation and offered rewards for providing information that could help in arresting the assailant.

4. OVERALL IMPACT OF MASS HYSTERIA

Social Unrest – Pervasive fear and panic can cause community unrest. The failure of policies and initiatives taken by the government and police authorities could lead to feelings of insecurity amongst the people. Noticing the inability of the government to deal with cases of mass psychogenic illness, people may lose confidence.

Stigma – Incidents of mass hysteria may stigmatize the areas where the episodes occur along with the victims. This stigma may reduce the quality of care that they should receive. Also, since it is a psychological illness, people in India may not pay much attention to it as already mental health is considered as a taboo in India and the people suffering from any mental illness often suffer in isolation. According to a report published by the Financial express, there is an acute shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists in India. There are only 0.07 psychologists and 0.75 psychiatrists per 1 lakh people.

Strengthening of Superstitions- The people do not consider mass hysteria as a psychological illness because of the lack of awareness and also because of certain superstitious beliefs.

Most people in India turn to shrines and temple instead of psychiatrists. Such beliefs are often attributed to less – educated people. However, it has been observed that educated people also believe in superstitious beliefs. The cases of mass hysteria give rise to new sets of superstitions. At the time of

Uttarkashi government school case, some people believed that the girls were under divine possession while some considered the incident as a wrath of the deities and the focus of the people was more on healing with ritualistic practices and prayers rather than medical procedures.

Diversion of Resources – Any social phenomenon that leads to mass anxiety and distress can impact the functioning of the state, state authorities, safety agencies, health services, educational and other institutions. Mass Hysterical cases can divert the healthcare and security resources, specifically emergency services from addressing other important tasks. During the period of collective hysteria, public look towards the government and police authorities for protection due to which fire, police and medical teams have to be deployed to the hotspots, diverting the resources.

Social Isolation - Mass hysterical cases can impact the day to day lives of the people. Whenever an outbreak strikes, institutions like schools, colleges etc. are first to get affected as they are closed for days until situations are not appropriate for opening the institutions. People are forced to self – isolate themselves as happened in case of the Onion witch and the Blood – sucking Vampire. The victims are also isolated and stigmatized which might deteriorate their health further.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The spread of false information and conspiracy theories can have a major impact on a country's social, political, cultural and economic condition. Something similar happened at the time of COVID 19 pandemic which also turned out to be a misinformation pandemic when various conspiracy theories related to its origin, vaccines etc. promulgated without any restraint. Conspiracy theories lead to confusion and may also lead to mass hysteria. Some sinister personalities develop such conspiracy theories for their personal gain. It may happen that news agencies and digital platforms develop close contacts with the political leaders. Politicians may begin to regulate the news outlets and social media platforms. [6] They can use these platforms to strike fear into the hearts of the citizens and emerge as their saviors.

6. CONCLUSION

The nature of mass psychogenic illness is very complex and can manifest itself into social, cultural, political, economic disruptions. Hence, it becomes extremely important to understand its nature and channelize the energy of the authorities and media in the right direction, in the spread of correct and rational information to promote critical thinking and to curb the activities of all those who try to trigger mass anxiety and violent activities like witch hunts. The police and other authorities should never state false information in front of media or people amidst widespread panic. There is an engender need to dispel superstitions which can only happen by creating awareness

amongst the people about mass psychogenic illness. Also, there is a dire need for more psychiatrists and other mental health care providers. Timely and proactive measures can reduce the impact of mass hysteria and help reduce the likelihood of relapse.

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