

Thousands of urban Indians are taking to the streets, and many more on social media to protest against lynchings in the name of protecting cows—the sacred animal of the Hindu religion.

The lynchings have surprised many in the international community since it seems to be a moral clampdown by vigilantes on a dietary choices and religion in a developing economy which is otherwise projected as a progressive democracy.

Mob violence is not new to the subcontinent. It is not uncommon to see crowds of people resorting to assault and even lynchings against both the criminal and who they perceive to be immoral. Women are still hounded as witches in parts of the country; vehicle drivers involved in road accidents and thieves are beaten up routinely before being handed over to the authorities; corrupt officials are rowdily taken to task—mobs mete out justice frequently and dangerously.

'Hindutva' groups, which want to enforce their interpretation of the religion, have always existed in India. The violence and lynchings have been attributed to members of these groups. The number of these assaults on Muslims in the name of cow protection has gone up significantly since Narendra Modi assumed power in 2014 with a sizeable majority. While Modi himself rose to power on a plank of anti-corruption and economic reforms, a rabid section (however small in number) of the Hindu majority population has seen this as a platform for instigating and aggravating communal conflict.

Mohammad Akhlaq was killed by vigilantes in Dadri in September 2015 on mere suspicion of having beef in his refrigerator.

Zahid Rasool Bhat was killed by a petrol bomb attack on his truck in Kashmir in October 2015. It was seen as an effect of communal unrest following a 'beef party' thrown by a Kashmiri legislator.

Cow vigilantes killed Mohammad Majloom and Azad Khan in Jharkhand state in March 2016 and Abu Hanifa and Riazuddin Ali in Assam in separate incidents.

Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer, was killed in Mewat near New Delhi in April 2017. The cow vigilantes suspected that the milch cattle he was transporting were intended for slaughter.

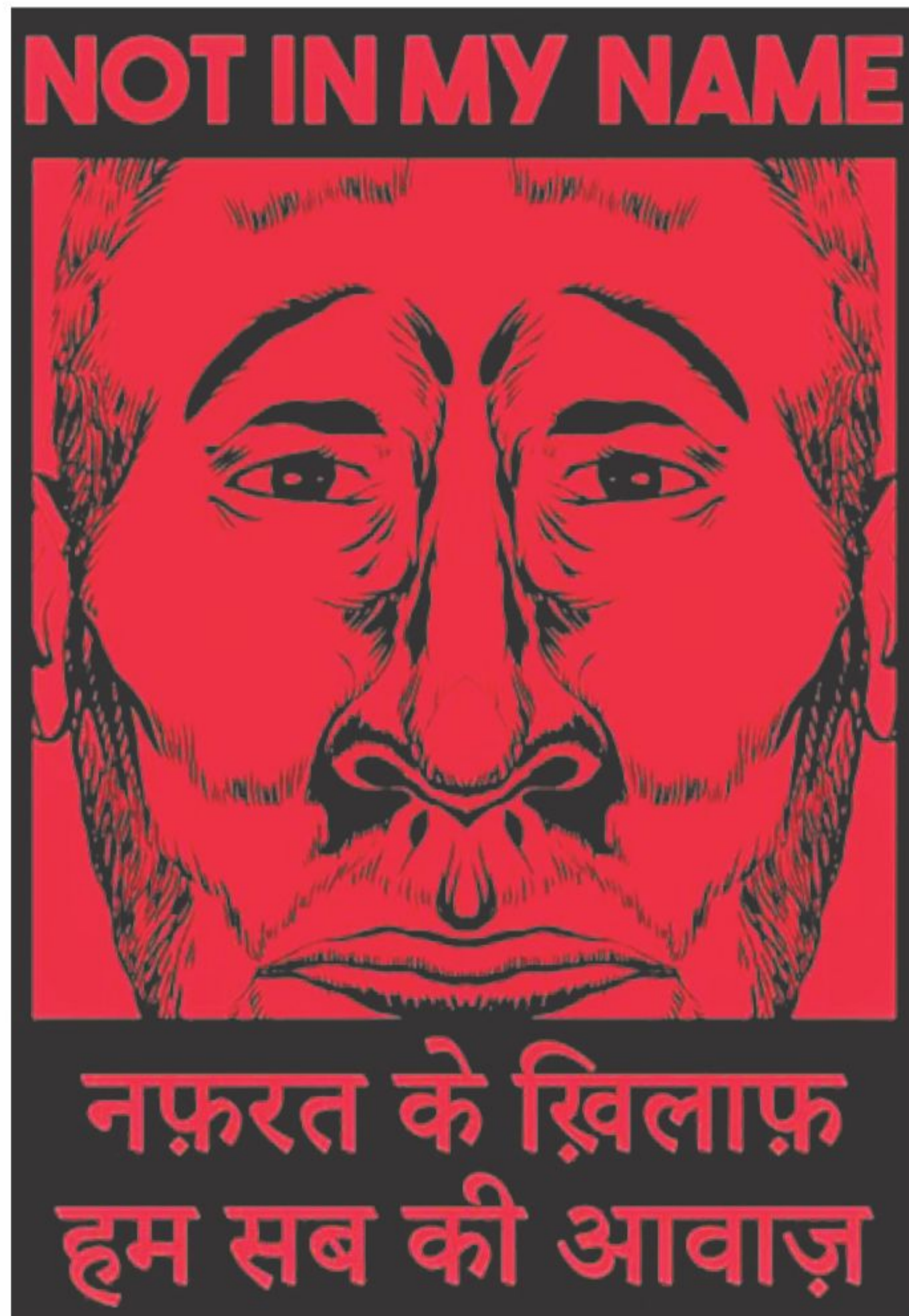
It was shortly after that that the Modi government framed new regulations on cow slaughter. It banned transport of cattle meant for 'non-farming' purposes. This included bullock and buffaloes as well, even though these animals do not enjoy the same sacred value in the Hindu religion as the cow.

The incident that drew the most outrage recently was that of Junaid Khan. The teenager and his brother and cousins were attacked by a mob while traveling in a train very close to New Delhi. A video of Junaid Khan's corpse shows multiple stab wounds and several contusions and other injuries on his body. Surprisingly, none of the other commuters have come forward to testify against the mob though some arrests have been made. Also, in June, deputy superintendent of police Mohammad Ayub Pandit was stripped naked and stoned to death by a mob outside the Jamia Masjid in Srinagar allegedly for taking photographs. Modi has made two statements on cow vigilantes, invoking Mahatma Gandhi in both. In the first (made in August 2016), Modi cautioned against "fake cow vigilantes". A video of and by cow vigilantes beating up Dalits in Una, Gujarat had gone viral, triggering nationwide outrage and protests in Gujarat. While Modi pointed out that Mahatma Gandhi had been in favour of protecting the Hindus' sacred cow, there was no direct mention of the violence unleashed by cow vigilantes.

Modi's second statement was made more recently after nationwide 'Not In My Name' protests following

IN WHOSE NAME THEN?

USHINOR MAJUMDAR



Against hated, we all shall stand.

IMAGE: COURTESY

Junaid Khan's killing. In this, he said that Mahatma Gandhi would not approve of the violence. This statement was made from Gandhi's ashram in Sabarmati and also posted on social media by the official handle of the office of the prime minister of India.

Many observers have pointed out that Modi seemed to be saying 'Not In My Name' as well, or at least 'Not In Gandhi's Name'.

Gandhi's views have been debated hotly, with many (including historians) also pointing out that the father of the Indian nation had advocated for *seva* (service) and not *raksha* (protection). An interpretation by some claims that protection is a form of service.

INTERNATIONAL

When the violence increased soon after Modi assumed office, it was attributed to 'fringe Hindutva groups', which was seen as an effort by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to distance itself from the violence.

However, following a recent lynching in Jharkhand, a local BJP functionary was also accused and arrested for the crime. Asgar Ansari was stopped by a mob near a village in Jharkhand's Ramgarh district supposedly on suspicion of carrying beef to Eid celebrations. The mob assaulted and killed him, less than a week after another Muslim man was attacked and his house set ablaze by cow vigilantes.

The vigilantism has grown quietly over a period of time. It was mostly restricted to rural India except for sparse incidents where some Hindu fundamentalists stormed inside restaurants and premium hotels to check their menu. That kind of vigilantism was only taken as a clampdown on a person's dietary choices. A minor section of Hindus also eat beef and it was seen as a curb on their choices too.

While vigilantism is illegal, the state of Maharashtra had tried to legitimise it. The BJP-led state administration had advertised for volunteers who would monitor the cattle slaughter ban.

"A monstrous new moral order is unfolding, irrigated by the blood of our citizens," policy expert Pratap Bhanu Mehta wrote in a column in *The Indian Express*. "But this monstrosity is also wickedly clever. It is unfolding slowly, picking on individual victims, manifesting through a thousand cuts, rather than through a big cataclysm."

There have also been concerns if this is the first of many steps by the Hindutva groups to establish a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation). That would only be an extension of the post-partition politics that is a burden on the country's political inheritance.

Those in the country's right-wing quarters have had a tough time defending the ideals behind cow vigilantism. Many tried to find solace within the Constitution of India which places "cow preservation" as an ideal under the Directive Principles of State Policy.

States frame their own laws on cattle slaughter and a few states did not ban it, but the new central rules have an overriding effect on the federalist nature.

The cow vigilantism has also affected the economics behind cow slaughter. Several news reports have showed how it is not just the meat but other parts of the cow that is used in several trades—not the least of them being the cow hide used in leather.

India's meat export industry is valued at US\$ 4.5 billion and the dairy industry is valued at US\$ 10 billion. With the vigilante crackdown on cattle transportation, there has been rising concern over the safety of dairy farmers transporting milch cattle, which cost much more than cattle that is headed for the slaughterhouses.

The new law makes the distinction between farm and non-farm purposes but the cow vigilantes have been unable to distinguish the two. In Odisha, a group of

cow vigilantes assaulted the employees of a dairy who were escorting around 20 cows on a train to a government dairy in Meghalaya state.

Those supporting Modi for his economic vision have equally condemned the violence and lynchings. Some even warned that the vigilantism in name of protecting the cow had the potential to cost the BJP the next elections coming up in 2019.

With the country struggling under agrarian and other economic concerns, violence in the name of the cow or religion should probably be the last thing on any Indian's mind.

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FILM

BHALOBASHAR SHOHOR SOMETIMES GREAT THINGS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES

KARIM WAHEED

Do you have 31 minutes? But 31 uninterrupted minutes of no distraction. Go to YouTube and watch "Bhalobashar Shohor" (City of Love). You'll understand how and why Jaya Ahsan is Bangladeshi excellence personified.

If you've been following Jaya's ascending career graph in the Bengali film industry in India [her performance in Kaushik Ganguly's "Bishorjon" has been widely acclaimed by critics and audiences alike and won the award for Best Bengali Film at the recent Indian National Film Awards] and wondering how she has managed to pull off this Herculean feat, this short film provides the answer. The answer is, as an artiste, she is hungry. That hunger—to leave a lasting impression on the audience—is evident in "Bhalobashar Shohor", her first short film.

Directed by Indranil Roychowdhury, the short film was released on YouTube on June 30 [for viewers outside Bangladesh and India, the film is available on



A still from *Bhalobashar Shohor*.

PHOTO: COURTESY

Vimeo]. The film follows a lower middle class woman, Annapurna, living in a crowded Kolkata neighbourhood with her elderly father and comatose daughter. Annapurna works two jobs to make ends meet, seemingly crushed by her reality every day. Through flashback, the audience learns she had eloped with Adil [played by Ritwick Chakraborty] and moved to Homs, Syria in search of a better life. That better life was interrupted as war broke out, leaving shrapnel in her daughter Noorie's head and forcing Annapurna to leave Adil behind. The universal message is this: we all wait for our loved ones to return. In that sense every city is "bhalobashar shohor" – Homs, Kolkata or Dhaka.

Working with a shoestring budget, Indranil

Roychowdhury has successfully narrated a global story within a modest frame. Use of the song "Rangeela" [written by Jasimuddin and originally recorded by SD Burman] sounds appropriate, as it heightens the nuance. As an audience, my only gripe would be an unclear ending.

After the closing credits, details are provided for viewers interested in making monetary contribution to cover production costs. By taking the film directly to the audiences, the director has avoided the snags that usually come with involving major production houses, distributors and a big budget. So far, the film has been viewed over 50K times.

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LABOUR RIGHTS

THE DEATHS COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED

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reason behind this is that these boilers are not checked properly," says Akter.

"It's not just the 5000 factories that are using boilers. There are other unauthorised boilers as well and the inspectors should ideally be checking those too. But it's not possible with just these many inspectors," she adds.

The future of the boiler inspections seems bleak at the moment. According to a government official, a proposal was supposedly sent to the ministry to appoint 350 more inspectors at the office that deals with the inspection of boilers more than a year back. The unfortunate aspect is that despite the urgent need of such inspectors, that proposal seems to be a long way away from making it to the next stage.

Moreover, the factory was covered by the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which is a legally binding agreement between global brands and retailers and trade unions and was designed to build a healthy Bangladeshi garments industry following the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013. The Accord had instructed the factory to construct a separate boiler room and seal and protect all openings to maintain the required fire separations in 2015 during an independent inspection. Although the



PHOTO: TASHLIMA AKTER

The series of deaths isn't a surprise considering that the government has appointed just six inspectors to investigate the all the authorised boilers across the country.

factory had made the adjustments suggested by the Accord, it was not enough to prevent an explosion.

As Scott Nova, the Executive Director of the Worker Rights Consortium, a witness signatory to the Accord notes,

"Boilers are not presently covered in the Accord standard, or the Alliance standard, and are not part of the inspections. The standard requires the separation of the room containing the boiler, using fire-rated construction, but

does not require that the machinery itself be inspected. A powerful explosion, like the one yesterday, cannot be contained by a fire wall. It is therefore essential to inspect the boilers themselves."

The Accord's Witness Signatories have advocated since 2014 for the Accord to cover boilers. "We called for this again, last year, after a fatal boiler explosion at a factory making plastic packaging, unrelated to the garment industry. It should not have required a major disaster in a garment factory to compel brands and retailers to act," states a statement published by four international labour rights groups on July 4 concerning a boiler explosion at Multifabs, Ltd. The groups were Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labor Rights Forum, Worker Rights Consortium and Maquila Solidarity Network, all of whom were witness signatories.

Kalpona Akter, whose organisation is currently working on finding out the root cause of the boiler explosion in Gazipur, perhaps best describes the urgency needed.

"Before we had electric boilers and now most of them are run on gas. I don't know if you have seen the photos of the dead from Gazipur. Their necks were separated from their bodies. These were painful and horrific deaths. We desperately need the inspection system to improve." ■