

A murder is a murder, whatever the context



*The death of Junaid Khan at the hands of a mob sparked rallies, followed by widespread criticism of the protesters. **Maitreesh Ghatak** writes that the danger of dismissing reactions against mob violence is that it perpetuates the view that everything is partisan political fight and references to human rights are just ruses to gain an advantage. He argues that while it is useful to question and understand the context of any incident, we should separate that from the issue of justice and recognise that no violent act is justified.*

The [tragic incident](#) that occurred nearly two weeks ago – when a teenager named Junaid Khan was beaten to death and his brothers, who were travelling with him, physically assaulted by a mob in a train – and the protests that followed have once again converted a human rights issue into a predictable partisan debate.

Junaid and his brothers were clearly targeted for their religion, even though the altercation started with a dispute over seats in a crowded train. Protest rallies were organised in various cities in India and abroad under the banner #NotInMyName, drawing primarily from urban, well-educated, left-liberal Indians. No political party was directly involved, and the main purpose was to convey the message that hate crimes targeted at minorities or Dalits do not have the sanction of all citizens or members of the majority community.

The reactions to the protest rally, primarily from the right-conservative side of the political spectrum, essentially are allegations along the following familiar lines:

First, there is the standard charge of *selective outrage*: for example, [this](#) piece asks, if you think mob violence is bad, why were you silent [when](#) Mohammed Ayub Pandith, a policeman who also happens to be Muslim, was killed by a mob of separatist Muslims outside the Jamia Mosque in Sringar (as a matter of fact, Pandith's killing was mentioned in the #NotInMyName protests).

The second charge is that the protest is based on a *biased narrative*. For example, some have [argued](#) that yes, mob violence is unfortunate, but it happens all the time, even in other countries; isolating one incident and giving it a political colour and relating it to the cow protection movement is politically motivated. Or, that there is a historical context to any inter-group conflict – and so highlighting a single act of atrocity creates a false narrative about who is a victim and who is a perpetrator.

A third line of attack is that the protesters have *questionable credentials* to claim the moral high ground. After all, many of them come from a privileged elite background in a system that is based on caste and gender oppression, as one critic [pointed out](#). Also, the protesters are viewed as typical JNU-style leftists who are sympathetic to political movements where violence is often used, such as by Kashmiri separatists or Maoists, and not ordinary citizens genuinely moved by human rights violation.

If instead of this particular protest movement, we take another similar one – say, [the JNU protests](#) last year – we will see the reactions will fall neatly into one of these categories. But now let us flip this around: suppose a protest movement was organised in response to a terrorist attack in Kashmir, or mob violence involving the minority community such as [this incident](#) in West Bengal, or an instance of Maoist violence. We can immediately see that the reactions are also going to be very similar although coming from the other side of the political spectrum – and would involve charges of selective outrage (why not protest when *gau-rakshaks* engage in violence), biased narrative (why are you highlighting only these incidents and not looking at the factors that triggered it, such as state violence in Kashmir or Chhattisgarh), and questionable credentials of the protesters or the alleged victims (oh, these are all Sangh *Parivar* activists).

In fact, these three types of reactions to protests we do not like all boil down to a single charge: the view that this is a partisan political fight and human rights or other universal humanist principles are just ruses to gain advantage in this political fight.

Ideological bias is easy to recognise in others but not in ourselves. We all have our political, cultural, and ideological biases. When we interpret real world events, our interpretations are inevitably coloured by these biases. Therefore, it is a good to have a tussle between different points of view to average out the biases, learn from each other's experiences, and in the process, form a better understanding of the issues.

For example, without having a sense of context or narrative, we would not understand why people resort to vigilantism, crime, or terrorism. Unless we do that, we will not find a long-term solution to these problems, whether it is through reforms in policing or the legal system that will deter people from engaging in such destructive activities, or through greater economic opportunities that will turn people away from violence.

It is natural and even healthy to have different and competing narratives, and to hope that the ones we are more sympathetic to are eventually seen as more persuasive than others. It is also natural to be more outraged when a violent incident fits the political narrative we believe in, as opposed to one that contradicts it.

This is exactly like in sports – we want our teams to win. However, in the process of pursuing victory, whether in sports or in the political domain, we should also realise that there is one important dimension in which there is no conflict of interest: the game must go on. And for that, we have a common interest in ensuring that the rules of the game are followed. If we keep on questioning the legitimacy of the game or as supporters, keep taking matters in our own hand and engaging in mob-violence, it might provide temporary relief from the pain of losing a match, but the actual loss will be much larger -the game itself will cease to exist, and we will all lose.

Coming back to the issue of mob violence and terrorism, past and present injustices may be useful to understand the context better, but we should separate that from the issue of justice, both in the moral and legal sense. From this point of view, no violent act is justified, whatever may be the underlying factors, and we must treat a murder as a murder, a terrorist attack as a terrorist attack, a lynching as a lynching, and a riot as a riot, irrespective of the identities of the victim and the perpetrator. If we don't, it will trap us in a partisan debate that can never end. And we will all lose in the end by effectively legitimising violence.

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