

MASS HYSTERIA: THE CASE OF MONKEY MAN IN DELHI

Dr Manisha Sharma

Associate Professor, Department of History

Janki Devi Memorial College

University of Delhi

Abstract

The present paper represents the case of Mass Hysteria with special reference to the case of Monkey man in Delhi. The paper focuses on the role of socio economic, environmental factors as being greatly responsible for the cause of Mass Hysteria. This spread is often facilitated by social networks, media exposure, and pre-existing anxieties within a community. The paper also refers to the role of the administration and the Local Police in maintaining a situation of law and order in the case of monkey man

Key Points: *Collective distress, monkey man, mass anxiety, slums, vigilante groups.*

INTRODUCTION: Mass hysteria, a captivating and unsettling phenomenon, exposes the intricate interplay between individual psychology and collective behaviour. Characterized by the rapid spread of physical symptoms, beliefs, or emotions within a group, often in the absence of an identifiable organic cause, mass hysteria offers a glimpse into the potent influence of social dynamics and the fragility of rational thought.

Historically, mass hysteria has been shrouded in misunderstanding and misdiagnosis, often attributed to supernatural forces or dismissed as mere imagination. The term itself, laden with negative connotations, has been criticized for its tendency to pathologize collective distress and ignore underlying social and cultural factors. While the term "mass psychogenic illness" has been proposed as a more neutral alternative, it's crucial to approach the phenomenon with sensitivity and avoid reducing complex human experiences to simplistic labels.

One of the key characteristics of mass hysteria is its rapid and contagious nature.

Crystal Raypole describes it as "a rapid spread of panic and fear," highlighting the role of emotional contagion in amplifying and spreading symptoms". This spread is often facilitated by social networks, media exposure, and pre-existing anxieties within a community. For instance, Islam et al illustrates 'how the spread of misinformation and rumours during the COVID-19 pandemic fuelled panic buying and exacerbated societal anxieties.

While often associated with dramatic physical symptoms like fainting, convulsions, or paralysis, mass hysteria can also manifest as shared delusions, anxieties, or unusual behaviours.

Wessley suggests a “distinction between two forms: "mass anxiety hysteria" characterized by acute anxiety outbreaks, and "mass motor hysteria" involving abnormal motor behaviors”. This distinction underscores the diverse manifestations of the phenomenon and the need for nuanced understanding”.

The Case of Monkey Man in Delhi --

Over the last two decades, Delhi and the National Capital Region have witnessed three significant cases of mass hysteria and collective panic. One of the most notable incidents occurred in 2001, involving widespread sightings of a mysterious figure described as a "monkey-man". This unsettling phenomenon instilled a pervasive sense of fear and terror across the capital. The first reported case of monkey-man-related violence was in April 2001 in Sahibabad, a part of the National Capital Region. In the following weeks, more alarming reports emerged of sightings of a large, monkey-like silhouette prowling the streets. This disturbing phenomenon quickly spread to East Delhi, where the purported "monkey-man" was claimed to be seen attacking and assaulting people late at night, further exacerbating the public's sense of insecurity and dread. The news of these attacks circulated rapidly, with several reports of victims being clawed or pushed by the so-called monkey-man. The event received extensive media coverage in India, amplifying public fear.

Under this heightened sense of alarm, residents armed themselves with sticks and axes, forming vigilante groups to protect their neighbourhoods from the perceived threat of the monkey-man. However, this led to unintended consequences, as reports of attacks on innocent strangers by these vigilantes began to increase. In their zeal to apprehend the elusive "monkey-man", the vigilantes became overzealous and often resorted to indiscriminate violence, targeting anyone they deemed suspicious. This escalation of tensions led to a breakdown of law and order, as the authorities struggled to control the situation and prevent further harm to innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire of the public's hysteria.

The extensive news coverage and public interviews put considerable pressure on the government to address the situation. As a result, the authorities were drawn into the matter. Between April and May 2001, Delhi police received over a hundred phone calls reporting sightings of the mysterious monkey-man figure. Despite the widespread panic and fear that gripped the region, the number of reported sightings gradually decreased over time. By June 2001, both media attention and public obsession with the alleged monkey-man had significantly faded, allowing a sense of normalcy to gradually return to the National Capital Region.

During the periods of mass hysteria, legal transgressions were observed on several occasions. Vigilante justice, attacks on innocent individuals, and widespread fear-mongering were rampant. However, these acts of transgression largely went unpunished, as the societal upheaval made it difficult for the authorities to maintain order and deliver justice. The society was deeply convulsed by these events, and the functioning of the social machinery was severely disrupted. The convoluted complaints and reports further caused confusion and uncertainty, making it challenging for the authorities to respond effectively.

The case of monkey man has been understood to be a case of mass hysteria in its psychological context but the socio-economic circumstances revolving around cause of mass hysteria have played an important role in aggravating the spread of mass hysteria in the societies. The most important causes responsible for the spread of this collective hysteria in the case of the so-called monkey man have been many like:

1. Occurrence in Densely populated area:

The incident of Monkey man took place in the slum areas of East Delhi and Ghaziabad.

“The living space for these slum dwellers was also very small; the data revealed that 98.32 per cent of the households had per capita floor area (PCFA) less than the national average of 102 sq. feet per person, 26 13.78 per cent households have PCFA less than 12 sq. feet and 2.01 per cent households have PCFA less than 6 sq. feet’. The huts in slums are primarily semi-pucca, and are constructed with bricks, polythene and plastic sheets these were the places where people of very low income groups lived.” .

Moreover, most of the people lived in joint families. This is also a great possibility that in such areas people gathered to discuss the recent incidents taking place in their locality which led to the situation of panic in those areas.

2. Poor environmental sanitations:

It is also believed that the people living in the affected areas worked in poor environmental conditions which lacked sanitation. Under such poor conditions of working their minds are in a state of fear and superstition. The occurrence of the incident of mass hysteria also has taken place in the slums of Delhi where:

‘The Census Report of 2011 reveals that besides alarmingly increasing in metropolitan cities, slums are fast spreading their tentacles in smaller cities as well and presently constitute over 62 per cent of their population. It is not just a problem of overpopulated cities which are fighting the lost battle of encroachment and unauthorised construction to contain the menace of slums, but even the most posh and least populated civic body of the country - New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC)³- hides several slums in the backyard of VIP bungalows, ministries of the Union government, popular hospitals and hotels. The inhuman living conditions of urban poor living in slums have been a serious concern for policy makers since the dawn of democracy in India, but the number of slums and their population kept increasing year by year’ .

3. Lack of Education causing superstition leading to Hysteria:

The people living in the affected areas belonged to a class of uneducated people which believed in superstition and orthodoxy. ‘The survey of slum dwellers in Delhi brings out very interesting and important social and economic aspects about them. It shows the predominance of males among the city's migrant population, where the level of education is abysmally low among males and more so among females’ . Due to the prevalence of illiteracy in the affected areas they believed initially that

the monkey man was a supernatural figure. The imagination of the people regarding the so called monkey man went to the extent of imagining him to be a man which has three buttons attached to his body. The first button gave him super powers to attack, the second button to allow him to change his appearance and the third button made him disappear. Such imaginations can only be expected from a person who due to the lack of education is unable to find rationality in the things happening around him.

“This population is more vulnerable to such type of illnesses due to their low educational level as evident from the fact that only 2 victims were educated more than higher secondary level i.e., class XI standard. Review of literature also suggests that these outbreaks of mass hysteria often occur among population with low educational status. “VI

4. Formation of vigilante groups:

The terror of the so called monkey went to the extent of formation of vigilante groups who would injure anyone who was suspected to be a monkey. The irrationality and fear went up to such an extent in these low socio economic groups and sometimes the vigilante groups formed by them even led to the taking away of a person's life. Some such incidents were also reported by the media like The CNN reported that a frenzied mob of around 150 people caught and had beaten up a man in the East of Delhi only to discover that he was an innocent man. In their zeal to apprehend the elusive "monkey-man", the vigilantes became overzealous and often resorted to indiscriminate violence, targeting anyone they deemed suspicious. This escalation of tensions led to a breakdown of law and order, as the authorities struggled to control the situation and prevent further harm to innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire of the public's hysteria. “Youths armed with axes and sticks, meanwhile, have started patrolling the streets, and right-wing Hindu activists have taken up strategic positions with swords and scimitars.” .

5. Disparity in imagining the picture of Monkey man:

The vagueness and ambiguity of the imagined figure of the monkey man lies in the fact that the figure of monkey man imagined by the different types of people differed greatly .According to some people the monkey man had a Chinese like appearance and it height was 5 feet 4 inches whereas others said that he looked more like a monkey and less like a man with a height of 5 feet 8 inches. “Some victims say he wears a helmet; others insist that he sports metal claws, has a shaggy black hide - and possibly roller-skates. At least one man has died after tumbling off a building in panic when his neighbor cried: "The monkey man is here!" Such variations clearly points towards the irrationality amongst the people in a modern age.

6. Role of press and media –

The role of media has been particularly very significant in spreading mass hysteria. Within a month of the occurrence of monkey man incidence the terror of it spread very rapidly. ‘The press and media gave extensive coverage to the whole outbreak from the very beginning’. .The people not living in the affected areas were frightened by reading the increasing cases of monkey man in the newspapers and

watching it as major headlines in leading news channels like NDTV, CNN. Photographs and interviews of the victims and other experts were telecasts and printed in media and newspapers respectively. This was also a time when there was competence amongst the news channels for increasing their channel's ratings. "All this facilitated and spread of the outbreak against the background of stress, as the phrasing in the press was emotionally laden".

7. Economic Loss -

More than just causing anxiety and fear amongst the people of the terror of monkey man, it caused great financial loss to the people in the affected areas as in the locality shops would close down after sunset to avoid the outbreak of any incident with them in the dark." Even a Bollywood flick of Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra named 'Dilli 6' showed a scene of monkey man attacking residents of Old Delhi." . The places in East Delhi and Ghaziabad where the incidence of monkey man took place the people going for work would return back early in the fear that they should their homes safely so that they are not affected by the monkey man attack. It affected the income of the workers working on daily wages.

Steps taken by Government and the local Police –

The slums of the affected areas were those places where there were long power cuts by the electricity board, therefore it was easy to have an imaginable figure attacking the people and walking away. However the areas with proper electrification in the nearby areas were not victimized by the so called monkey man. "New Delhi's wealthiest residents were not sweating and exposed on dark, crowded rooftops but were at home under air conditioning—using portable generators during the blackouts."xi After the breakout of the incident the Government took measures to improve the electrification of those areas which otherwise had suffered by long durations of power cuts. The local police deployed around 3000 policeman to catch of the monkey man. The government also acted promptly by improving the power supply in those areas.

CONCLUSION:

Within a span of two moths the case of monkey man and its terror faded away. The police start taking strict action against the persons giving hoax call to the police .A warning was also issued to the public that punishable action will be taken against those misleading the police in the case of 'Monkeyman'. The case of Monkey Man clearly represents a case of Mass Hysteria. It took place in communities which were tightly knit together. The study of mass hysteria presents a unique challenge to psychology, demanding a delicate balance between acknowledging the reality of collective distress and avoiding reductive explanations those pathologies social phenomena. While psychological research has offered valuable insights into the mechanisms of emotional contagion and the influence of social dynamics, it has also, at times, fallen short in fully capturing the complexities of mass hysteria, often perpetuating misunderstandings and misrepresentations. Though mass hysteria is clearly a case of psychological distress but factors in leading the emergence of such distress are many like environmental factors, lack of education, claustrophobic dwellings, areas with complete blackouts, and punishable action for those spreading rumours. Actions like improving the slum

dwelling, improving electrification by reducing power cuts at night, increasing literacy rate, better environment condition to the workers, reducing their exploitation by minimising their extra hours of work can be some solution to the chaos created in the society by Mass Hysteria.

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Corresponding Author: Dr Manisha Sharma

E-mail: manishasharma@jdm.du.ac.in

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