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The Onion Witch of Delhi: Folklore, Fear, and Mass Hysteria in ‘An Urban Metropolis’

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Abstract: Indian society has no dearth of incidents that cannot be explained, yet have had a profound impact on its people, whose beliefs often shape into phantom menaces that defy verification and cannot be easily confronted or brought to justice. One such case was the Onion Witch panic of 2005 in Delhi. Folklore and fear gave rise to a clear situation of mass hysteria, echoing the Monkey Man panic a few years earlier that gained national attention. It was alleged that a woman (supposedly a witch, or in some versions a group of three witches) was going door to door and asking for an onion; if provided, she would cut the onion at the doorstep, causing blood to allegedly spurt out, after which it was believed that the household would experience deaths within days. This present research paper examines this occult panic as an early outbreak of mass hysteria and its severe consequences for the alleged ‘witches’, which instilled lasting fear among community members. By critically examining media sources and historical classifications of mass hysteria, the Onion Witch incident provides an opportunity to understand how urban folklore and fear intersect to create social menace, even within a metropolis often associated with modernity and rationality.

Keywords: Hysteria, Folklore, Orthodox, Superstitions, Psyche, etc.

Introduction: In the year 2005, a rumor of such strength gathered momentum that many believed in it beyond rationality and other considerations. The rumor, purported primarily in the Sagarpur and outer Delhi area, detailed the testimony of several victims who fell prey to a woman who knocked at their door asking for an onion and, upon receiving it, cut it open and blood flowed out of it. These victims and their family members were soon considered to be deceased because of this incident, a claim which, of course, remains unprovable. No matter the ground reality of the alleged victims, the lore managed to haunt almost every house in the outer Delhi area, which resulted in superstitious remedies: “Those falling for the gag are applying palm prints of turmeric and henna on doors to ward off her (witch’s) evil eye”¹

A curious mind is forced to wonder how such a rumour spread in an urban metropolis, the capital of India, no less. The answer is not as complicated as one might consider because, at

the end of the day, the urban population of any town has its roots in the village, and what some might consider superstitious or ‘obviously untrue’ might be based on true faith for others, allowing their minds to rationalise that phenomenon. The formation of this rumour can easily be attributed to the legends or tales that people grew up learning. Patrick Mullen insightfully pointed out, “A legend can break down in transmission until there is no longer a narrative but merely a core statement, a rumour left... Thus, the most logical conclusion is that the relationship of rumour and modern legend is one of interaction; they are constantly feeding one another.”²

Main Text: Delhi, a prized gem of countless civilisations before colonial times, has always been an urban centre of trade and commerce, tracing the journey of millions of individuals from a rural to an urban setting. Everyone who ever came to Delhi, in search of fame or fortune, must have had a history of cultural beliefs that were sacred and central to them. These beliefs were never left behind when they chose a new life for themselves and have, consequently, affected the metropolis in several ways that shape modern perception even today. It is this superstition that allowed the spread of misinformation about the Onion Witch. Dipesh Chakrabarty defined superstition as, “We can use the word “superstition” to refer to practices marked by two features: (a) they entail human beings appealing to supernatural, extra-human forces for positive or negative interventions in their lives and (b) these forces cannot be systematised into a set of religious doctrines.”³

Delhi’s history of mighty conquests often underscores its history of mass hysteria outbreaks. India, as a nation, has collectively witnessed mass hysteria time and again, owing to its deeply religious people who believe in the fantastic and the macabre, making them relatively vulnerable to becoming prey to superstitious rumours that cause widespread panic. Delhi’s infamous Monkey Man incident and the Phantom Barber case are two such instances where the people of Delhi (and, to an extent, North India) were haunted by rumours of an unconfirmed Monkey Man who was killing people and a phantom barber who was cutting off women’s braids in an attempt to subdue them using black magic. In both of these cases, the general public resorted to immediate violence owing to mass hysteria since they wanted to be extra cautious to protect themselves. Any person or thing that was suspected of being even slightly connected to these phenomena was brutally attacked. Reports about the monkey man stated:

“It’s no laughing matter either -- three people have been killed and more than 60 have been injured in the panic caused by fear of the monkey man... Tired and scared, the people patrols often turn violent. An angry crowd smashed one van when they suspected it was the monkey man’s getaway car.”⁴

Similar incidents happened at the time of the Phantom Barber panic:

“In Mewat, they killed a cat because someone had visions of it turning into a witch. In the only “case” cracked so far, two young pranksters confessed to sniping a 14-year-old girl’s braid. While one of the pranksters was her brother, the other was her nephew. But that’s not stopped the contagion.”⁵

Throughout 2005–2007, the rumour spread and mutated like a living organism. What began as a simple tale of a witch asking for onions soon evolved into a darker narrative, suggesting not one witch but a trio carrying out this sinister practice. People even recalled believing that offering a

large onion would doom the eldest child, while a small one would condemn the youngest. Refusing to open the door, however, was thought to bring death to someone random.

This case of the *Onion Witch* highlights the most negative consequences of mass hysteria that a society is sometimes forced to encounter. Mass hysteria, also known by terms such as: “*collective psychogenic illness, epidemic hysteria, or mass psychogenic illness (MPI)*, refers to a psychological phenomenon where a large group of people begin to exhibit abnormal, irrational behaviour and experience similar symptoms without a clear physical or pathological cause”⁶.

The *Onion Witch* was, of course, never found but still lives on in people’s collective memory as an incident of horror and panic. It was the belief in something inexplicable that propagated the myth, as it inspired not only fear but awe in the entire population, and as we know, “No one is immune from mass sociogenic illness because humans continually construct reality and the perceived dangers need only to be plausible in order to gain acceptance within a particular group and generate anxiety.”⁷

Although the Onion witch incident does not perfectly align with the distinction created by Simon Wessely, it remains exponentially relevant when critically evaluating its grassroots implication within a society that is often defined by a collective anxiety and contagious mentality. Wesley, in his analysis of mass hysteria, created two broad categories:

“One form, to be called 'mass anxiety hysteria', consists of episodes of acute anxiety, occurring mainly in schoolchildren. Prior tension is absent, and the rapid spread is by visual contact. Treatment consists of separating the participants and the prognosis is good. The second form, to be called 'mass motor hysteria', consists of abnormalities in motor behaviour. It occurs in any age group and prior tension is present. Initial cases can be identified, and the spread is gradual.”⁸

While the Onion Witch panic does not fit neatly into either of the above-mentioned categories, it appears to demonstrate features of both. The spread of misinformation, much like in mass anxiety hysteria, was very rapid, and the pre-existing social tension often linked with motor hysteria was also a factor in its onset.

Although this panic predates the massive outbreak of social media, the information still managed to spread rapidly across a wide array. This was aided (to a certain extent) by newspaper and media coverage, but it was largely spread by word of mouth. It became a part of the oral tradition of people who were linked together, and these rumours not only spread but multiplied and adapted with time (as discussed earlier). The Onion Witch Narrative runs parallel to how information propagates in social network models. A study in Germany about spreading rumours in a social network stated, “‘information spreads extremely fast in social networks’ and a simple push strategy, where ‘each vertex that knows the rumour forwards it to a randomly chosen neighbour,’ quickly disseminates information to the entire network.”⁹ This makes it clear how informal personal communication can also achieve wide coverage in surprisingly little time, a phenomenon clearly observable in the spread of the onion witch rumor.

The compelling incident of the *Onion Witch* panic stands as a testament to how folklore, fear, and social dynamics greet each other to create episodes of mass hysteria in urban settings, time and again. What started out as a seemingly implausible story took no time in transforming

into a nationwide panic, capable of altering social behaviour and shaping people's perception of reality for years to come. The rumour endured, despite the absence of verifiable evidence, which reveals to the keen observer the powerful belief system and inherited cultural narratives of Indian society.

This case further demonstrated that mass hysteria is not limited to rural contexts but can spread within the urban metropolis just as quickly, if not more. Even in a modern city like Delhi, which houses some of the most educated people in the country and the most modern infrastructure and technology, rumours had the ability to bypass rationality and embed themselves into daily life. Furthermore, the Onion Witch rumour spread rapidly, not through the well-established social media network that we know and understand today, but rather by face-to-face communication and word of mouth spread within local networks.

Conclusion: The incident also showcases the need of contextual sensitivity when examining panic-driven societies. It reveals the true influence of cultural beliefs, inherited faiths and fears that continue to shape the modern globalised world. Moreover, it highlights the real importance of timely interventions, including but not limited to fact-checking and responsible media coverage, to prevent the spread of misinformation.

Ultimately, the *Onion Witch* panic surpasses its traditional classification of an urban legend. It becomes a case study in how communities respond to uncertainty, reminding us that myths are not merely relics of the past but are carried on by oral traditions and kept alive by people's collective memory. The *Onion Witch* might not have been real, but the fear and panic it evoked were very real.

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