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India's Monkey Man and the Politics of Mass Hysteria - Brief Article

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A mysterious creature dubbed the Monkey Man allegedly attacked people in the Indian capital of New Delhi during May 2001--this intruder apparently a combination of Superman and Batman as it is reported to have extraordinary physical agility (like flying from one rooftop to another) and prefers darkness to light. Its ambushes were most noticeable in and around the congested colonies of lower middle class people in East Delhi, where panic spread like wildfire. Innocent people were either harassed or arrested and newsmen were beaten up. People even organized night patrols and began to invoke Hanuman or Bajrangbali-- the Hindu Monkey God of Prowess--to save them from the Monkey Man!

Several handsome rewards were offered for information leading to the arrest of the Monkey Man. The All India Sadbhavana Sangathan (AISS) had offered around \$760; the police offered a similar amount. The AISS--which aims to promote peace and harmony-- said the public has a civic obligation to help apprehend this mysterious half-man-half-animal.

Routine police operations had ground to a standstill since the beginning of this baseless panic as there were hundreds of crank calls, false alarms, and incidents of simple mischief. An inebriated person called the local police station, claiming that the Monkey Man had stolen his mobile telephone! Other people faked injuries to attract media coverage, while even educated and supposedly responsible professionals like doctors and lawyers had joined in the charade. The police, at an early stage in their investigation, had even concluded that these creatures of the night were actually remote-controlled robots being maneuvered by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence!

Delhi police, moreover, were confident after a while that they were close to solving the Monkey Man mystery. They said they had narrowed down their area of investigation and were confident of making early arrests. They also claimed that the attacks were being made not by a mysterious animal but by human miscreants dressed in crash helmets, leather jackets, and dark glasses.

The Monkey Man was blamed for hundreds of attacks. The city's Joint Commissioner of Police, Suresh Roy, told the media, "We have already narrowed down our suspicion on the people involved in the mischief. We should be able to end this soon." However, reports of Monkey Man attacks in New Delhi became less frequent after a few weeks of mass hysteria, although hoax telephone calls continued almost unabated. New Delhi's Joint Police Commissioner said that the situation was inching back to normal, and his force would keep strict vigil over any rumor-mongering detrimental to public interest.

Tales of violent nocturnal attacks had spread through a city known for its affinity for urbane culture and information technology when this official stricture was finally announced, and many people claimed to have been injured by this nightmarish intruder. Officials later conceded that the problem was entirely concocted by mischief makers fueling mass hysteria. Forensic officers had been investigating alleged incidents, along with volunteers and counselors, explaining to the panic-stricken people that the Monkey Man was not real.

The number of attacks attributed to the Monkey Man began to decrease as a result. Several arrests were made for making bogus claims about the attacks though others still claimed that they had been terrorized. Residents of Delhi had even claimed that the Monkey Man had killed two persons and injured scores of others.

Police brought in medical experts to examine the injuries allegedly caused by the Monkey Man. Joint Police Commissioner Roy said on-the-spot examinations would help people "overcome the delusion." In many cases wounds supposed to have been recently sustained were actually two to three days old!

Academics and counselors were also involved in police efforts to fight the widespread panic. Reports of Monkey Man attacks declined after New Delhi Police arrested a dozen people for spreading rumors. The police said they received more than 260 hoax calls since this bizarre incident had begun first in nearby Ghaziabad and then in New Delhi. Those caught in the act of spreading rumors were threatened with heavy fines and six months of imprisonment.

India's Monkey Man syndrome clearly demonstrates the palpable dangers of mass hysteria, how people tend to believe whatever they are made to believe or, even worse, what they would actually prefer to believe. This is dangerous mob mentality and cannot be allowed to spread by rational and responsible individuals. India has also witnessed similar incidents in the recent past--an identical intruder called the Stoneman had allegedly killed street people many years ago in Calcutta. This was later exposed in the press as a cover-up operation by none other than a certain section of the police force! We have to constantly remind ourselves of the virtues of citizens' vigil and conscious community policing underpinned by an enlightened sense of collective responsibility and well-being.

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