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The Big Picture: Tackling Rumours

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Spreading misinformation and creating panic has become easier in the digital era. These rumours can easily evolve into violence and riot-like situations which may be difficult to control. Media regulation and preparedness of police to deal with such situations has thus become imperative to discuss. Social Media is a double-edged sword that on one hand has exacerbated the reach percolation and intensity of fake news and misinformation but on the other hand, has enabled the police to easily trace the culprit.

Increased Instances of Rumour Spreading

- Heightened tensions prevailed in the national capital as the rumour spread regarding riot-related violence and arson and stone-pelting.

- As the rumours spread, police were inundated with calls from certain areas. Delhi police got over 3,000 distress calls from people panicked over riot-related rumours.
- More than 500 distress calls were made from west Delhi alone, causing a mobile network jam in the city.
- The rumours prompted senior police officers to come on the ground and quell the hoax. The police also took to social media to control panic.

SOP of Police

- **Tackle the rumours:** Rumour-mongering puts undue pressure on the police. The police are expected to tackle the situation by putting out statements to quell the rumour.
- **Reach out to public:** The police may use both the traditional media platforms as well as official social media handles to reach out to the public.
They may also conduct patrols in the impacted area.

Laws to Deal with Rumors

- **Section 153A:** It deals with promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony
All hate crimes can be penalized under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code.
- **Section 505:** Criminalizes making statements, reports or rumors that encourages members of armed forces or a police officer to refuse to perform his duty, encourages a person to commit offences against the state or disturb public tranquillity and incites persons to disturb public tranquillity.
It does not amount to an offence, within the meaning of this section when the person making, publishing or circulating any such statement, rumour or report, has reasonable grounds for believing that such statement, rumour or report is true and makes, publishes or circulates it in good faith and without any malafide intent.
- Offences committed under both sections are cognizable which means that an accused can be arrested without a warrant.

Surveillance vs Privacy

- The Supreme Court in Justice K. S. Puttaswamy (Retd) Vs Union of India unanimously held that Indians have a constitutionally protected fundamental right to privacy that is an intrinsic part of life and liberty under Article 21.
However, this right is not absolute and is subject to certain restrictions.
- Governments can demand information in the larger national interest if a certain post is responsible for rumour-mongering. There are certain basic barriers for such action

- Hon'ble Chandrachud J. Supreme Court judge in Puttaswamy (Privacy) judgment, noted that any invasion of life or personal liberty must meet 3 requirements of:
 - **Legality**, i.e. there must be a law in existence.
 - **Legitimate aim/State interest**, which includes goals like national security, proper deployment of national resources, and protection of revenue, social welfare.
 - **Proportionality** of the legitimate aims with the object sought to be achieved. There should be a rational nexus between the objects and the means adopted to achieve them.

Way Forward

- Digital footprints help the police in closely monitoring the social media accounts spreading fake news or rumors and take action against them.
- **Modernisation of police force:** Limitation of resources including skilled manpower and technology to monitor social media has been a challenge.
 - With the digitization of society increasing number of cybercrimes, there is an immediate need to equip the police with the required paraphernalia to deal with technology-based crimes.
- **Responsible behavior:** Most people today have the tendency to forward information without even going through the content just for the sake of feel-good factor.
 - Media Literacy is required for people to avoid falling in the trap of fake news forwards.
- Rumour mongering on social media privacy issues should be considered in the light of national interest.
- **Public and police cooperation:** To effectively combat the menace of fake news the cooperation between public and the police is of immense importance. There have been certain initiatives by the Delhi Police to bring about the same.
- **Aman Committees:** In around 1980, in several areas in Delhi these committees were formed. Also known as Nagrik Suraksha Samiti they are formed in areas that are marked sensitive (residents are a mixed lot, practising different religions).
 - The committee consists of police officers, members of political parties and residents from various communities.
 - Representatives who hold a position of significance in their residential areas and are popular enough are picked so, in case of an emergency, they can work as an interface between the police and the people.
- **Police Mitras:** It is an initiative started in 2016 wherein the civilians would assist the police in handling local matters in an initiative to strengthen the relationship of the security force and the public.