

## WORLD

# India's far-right politics in year of the lynch mob

HAZARIBAGH, INDIA

## U.S.-educated official feted men accused in a killing, leading to broad outrage

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN AND HARI KUMAR

Jayant Sinha is a Celtics fan. He graduated from Harvard. He worked for McKinsey.

Born and raised in India but minted in the United States, he found wealth and success in the Boston area, home of the Celtics basketball team and Harvard University. His American friends say his politics were moderate, maybe even progressive.

Then he returned to India.

He ditched the suits he had worn as a partner at McKinsey & Company, an elite management consulting firm, in favor of traditional Indian kurtas. He joined the governing Hindu nationalist political party and became a member of Parliament and then a minister, leading Hindu parades and showering worshipers with flower petals from a helicopter.

This month, he also celebrated eight men who had been part of a Hindu lynch mob that the authorities said beat an unarmed and terrified Muslim man to death. His embracing of the attackers, who were convicted of murder, has become the political stunt that Indians can't stop talking about.

Across the country, the images of Mr. Sinha draping wreaths of marigolds around the men's necks have started a conversation about whether the state of Indian politics has become so poisoned by sectarian hatred and extremism that even an ostensibly worldly and successful politician can't resist its pull.

It has become the year of the lynch mob in India. Dozens of people have been beaten to death, often in cold blood, by crowds of bored young men who alternate between booting someone in the

**"It's only going to encourage more lynching. But Jayant was concerned his party would dump him, and this will help."**

head and taking a selfie. Suggestions of whom to kill rip so fast through villages via social media, especially WhatsApp, that no one seems able to stop them.

In this atmosphere, some conclude that Mr. Sinha might actually win votes for his maneuver.

"He'll get some benefit," said Rajiv Kumar, a homeopathic medicine salesman and one of Mr. Sinha's constituents. "I don't agree with what he did; it's only going to encourage more lynching. But Jayant was concerned his party would dump him, and this will help."

Mr. Sinha says he now feels horrible about honoring the convicts.

"In a highly polarized environment, this became a spark and I regret giving the spark," he said in an interview. "I wouldn't do it again."

For decades, a center-leftist political organization, the Indian National Congress, dominated politics.

But four years ago, India's political landscape was wiped clean. The Bharatiya Janata Party, with its roots in Hindu supremacy, won overwhelmingly, and the party's top figure, Narendra Modi, became prime minister. Mr. Modi promised to stoke India's go-go economy, and he recruited Mr. Sinha, who had built a small fortune in the United States as a consultant and hedge fund manager, to help him.

It didn't hurt that Mr. Sinha's father was a senior member of the Indian Parliament and the Bharatiya Janata Party. With Mr. Modi's backing, Mr. Sinha easily won the election to take over his father's seat. He was made a finance min-

But the area he represents, centered in the bushy town of Hazaribagh (which means "a thousand gardens"), is poor, troubled and socially conservative. Lying more than 500 miles east of New Delhi in the state of Jharkhand, it is home to coal mines, Maoist rebels and land-grabbing gangs.

Like so much of India today, Hazaribagh is more polarized between majority Hindus and minority Muslims than it has been in a long time. Many people here support Hindu vigilante groups, especially the so-called cow protectors who hunt down those who break Hinduism's taboo against killing cows.

It was one such vigilante group that swarmed Alimuddin Ansari, a Muslim trader, in Mr. Sinha's constituency last year. A rumor spread that Mr. Ansari was transporting beef, and a mob dragged him out of his van and beat him. Police officers eventually pulled him away, but he died a few hours later from internal injuries, officials said.

His family is now broke.

"My life is doomed," said Mariam Khatoun, his widow. She sat in a plastic chair in a ramshackle house, the concrete foundation cracking beneath her feet.

From cellphone footage — the culprits gleefully shot pictures of themselves hitting Mr. Ansari — investigators identified 12 culprits and a court sentenced all of them except a juvenile to life in prison.

But a higher court recently granted an appeal, saying the evidence was flimsy. And where did eight of the men go the moment they were granted bail? Mr. Sinha's house, where he was waiting with plates of sweets and wreaths of marigolds.

There is still a mystery about how Mr. Ansari died. A lawyer representing some of the convicted men said that, yes, the mob had roughed up Mr. Ansari but that it was actually police officers who beat him to death, in custody. The lawyer pointed to photos that have been circulating on social media that show Mr. Ansari looking alert and apparently not badly injured as officers led him away from the mob. The trial court had heard many of these arguments and rejected them.

Mr. Sinha said he was helping the convicts because there was "no evidence" that they killed Mr. Ansari. He has actively supported their legal defense, paying several hundred dollars to one of the defense lawyers and connecting this lawyer to an experienced attorney friend to craft a persuasive appeal.

He celebrated their release from jail with sweets and flowers, he said, to show how happy he was that they "got a fresh lease on life."

But Mr. Sinha conceded that he never made a condolence call to Mr. Ansari's widow, who is also his constituent. He said it was too dangerous to visit her, an excuse that raises questions. Her scruffy little house sits on a quiet lane. And with his ministerial security detail, it's hard to imagine anyone in that neighborhood bothering Mr. Sinha.

National elections are scheduled for next year, and Mr. Sinha might have been feeling vulnerable. He has hewed to the political right since his time in the United States, but in today's India, his right may not be right enough.

Neither he nor his father came up through the ranks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right-wing Hindu ideological group that molded Mr. Modi and other top members of his party. Recently, Mr. Sinha had been taking heat from a former lawmaker in his constituency who said he was not doing enough to help the convicted killers.

"There was a lot of resentment toward Jayant," said Abhijit Sen, a senior journalist in Hazaribagh. "Those others forced him to act."

Mr. Sinha insisted that he had tried to stay out of the case because it was so divisive. But after he studied the files, he said, he became convinced that there was much more to it than initially reported. He regrets the garlands but not