

WITCH-HUNTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
A SERIOUS CHALLENGE TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL
TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract. Beliefs in witchcraft result in witch-hunts. Today, in many rural parts of India, if a woman is confirmed as a witch by the local *Ojha*, she receives all sorts of tortures: beating, burn injuries, insertion of different objects in the intimate parts, she is forced to walk naked through the village, eat human excrements or raped, her hair, nose or ears are cut and teeth are removed, her land and properties are destroyed or confiscated, she is forced to leave the village or killed. These acts of violence are occurring at an alarming rate in the villages of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Haryana, Orissa, Assam, and other rural regions. We are facing, thus, a serious threat to the empowerment of women in Indian society. The main objectives of this study are to identify the factors behind witch-hunts, the nature of witchcraft practices, and to provide some suggestions for eradicating such behaviours.

Keywords: witchcraft, witch-hunt, violence, empowerment, women, society, tribal, Dalit

INTRODUCTION

Indian philosophical tradition has shown respect for women and their place in society. In Indian religion, there is no dishonourable or derogatory remark to them (Ghosh 2010, 15). The woman is regarded as a divine power called *Mahasakti*. Manu, the ancient social philosopher, said that God is pleased when women are honoured. In the Vedic period, the status of women was so high and they enjoined freedom in their life. The evidence shows that women of

those days were allowed to study *Veda* and fine arts. They were enjoying equal rights in social and religious life.

Women emerged as a distinct interest group in the 19th century, primarily because the democratic revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries' bourgeoisie excluded them from the right to equality. Since then, they are facing different types of serious socio-economic and cultural challenges, such as domestic violence, trafficking, rape, witchcraft accuses and the continuous struggle for the recognition of their rights as human beings. All this time, they performed multilateral roles in society, as bread earners and caretakers of their families as mothers, wives and daughters.

PRACTICES OF WITCHCRAFT

Generally defined as a supernatural power, witchcraft is used to influence the health (longevity, sickness, drowning, and death) or behaviour of another person (the witchcraft's victim), as well as to cause various physical actions (*e.g.* drought, earthquake) or social events (unemployment, divorce, car accidents) (Adinkrah & Adhikari 2014, 315). Terms such as *daayan*, *tobni* or *chudali* are used to brand a woman as a witch capable of performing black magic or sorcery, causing harm to the human health (the term *tobna* designates the man wizards of the forest state of Chattisgarh) (Iqbal 2015, 111).

A present-day report shows that, over the last twenty years, more than 3000 Indian women have been killed because they were accused of witchcraft. According to Vernon, witch-hunts are most common in poor rural communities with reduced access to education and health services and long-standing beliefs in witchcraft. He also points out that, in these communities, when a person gets ill or is sick, the blame does not fall on a virus or crop diseases but on an alleged witch. It is obvious the witchcraft is still part of the rural culture of India. In the villages of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, some pockets of West Bengal, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat,

Assam, and other North Eastern states, ostracism and severe violence against women accused of witchcraft are occurring at an alarming rate.

The hunt for witches or evidence of witchcraft often involved moral panic, mass hysteria and lynching mixed, as happened in different European regions, with legal debates undertaken during trials. It was believed that the power of witchcraft resides in a substance inherited or innate, located in the abdomen. It makes the person who possesses it to act, consciously or unconsciously, during the night, to harm the others and gives him invisibility or the capability to metamorphose himself. On the other hand, the sorcerer operates in daylight and harm his victims by using plant substances or performing evil rituals. He is able to transfer his power from one generation to the other.

Anthropological studies identify three types of witches in popular faith: neighbourhood (or social) witch, magic or sorcery, and supernatural or *night witch*. In many Indian tribal rural areas, witch-hunting usually results from the decision of the local *Ohja*. If a woman is declared a witch by the magicians of the village, she receives all types of torture, such as beating, burn injuries, and insertion of different objects in the intimate parts. She is forced to walk naked through the village, eat human excrements or raped. Her hair, nose or ears are cut and teeth are removed, her land and properties are destroyed or confiscated. Sometimes she is forced to leave the village, other times she is killed. A strange type of magical act is performed in the Bhil tribe to contradict the effect of epidemics. People hang pots and baskets in bamboo poles and run on the main street shouting "Toraka, Toraka". Hearing them, the other locals of the village come to help in carrying these objects out of the village. They are taken to the nearest river or in the jungle and, by throwing them, people think the epidemic itself has been thrown out into that river or forest.

The tribal society of India has a defining faith in *Mana*. The *Ho* and *Munda* tribes call it *Bonga*. Other such ancestral practices are

found among the *Santhals* and *Orans*. The *Korawa* tribe believes in a goddess of crops, one of the animals and other presiding rain. The tribal people try to please these gods and goddesses by offering them sacrifices of animals and birds. According to their animism, there is a mysterious, unknown, impersonal power behind all living beings. They also believe there is an animal spirit in all movable or immovable things. This type of animism is also found in the tribe of *Bihar*. For them, bones, beads, stones and feathers have living and magical powers. Stones are the children of Mother Earth and, therefore, they should be worshipped. Besides, they consider that the soul is not destroyed by the death of the body and requires food for a sufficiently long time. The *Nagas* and *Nicobari* believe that the skull of the dead man must be placed on a wooden statue because his soul passes from the skull to the statue. Thus, these statues are served like living human beings and efforts are made to fulfil all their needs. Such is the custom among the *Garo* tribe of Assam. The *Toto* tribe of West Bengal is also fully bound to tradition and people suffer from different superstitions. As such, they believe that the evil spirits are mainly liable for their diseases, and only by performing magical rituals they can get rid of them. Therefore, the *Baidangis* or exorcists still have an important role among the *Totos*.

A historical report mentions that, during the 17th and 18th centuries, 40,000 women were killed in Europe because of witchcraft accusations (Aditya 2015, 9). In India, the witch hunting cases are not registered due to remoteness and unawareness. Here, nearly 150 to 200 women are still killed in every year under witchcraft blame. A study by *Human Rights Law Network* reported that 2,500 women have been killed in the last five years. In Jharkhand alone, 500 such cases were reported. According to *Assam Home Department*, witch-hunting took 116 lives between 2001 and 2011. From 2006 to 2009, 50 people were killed in the name of witch-hunting in Assam, of which 22 were from the badly affected district Kokrajhar. But witch-hunts are organised in all parts of the country. Rural tribal women are the main victims.

AN OVERVIEW OF WITCH-HUNTING ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Rajgarh, Khargone, Badwani, Jhabua districts of Madhya Pradesh are badly affected by witch-hunts. In the tribal villages of this regions, *Ojhas* abuse their role and positions. Bhuri Bai, a woman of Jhabua district declared witch by the *Ojha* for the death of a boy, was brutally beaten by her neighbours and paraded naked through the village. Lalpari Devi, a 45-years-old Bihari Dalit women, was publically humiliated as she was tied to a tree, and her hair was shaved because *Ojha* declared her witch. Another woman, Mita Bai of Chhattisgarh, also declared witch by the village *Ojha*, was brutally beaten by her neighbours. Lata Sahu of Bijli Village, in Raipur District of Madhya Pradesh, was declared *Tonahi* witch by her sister-in-law. She was stripped of her clothes and paraded in the villages. In Tarra, Raipur district, another woman was hacked to death, being branded as a witch by her brother-in-law after she sought to obtain ownership of the land of her deceased husband. Ganadi Village, Rachi District, Jharkhand: two Dalit widows, Jeetan Devi and Dulshan Devi were tortured, one of them losing her life. Another two tribal women of Rachi District, Jharkhand, were declared witch by an exorcist. Villagers forced them to parade naked and shaved their heads. One of them was also raped. Five tribal women of Kanjia, Ranchi district, aged between 32 and 50 years, were beaten to death with sticks because they were accused of witchcraft practice. A 50-years-old tribal woman, Budhmaniya Nagasiya, was hacked to death at Ranikhola line of the Rangamati tea estate under Malbazar Police station, in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, on 9th January 2017.

A witch is called, by Santhals community in West Bengal, *fuskin*. Mahan, their leader, has the power to declare a woman *fuskin*. The murder of a *fuskin* is always preceded by deaths or instances of prolonged illness in the village or family (Biswas 2015, 283). North-eastern states are the most affected. Subhadra Basumatray (40 years old) - a Bodo woman in Tilapara, Goalpara district in Assam, was

deemed as a witch by the local *Ojha*, who claimed that she was responsible for the diseases in the village. Basumatray was dragged out of her house by a group of people and beaten to death. Laxmi Dev Barma, a tea garden worker from Tripura, was declared witch after her co-worker felt ill. She was murdered by the villagers. Sarala Brahma, 50 years old, of Samsaibari village in Kokrajhar, was hacked to death being suspected of black magic and witchcraft. According to a report published in the *Times of India*, another three women were murdered for black magic. The newspaper also reported that at least 200 people have been killed during the past five years for allegedly practising witchcraft, mostly in the tribal-dominated areas of Western and Northern Assam. Saniram Boro (67 years) of Banbari Thaikarkuchi and Hagan Boro (60 years), Sitalpur, were killed among them. Puleswari Boro, a 50-years-old woman of Baksa district, was declared witch and killed by villagers on 28th July 2010.

On 29th April 2011, Jugen Boro (65 years), and his wife, Alasi Boro (60 years) were killed on charges of practising black magic at Tikritola in Udalguri. On 15th April, Purni Basumatary (57 years), and Modani Boro (55 years) were brutally killed at Belguri Guabari under Serfanguri police station. On 16th April, Ram Narzary, 45 years old, and his wife of East Tengaigaon were also killed in that place. Suresh Narzinary, 50 years, and his wife, Laogi, 45 years, of Jalaishree Hatighar in Gossaigaon, were killed under Kachugaon police station.

CAUSES OF WITCH-HUNTING

There are researchers who showed that witch killings often have political, property related or gender motifs. According to K. S. Singh, the former Director General of the *Anthropological Survey of India*, the greed for properties is one of their main reason. Malabika Das Gupta states that witch-hunt became popular as an extra-legal method to deprive tribal women of control over the land. Economic inequality is another cause of this phenomenon.

On the other hand, the poor health infrastructure and the absence of qualified medical practitioners in rural belts make villages dependent on the *Kavirajs* or local *Ojbas*, the main responsible for these types of brutal humiliations and killings but who are also taking advantages of these situations. Poor law enforcement and the poverty of rural areas are other causes of witch killings. In addition, there are frequent situations when women reject the sexual advances of their male neighbours, a fact that cast upon them the accusation of witchcraft. Also, their ancient customs might be misunderstood and the devotion of women to traditions can be perceived as witchcraft.

Apart from the already mentioned causes, political apathy, police negligence, the lack of reporting by the media, and the absence of an institutional program to raise awareness of the population lead to the spread of these atrocities.

ANTI-WITCH-HUNTING LAWS IN INDIA

There are no strong anti-witch-hunting nationwide laws in India. The most affected states have taken initiatives to protect people, especially women, from this type of practices. The Assam Police launched the project “Prahari”, in 2001, and “Mother”, in 2011, to safeguard them. *Prevention of and Protection from Witch Hunting Bill 2015* provides from 3 years to life imprisonment for branding a person as a witch; 3 to 7 years imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 50000 to the *Ojba* who declares that a woman is a witch. *Odisha Prevention of and Witch Hunting Act 2013* provides 3 years in jail and a fine of Rs. 1000 for witch hunting, and from 3 to 7 years for the second conviction. The State of Bihar passed *Prevention of Witch Practices Act* in 1999, which provides imprisonment from 3 to 5 years for accusing a woman of being a *Dayan* and causing her physical harm. The State of Maharashtra passed *Prevention of and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act* in 2013.

It provides a jail term from 6 months to 7 years and a fine between Rs. 50000 and 50000 to the convict. The Government of Rajasthan has drafted, in 2011, a bill called the *Rajasthan Women (Prevention and Protection from Atrocities)*. As per this draft bill, whoever brand a woman of being a *Dayan, Dakan, Dakin, Chudial, Bhootdi, Chalavan, Opri* or *Randkadi* will be punished with 3 years of prison and a fine up to Rs. 5000. The Government of Chhattisgarh passed *Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act*, in 2005, which stipulates 3 years imprisonment for accusing woman as *Tonahi* or *Dayan*, and 5 years imprisonment for physically harming her. The Government of Jharkhand passed *Witchcraft prevention Act* in 2001 for the prevention of witchcraft practices. Except for these state acts and provisions, there is no national law to protect women from this age-old menace which takes each ear more and more lives across India. Its victims are always poor, vulnerable, tribal and other weak segments of society.

CONCLUSION

Which-hunting is still part of the rural culture in India. Once a woman is branded as a witch, it is very difficult for her to get rid of this stigma. She can suffer severely the rest of her life, be hurt at any time and subject to public humiliations.

Education is an important way of abolishing such evil practices from society. It is, first of all, a dynamic process that makes people think logically instead of believing in magic. Various state-sponsored schemes already helped the rural regions. Moreover, we need to create strong national laws to protect women. At present, only a few states in India approved protective anti-witchcraft laws, which are still ineffective to protect women accused of witchcraft. Police actions, courtroom decisions and legal representation need improvement. A mass awareness programme against witchcraft practices should be initiated and introduced in all elementary schools of these regions, in order to save future generations from

such type of black practices. *Women Rights Commission* must take initiative for the protection of vulnerable helpless women from this menace. It already took positive initiatives in many cases. But it is necessary to pass a strong national-wide anti-witchcraft act. Besides, it is necessary to develop the communication infrastructure and transportation in the rural areas, as well the health system. Such programs will help to normalize this situation.

A violence-free environment is required. After all, it is necessary to change our patriarchal mind because patriarchy makes women vulnerable.

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