

WITCH-HUNTING IN TRIBAL ODISHA: SOCIAL EXCLUSION, GENDER, AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the persistence of witch-hunting practices in tribal societies of Odisha, eastern India, by analysing their underlying causes and socio-cultural contexts. It explores the factors contributing to the continuation of such practices and their consequences, particularly in terms of social exclusion, discrimination, and violence against women. Despite the existence of legal provisions aimed at curbing witch-hunting, the practice continues to prevail, indicating gaps between legislation and ground realities. The paper argues that a combination of legal enforcement, social awareness, and community-level interventions is essential to address this deeply entrenched and harmful social practice and to promote human dignity and social justice.

Keywords: Witch-hunting; Tribal communities; Social exclusion; Gender-based violence; Odisha

THE INCIDENTS AND THE PROBLEM

In a horrifying incident reported from Mayurbhanj district of Odisha in June 2020, Budhram Singh killed his 60-year-old aunt, Champa Singh, a widow, suspecting her to be a witch and holding her responsible for the death of his daughter. As per the police report, she was sleeping in the verandah when his nephew Budhram allegedly dragged her out and decapitated her. Wrapping the severed head in a traditional towel, he walked 13 kilometres to reach the local police station and surrendered himself. He was booked for murder by the police. Budhram Singh told the police that he beheaded Champa Singh, his aunt, in the morning as he suspected that his daughter had died three days ago because of black magic done by her. Khunta Police Station Inspector-in-Charge, Swarnalata Minz informed the media that both Champa Singh and Budhram Singh belonged to tribal community and were residents of

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Nuasahi village. Notably, several bystanders were present at the scene but did not intervene to stop Budhram Singh from killing his aunt³.

Let's consider another similar horrifying incident:

It all started after a migrant labourer from Ravan Jhula village under Chandiposh police station limit of Sundargarh district died due to illness one month after his return from Kerala. Villagers suspected Gangi Kerketta and her daughter Sibani's role in the death. They were being branded as witches and practicing sorcery. While the mother was 28, the daughter was only 5-year-old. On 9 September 2019 villagers conducted a Sarna Puja (a tribal worship) and also convened a village meeting. At the village meeting, they decided to eliminate the mother, daughter and Birsa Kerketta, Gangi's husband. Around 8:30 pm, Birsa Kerketta, who was outside at the time, saw the neighbours entering his house. Instead of rescuing his family, he fled into the forest. Abakas Routray, Sub-Divisional Police Officer, Bonai, said that the villagers dragged both the woman and the kid and tied them to a pole. They beat them brutally despite the two pleading for mercy. They were hacked to death and thrown into Brahmani River so that evidence could be erased. Police arrested seven persons in this "witch-hunt" murder of mother-daughter duo⁴.

These incidents, for example, demonstrate how witch-hunting remains a long-standing and deeply problematic practice that continues to persist even in the contemporary scientific era. To analytically situate the persistence of witch-hunting, this paper draws upon key conceptual frameworks such as structural violence, cultural violence, and feminist anthropology. These perspectives enable an understanding of witch-hunting not merely as an outcome of superstition or ignorance, but as a phenomenon embedded within broader socio-cultural, economic, and institutional structures that perpetuate inequality and legitimize violence against marginalized individuals. Despite growing scholarship on witch-hunting in India, limited attention has been paid to its intersection with structural and cultural forms of violence in tribal contexts, which this paper seeks to address.

The roots of witch-hunting go back to the so-called most advanced and civilised societies of the world. The practice of witch-hunting was a widespread phenomenon in early modern Europe and colonial America, particularly between the 15th and 17th centuries (Levack 2006; Behringer 2004). In England, legal frameworks such as the Witchcraft Acts facilitated prosecutions, with early cases like that of Agnes Waterhouse (1566), one of the first recorded executions (Gaskill 2010), and later trials such as the Pendle Witch Trials (1612), in which 10 individuals were executed (Poole 2002). In continental Europe, large-scale persecutions such as the Trier Witch Trials (1581–1593) resulted in the execution of approximately 368 individuals, including members of the clergy and local elites

³ <https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/wtf/witchcraft-odisha-man-brings-severed-head-police-station-515749.html>

⁴ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/seven-arrested-in-witch-hunt-case-in-odisha/article29425220.ece>

(Behringer 2004; Midelfort 1972). Similarly, in colonial America, the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 led to the execution of 20 people and the imprisonment of many others, making it one of the most well-documented instances of witch-hunting (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974; Rosenthal 1993).

The exact date of origin of witch-hunting in India is not known. The practice is said to have emanated hundreds of years ago in the Morigaon district of Assam which is famously called “The Indian capital of black magic” and is the abode of people who want to learn witchcraft (Chakrabarty and Borah 2013; Sharma 2023). The practice is a customary one in India and is prevalent in rural isolated areas especially among the tribal population.

And, the practices of witchcraft and witch-hunting remain widespread across the globe even today. Similarly, belief in witches continues to persist. Survey data from 2005 suggest that about 13 percent of individuals in Canada and the United Kingdom expressed belief in witches, whereas the figure was notably higher in the United States, reaching approximately 21 percent⁵.

In India, there is a death for witchcraft reported every third day, with majority of victims being women. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2022), 2,097 murders were committed, motivated by “witch-hunting”, between the years 2000 and 2012. In fact, a search of newspapers and internet reports reveal that at least twelve states in India are recognized as regions where witch-hunting practices are prevalent, including Odisha, Jharkhand, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Assam, and Bihar. While it is observed that in states like Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal with large tribal population show a prevalence of witch-hunting, meanwhile states like Haryana, Bihar and Rajasthan with greater gender disparity also tend to show similar problem.

As per the NCRB (2016) report, Odisha records the second-highest number of witch-hunting incidents in India, following Jharkhand. In Odisha, the deplorable practice of witch-hunting is rampant and women and their family members are succumbing to the senseless violence. According to NCRB (2022) figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Odisha was 396 for the period 1999–2014. In 2015, 58 cases were registered which went up to 83 in 2016, an increase of 43 per cent. In 2017 a total of 99 cases have been registered which is an increase of 19 per cent over 2016. In 2018, 73 witchcraft-related cases were reported across Odisha. In 2018, Keonjhar district of Odisha itself accounted for 12 out of 18 people murdered for “sorcery” across the state. Out of the thirty districts, witch-hunting is prevalent in about thirteen districts of Odisha. Mayurbhanj⁶ and Keonjhar have reported the most murder cases related to witch-hunting. Witch-hunting incidents have also been

⁵ Schons, Mary 2011. “Witch Trials in the 21st Century: Accusations of witchcraft persist”, Accessed from <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/witch-trials-21st-century/>, on 23 January 2022.

⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/witch-hunting-continues-unabated-in-tribal-pockets-of-odisha/articleshow/63043374.cms>

reported from Ganjam, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Gajapati and Koraput⁷ (for Odisha related data see ActionAid 2021). Though witchcraft beliefs exist among the caste communities too, but it is more prevalent and the witch-hunting cases are severe in the tribal communities and hence the paper has focused on the practices of witch-hunting among the tribes of Odisha.

This paper therefore seeks to explore the rationale behind continued practices of witch-hunting in different tribal societies of Odisha, a state in eastern India. Further attempts have been made to find out the causes of persistence of these practices and their consequences in tribal societies. Although different remedial measures are implemented through legal provisions to stop witch-hunting practices in Odisha, the paper argues, witch-hunting continues and women are the worst sufferers of not only social exclusion but also discrimination and violence. The paper further suggests social awareness and awakening coupled with legislations may bring this age-old, inhumane, and shameful practice of witch-hunting for the betterment of the humanity.

CONCEPTUALISING WITCH, WITCHCRAFT, AND WITCH-HUNTING

“Witch” is derived from the old English word *wicce* meaning “female magician, sorceress”, and *craeft* refers to “skill or ability”. Therefore, as per Online Etymology Dictionary, witchcraft refers to a person, particularly, “a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their cooperation to perform supernatural acts”. The person professes witchcraft is called a witch or wizard. The women accused of being witches are called by various names like *dahani*, *bhootni*, *tonahi*, *beta khauki* (son-eater), *admi khauki* (man-eater), *bhaikhauki* (brother-eater), *maradmuhi*, *kheldi* (characterless), and *bisahin*⁸ (poisonous woman). As the word is used in a negative sense, the people associated with witchcraft are looked down upon with suspicion and are socially less acceptable.

Witch-hunting denotes the violent persecution and killing of individuals accused of being “witches”, a practice grounded in entrenched superstition and social prejudice. A “witch” is commonly perceived as someone believed to possess or practice supernatural powers. Such beliefs, often traced to early religious traditions, disproportionately result in the stigmatization and targeting of women. In general parlance, a “witch” is typically identified as a female alleged to have magical powers that it uses to bring evil to the society. Blaming women for the acts of violence committed against them is not a new idea to societies that are bound largely by patriarchal values. Taking it further, there are witch-hunting cases blaming women

⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/memorial-tells-tragic-tale-of-odishas-witchhunts/articleshow/68407785.cms>

⁸ Most of these words are in Hindi language.

for everything that happens in society, even if it is a natural occurrence (like diseases and natural calamities). Witch-hunting has become one of the alarming concerns for tribal dominated areas of Odisha. Witchcraft, as a socio-cultural and religious belief system, incorporates practices like divination, spell casting, sorcery, enchantment, necromancy, shamanism, demonology and mysticism (see Murray 1921; Kapferer 2003; Mishra 2003). Traditionally, the term was used to accuse someone of bewitching others, or casting a spell on them to gain control. It is largely purported as a practice wherein supernatural entities are called upon through certain rites and techniques, for malevolent usages. Due to its perceived negative intents, witchcraft is generally known as a “wicked” practice and is often looked down upon with pessimistic impressions.

People associated with witchcraft are often accused of causing detrimental impacts and therefore, are socially discarded. It has been well depicted, documented and believed that witchcraft has mainly been practiced by females. People strongly believe that these witches use their magical powers to incapacitate people and also reduce the fertility capacity of married couples. According to Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting (OPWH) Act, 2013, witch-hunting means any act of omission, commission or conduct on the part of any person – (i) identifying, accusing or defaming a woman as a witch, or (ii) harassing, harming or injuring such woman whether mentally or physically or damaging her property. Witches in this context are believed to cause harm to people and domesticated animals, crops of the cultivators and also bring drought miseries and tragedies to the village. It is observed that mostly women are targeted and branded as witches whenever a calamity befalls the village – be it a death, disease or drought (Chaudhuri 1981).

WITCH-HUNTING AS GENDERED VIOLENCE: PATTERNS OF VICTIMISATION

A “witch” or its Odia vocabulary “*Dahani*” is used to identify a male or female, alleged to have magical powers that he/she uses to bring evil to the community. Empirical studies suggest that witchcraft accusations disproportionately target socio-economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized individuals, including poor and widowed women, childless women, unmarried women, persons with stigmatized physical features, and those subjected to social exclusion. Several reports suggest that women branded as witches face public lynching, in addition to cases of killings perpetrated by individuals. In most cases, the reason is not limited to superstition; almost invariably someone who seeks to settle a land or financial dispute or a personal vendetta, can settle on witch-hunting as a solution, especially if the victim is disenfranchised and belongs to a vulnerable section. Witch doctors are known as *ojhas* (there are also other terms varying from states and regions), who are mostly men and are called upon to undo the supposedly evil influences of a witch. In Odisha,

the tribal inhabited districts bear the brunt of this practice. Ritual practices are often performed on women suspected of witchcraft, wherein the accused are alleged to engage in sorcery and subjected to severe forms of violence; in several instances, this includes acts such as forced consumption of excrement and the extraction of teeth (defanging).

In popular imagery, witches are often portrayed as ominous and scary-looking women, brandishing broomsticks and engaging in activities considered despicable and spiteful. As these women are painted and described as bringing misery to the families, villages, and communities, they are tried in the self-styled banana court, tonsured forcibly and flogged in public, stripped naked and made to run on the village road, socially ostracised and banished from the village with blackened faces. In some cases, they are raped, murdered and burnt alive, and their properties are looted and lands are grabbed. In several instances, the family members, relatives and social acquaintances are found to be main perpetrators. Identifying a witch involves a belief system with a designated sacred specialist: the witch doctors, called “Gunia” locally, are believed to possess paranormal abilities and power of healing, divination and protection against the black magic of others, trigger the issue by branding the person as a witch. The villagers follow his words as gospel truth and conduct witch persecutions.

Exclusionary dimension is intertwined with witchcraft beliefs and practices, be it socio-political or economic. The social exclusion precludes full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of a given society and a denial of access to information, resources, sociability, recognition, and identity, eroding self-respect, and reducing capabilities to achieve personal goals. It is the rupturing of the “social bond”, meaning the disruption of social relations, social institutions, and imagined identities of belonging constituting social cohesion, integration, or solidarity which are concerned at the individual and collective levels. There are several instances of suspected sorcerers being forcibly driven out of villages by mobs. Women who suffer from social exclusion as a result of witchcraft allegations are usually those from the social and economic backgrounds without support, and who constitute a burden on the family; or women who refuse to comply with their socially-sanctioned roles and status. With regard to the responses of institutions and actors closest to the site of victimization, the immediate family are most protective (except in some cases where a marital dispute already exists), and as a result are also victimized. The responses of the extended family vary, with many of them being the primary instigators themselves; in some cases, however, where the victim is expelled from the village, members of the extended family had provided shelter until the point at which their hospitality begins to put them at risk of secondary targeting. The neighbours appear to be hostile, either as instigators themselves, or as supporters of instigators, and as passive onlookers in many cases. The element of malevolence associated with witchcraft makes the issue one of social exclusion; and in the context of tribal societies, where

women are disenfranchised in decision-making and political processes, people branded as witches become marginalized, often facing ostracism.

At its core, witch-hunting is a form of gendered violence. The overwhelming majority of those branded as *dahani* are women, particularly those who are widowed, unmarried, elderly, or otherwise socially and economically vulnerable. Such accusations function as a mechanism to discipline, control, and exclude women who fall outside patriarchal norms or who possess claims over resources such as land and property. Thus, witch-hunting not only reflects belief systems but also reinforces existing gender hierarchies and inequalities.

CAUSES OF WITCH-HUNTING

Unlike witch-hunting studies in Europe, Africa and USA, historians and sociologists have ignored the study of witch-hunts in India. “Witch-hunting” has become one of the alarming concerns in the tribal dominated areas of India. Anthropologists have conducted a number of scholarly studies of witch-hunts in other parts of the world, especially among the various tribes in Africa and South America. However, there are only a few studies on witch-hunts in India namely Bailey’s *The Witch Hunt or the Triumph of Morality* (1994); Barman’s *Persecution of Women: Widows and Witches* (2002); Behringer’s *Witches and Witch Hunts. A Global History* (2004); Chakraverti’s *Beloved Witch: An Autobiography* (2000); Chaudhuri’s *Witch Killings Amongst Santals* (1981); Kelkar and Nathan’s *Gender and Tribes: Women, Land and Forest in Jharkhand* (1991); Mishra’s *Casting the Evil Eye* (2003); Nathan, Kelkar, and Xiaogang’s *Women as witches and keepers of demons: Cross-cultural analysis of struggles to change gender relations* (1998).

The literature related to witch-hunting in India identifies economic conditions, particularly the struggle for property between families, disease and illness, village level conflicts and gender conflicts as the leading causes of witch hunts (Barman 2002; Chaudhuri 1981; Kelkar and Nathan 1991; Mishra 2003; Nathan et al. 1998). For instance, research on witch-hunts in the Jharkhand and Bihar states of India, focused on conflict over agricultural land between the tribal widows and their kin as the leading cause of witch hunts. Barman (2002), one of the few anthropologists studying witch hunts in contemporary West Bengal, claims that witch hunts are a form of persecution “towards women, especially widows, who face a ‘condition of marginality culminating in total exclusion from society’. By accusing them of practicing witchcraft, those men inherit the land immediately. Let’s consider the following case study from Koraput district”.

On 28 January 2001, at around 4:00 PM, a written complaint was lodged by Katei Muduli, aged approximately 47 years, widow of Late Gopi Muduli, a resident of Sunabeda Police Station area in Koraput district, Odisha. In her complaint, she

accused her brother-in-law, Kanhu Muduli (elder brother of her deceased husband), of subjecting her to physical and psychological torture on the suspicion that she was a “witch”.

Subsequent police investigation and supervisory inquiry revealed that the two brothers, Gopi Muduli and Kanhu Muduli, had been residing in the same locality with their respective families. In 1998, Gopi Muduli died due to illness. Within a year, in 1999, Kanhu Muduli’s wife also passed away due to disease. Following this, a series of unfortunate deaths occurred within Kanhu Muduli’s family: his elder son died without any prolonged illness, and shortly thereafter, his younger son’s wife also died under unclear circumstances.

These successive deaths created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion within the family. Kanhu Muduli began to attribute these misfortunes to supernatural causes, specifically accusing Katei Muduli of practicing witchcraft. Gradually, this suspicion escalated into violence, as Katei Muduli was subjected to harassment, social ostracism, and physical torture not only by Kanhu Muduli but also with the complicity of some villagers.

However, the police investigation brought forth a different dimension of the case. It revealed that there existed an underlying dispute between the two families over ancestral landed property. The allegation of witchcraft appeared to be a strategic tool employed by Kanhu Muduli to delegitimize and dispossess Katei Muduli, a widow, from her rightful claim over family property. The case was taken to the District Judge’s Court and remained pending for a longtime.

This case highlights that witchcraft accusations are often embedded in socio-economic conflicts rather than mere superstition. Here, the label of “witch” functioned as a tool of coercion in a property dispute, reflecting the intersection of gender, kinship, and resource control.

These dynamics may also be interpreted through the lens of structural violence, wherein systemic inequalities related to land ownership, gender relations, and access to institutional support create conditions that render certain individuals – particularly marginalized women – vulnerable to accusation and persecution. In this sense, witch-hunting is not merely an isolated cultural practice but is structurally embedded in relations of power and deprivation.

Kelkar and Nathan (1991) have also connected the witch-hunts in tribal Bihar and West Bengal to the land rights of the widow. In addition to widows, women with separated/divorced husbands are vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. A major part of Mishra’s (2003) study focuses on health and law in the tribal areas. According to her, due to lack of medical facilities, superstition, and illiteracy, people tend to rely on witch doctors who are basically men. They play a crucial role in identifying a witch and instigating a witch-hunt. Thus, witch-hunts in contemporary India occur primarily among the tribal populations of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The symbiosis between witch doctors, believing clienteles and an enduring worldview underpins the problem, and is common among the tribal communities in these states.

In her study *Tempest in a Tea Pot: Analysis of contemporary witch hunts in the tea plantation of Bengal*, Chaudhuri argues that, there is no evidence on the relation between land ownership of the tribal widows and the witchcraft accusations. Instead, she says that “witch hunts are cultural; that is, witch hunts cannot take place in a community where there is no real fear in witches” (Chaudhuri 2008, 19).

In order to find a concrete answer to the question as to why women fall prey to such inhuman practices, it becomes essential to understand their status in the society (tribal context). Some authors like Chaudhuri (2012) and Federici (2008) claims that witchcraft is a manifestation of the male dominated society which targets the economically independent women or widows who defies the accepted norms of the society, a single woman or one without a male partner are targeted. The Santals for example think that their women as inconsistent and irresponsible creatures belonging to sub human species and are deprived the fruits of development (see Boding 1940). Today the tribal women have been empowered with civic rights by the law of the country but community customs stand in their way. Some scholars like Barman (2002), Kelkar and Nathan (1991) have highlighted on the property issues and land grabbing, while Mishra (2003) views family and village politics as playing a critical role as a major cause for perpetuating witch hunt practices. It is also practiced to get rid of “unwanted females” such as widows and women who have become pregnant outside marriage (Chaudhuri 2012).

CATEGORIZATION OF ATTACKS

Tribal leaders and heads of caste councils are taken into confidence to counsel villagers. Sometimes an entire mob of villagers attacked them after an *ojha* accused anyone of practicing witchcraft and causing his death. As one victim’s husband states, jealousy can be an important factor contributing to a lynching. While immediate family members usually do protect the victims, they do so at great danger to themselves. Subsequent to the branding process, the victims had to undergo different negative consequences apart from physical violence. Social stigma, psychological/mental torture, social/economic boycott, loss of properties and livelihood, etc. can be the companion of the witch-hunt victims either for a short duration or for their lifetime, depending upon the circumstances (Mehra and Agrawal 2016; Schnoebelen 2009).

Witch-hunting assaults can extensively be categorized into two significant classifications – pre-determined and ambush. In case of pre-determined assaults, gender relationship between the accuser(s) and the accused assumes a significant role in the choice of “target/s”. Such assaults are pre-planned and serve as a method of looking for vengeance of pre-existence personal conflicts or fulfilling ulterior interests such as getting property and sexual harassment (Chaudhuri 2008). Affirmed witch/es fill in as scapegoats in such created connivance. Conversely, in the instances of surprise assaults, the woman or her family members, before the assault are

uninformed of the allegations. The attack happens haphazardly with no impelling as earlier clash or any history of witchcraft allegation. Looking at the magnitude of viciousness, the force is moderately more on account of surprise assaults, wherein the objectives of the informer/s are not ulterior, somewhat centred around “elimination of evil” from the place of inhabitation. In both these cases, the solid targets are individuals who have next to zero intensity of counter (Chaudhuri 2008). The thread common to those carrying out the act of eliminating “witches” is that they justify the killing as an act of cleansing or doing away with evil, irrespective of whether they had any ulterior motives or not.

The justification of such acts as necessary for the “elimination of evil” reflects what Johan Galtung (1969, 1990) conceptualizes as cultural violence, wherein belief systems and symbolic frameworks normalize and legitimize physical violence. In the context of witch-hunting, cultural beliefs surrounding sorcery and misfortune serve to morally justify acts that would otherwise be condemned.

THE VICTIM-PERPETRATOR DILEMMA

The notion of who is the real “victim” and the real “perpetrator” creates bewilderment among the researchers, media persons, police and administrators. In fact, the way the “victims” and the “perpetrators” are conceived and depicted are antagonistic amongst the “insiders” and the “outsiders”. People who live in or are residents of the village, community, locality, society or place where the incident of sorcery and witch-hunting take place are called “insiders”. On the other hand, those who are not connected and known to the accused or branded witch and also are not residents of the same place are termed as “outsiders”. Now, for the “insiders”, who brings harm or causes damage to them, is seen as a “perpetrator”, while the person who suffers due to the ill-effects of the evil power of the “black magic” is the “victim”. In order to reduce the impact of misfortune and/or to check any further damage, the “insiders” decide to ex-communicate, punish or kill the witch, that is, for them the “perpetrator”. On the contrary, for the “outsiders”, the witch who has been ex-communicated, ousted, punished or killed, is seen as a “victim” and the people, that is, the “insiders” are considered to be the “perpetrators”.

So, what is the reason for such change in perceptions? As such there is an ideological system prevalent amongst these communities which is not compatible with the constitutional rights guaranteed to every citizen. People are not well aware and well informed on the issues of gender parity, equality before the law and most importantly the dignity of women. In many cases the patriarchal dominance plays a big role in the socio-religious setting. They prioritize their traditional beliefs much above the constitutional rights and the judicial system, and any deviation from traditional practices and customs are scoffed at by the community. The community not only believes that they are bestowed with rights to uphold and continue the age-old practices,

but also challenge the law enforcement authorities and the government's administrative measures believing them of infringing on their traditional beliefs and practices. First, the persistence of witch-hunting among certain tribal communities may be linked to limited awareness of the legal and constitutional rights designed by the state to protect individual dignity, security, and citizenship. Secondly, due to the rigidity and perpetuity of traditional justice system, they do not avail themselves of other formal judicial systems to remedy the problem. These are reasons why the implementation of legal system is hindered in eradicating these "unlawful" activities.

In several cases it has been seen that witch-hunts are perpetrated by people who are very close to the victim by way of kinship relationship or by someone who resides in the physical proximity of the victim. Single women are quite vulnerable, but instances exist when the perpetrators of the crimes let loose their wrath upon entire families. It has been seen that the people who are the prime accusers of the victims, are often related to the victims in one way or the other. Single sisters with large properties in their name and women with leadership qualities are also at risk for being dubbed as witches. The middle aged and older women are primarily being made targets. Women who are without husbands in their marital homes are most vulnerable. Many of them belong to the economically weaker sections of the society and levels of formal education are extremely low among the victims. Besides that, there are certain distinct traits among the witch-hunt perpetrators. It has been found that witch-hunts are perpetrated by people who are very close to the victims by way of kinship relationship or by someone who resides in the physical proximity of the victim.

INTERVENTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT AND VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

The Odisha Prevention of Witch-hunting Bill (OPWH), 2013 was passed by the State Assembly in December 2013, which became an Act in February 2014. Every offence under this Act is cognizable and non-bailable. However, there is no perceptible change in the crime graph scenario regarding witch-hunting practices. Significantly, the state government promulgated OPWH Act in 2013 to check witchcraft. In March 2017 a sensational witch-hunt was reported in Jharsuguda, where two college going girls allegedly killed another girl to cure her illness through sorcery. This incident brought to light that there are still gaps between the ground reality and successful implementation of the Act, since witchcraft belief is strongly embedded in the social fabric of the communities, affecting even the educated.

The witch-hunt killings have a pattern. The decision-makers (mostly comprising of male elders) of the village brand the woman (or a man) as a "witch" or sorcerer and then they are paraded naked and subjected to other atrocities. Inevitably, people get extremely provoked and there is a fatal attack. The district administration has found that 40 of 47 people who were killed by their neighbours or others nearby were

illiterate, and 38 murders were concentrated in the Santhali, Kolha and Ho tribal communities.⁹ Now, the state government wants to end the macabre crime with an intensive campaign. The District Collectorate has launched a programme to combat the practice. They have constituted a rapid response team at block and gram panchayat levels to identify vulnerable people. The administration has been organizing street plays at local markets and spreading awareness on witch-hunting as a crime with serious consequences.

Odisha government for the first time has taken a unique step by building a memorial, a seven feet high granite statue and installing it in the campus of Police Head Quarters of Keonjhar district police on 27 February 2019. The memorial was installed in a public space to sensitize people on the destructive consequences of witch-hunting. Keonjhar district Superintendent of Police, Jai Narayan Pankaj conceptualized this memorial. "We have to change people's perception towards blind and unreasonable faith and give dignity to victims and their families who are often looked down upon by society and ostracized", he said.¹⁰ The statue itself has a wall around it with names of many of the victims who died in attacks. This memorial, claimed to be the first of its kind in the world, was inaugurated by the then Director General of Police, Odisha, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Sharma. Besides, the DGP also flagged off an awareness Rath (a vehicle decorated as a chariot), which started covering all pockets of the Keonjhar district where this inhumane practice still prevails. Besides attending the awareness programme attended by more than 300 victims, along with their family members and SHG (Self Help Group) members all the police and district administration officials had lunch with them, which was a positive step taken up by the government.

The State Commission for Women (SCW) had decided to launch massive awareness drives in Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Nabarangapur, Sundargarh and Rayagada districts to curb the rising incidents of atrocities on women on charges of being witches or practicing witchcraft. SCW chairperson has engaged the NGOs and local panchayat members to educate tribal people about the evil impacts of witchcraft and penal provisions.

Debendra Sutar, Secretary of Odisha Rationalist Party and working for eradication of witch-hunting practices in Odisha has said that "In rural areas, instances of women facing humiliation and brutalization after being branded as witches are common. Government awareness drives are yet to yield results". Duskar Barik, secretary of KIRDTI, a voluntary organization said, "We have been spreading awareness among tribal people against the practice. The social evil has been checked to a great extent over the years". It is observed that blind faith still prevails in many parts of hilly areas where people rely on sorcerer to cure illness. Awareness campaign

⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/mayurbhanj-leading-the-way-in-curbing-witch-lynching/article8592296.ece>

¹⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/memorial-tells-tragic-tale-of-odishas-witch-hunts/articleshow/68407785.cms>

still eludes some areas. In between the state policies and civil societies' interventions there exists the ground reality, which states the fact that certain cultural practices still have stronghold among the tribal communities that are resilient to change, besides the socio-economic parameters like land alienation, property disputes, an inheritance issues affecting the community and individuals.

Although Odisha has made rapid strides in different spheres, witchcraft, a social evil arising out of superstitions, still has strong roots in tribal pockets. It is evident from the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) 2016 report, which placed Odisha in second place after Jharkhand, for the prevalence of the practice in today's modern society. The link between tribal communities and witchcraft beliefs and its related crime is palpable, since the state of Odisha has one of the highest numbers of tribal groups in the country.

WHY LEGISLATION IS NOT EFFECTIVE?

Witchcraft beliefs and practices are not always associated with violence. A victim of witch-hunting is also a victim of isolation, abuse and exclusion. It is undeniable that, in addition to the presence of strong witchcraft tradition among the tribes, there also exists a nexus between the police, bureaucracy and political party. When the perpetrators belong to powerful group of the society, they receive more security and protection. It is most likely that cases of killings associated with witch-hunting and persecution of women will continue as long as economic inequities, lack of awareness of fundamental rights and neglect of the health care infrastructure continue. As a tribal custom such practices tend to ignore the various influences on tribal life, including the political one, where the constitutional right of political participation has the potential to bring women into public life.

It is widely observed that just framing laws and policies is not enough for their inclusion in society which is a huge challenge for various stakeholders. It can be put forth that, criminalization of witchcraft and associated offences is only one aspect of justice but also other domains requiring redressal, such as police apathy, poor investigation and indifferent prosecution which are major barriers in providing respite to the victims.

The limited effectiveness of legal interventions can further be understood through the framework of cultural violence, where deeply internalized belief systems continue to legitimize witch-hunting practices despite formal legal prohibitions. As long as these belief structures remain intact, legislative measures alone are unlikely to produce significant change.

Simultaneously, reformative measures also need due attention, without which such redressals cease to be just rhetoric. The remedies involving compensation, community dialogue, protection, livelihood support, shelter, promise of non-recurrence of violence must also be taken into consideration. As I have argued above awareness

programmes alone cannot deliver until a parallel transformation in the material conditions of the regions and communities is ensured. Structural changes guaranteeing accessibility to quality education, public health, along with an accountable administration, and a responsive law enforcement agency are also pivotal (Mehra and Agarwal 2016). Unless sufficient attention is paid to these deprivations, neglects and institutional mechanisms, amelioration of witchcraft related practices and crimes will be a distant dream.

CONCLUSION

Witch-hunting is a problem plaguing many parts of the rural areas and the tribal societies of India, although witchcraft belief is also found in the urban areas. The issue has raised a significant problem of cultural relativism and universal human rights. Hitherto, anthropologists as researchers have understood the witchcraft beliefs and practices within a given cultural context, not concerning the ethical and moral dimension of the belief system; nevertheless, anthropologists concerned with policymaking have reckoned the human rights issues, thereby working with stakeholders like the government agencies and NGOs to better understand the issue, and tackle the problem. The issue of gender violence, social exclusion, and power dynamics related to witch-hunting has garnered the attention of researchers.

The persistence of witch-hunting thus reflects not only superstition but also deeper forms of structural and cultural violence embedded within social systems. Addressing the issue requires moving beyond legal remedies to engage with the underlying socio-economic inequalities, gendered power relations, and cultural belief systems that sustain such practices.

It is observed that once women are branded as witches, it is very difficult for them to get rid of the stigma; they suffer severely for the rest of their life, susceptible to hurt at any time and subject to public humiliations. To eradicate this superstitious practice, steps need to be taken by the Government from the village levels to eliminate it through a holistic approach. At present India faces a profound paradox: on the one hand, the country has developed tremendously, adopting new technologies and modern lifestyles; while on the other hand, age-old cultural traditions and rituals still exist, lying open to interpretation and misuse according to the perpetrators' whims and fancies. It is found that while some people are attempting to hunt down "witches" and offer them nothing but pain and distress, others can step forward to stop this tradition for good. It is, indeed a challenge to look for social inclusion. Major barriers like police apathy, poor investigation and indifferent prosecution need to be addressed effectively so that respite to the victims can be provided. Law enforcement agencies should be responsive and responsible by ensuring victims receive reparative remedies such as compensation, communication with the community, protection, livelihood support, shelter, and an assurance of non-recurrence of violence. There should be

structural changes in place guaranteeing quality education, public communication, and better communication systems for the community as a whole. Then only awareness programmes can deliver positive results. Otherwise, they will remain administrative rhetoric or be confined to academic discourse, while social exclusion, deprivation, marginalization, and neglect continue to persist. In a country that looks towards a bright and prosperous future, these inhuman acts must be addressed with urgency.

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