

Analysing Modern-day Witch Hunts in Rural India

By

Bhumika Hooda
Student
Jindal Global Law School

Abstract

Witch Hunting is the process of finding people who use black magic and bring bad luck to others. When such “witches” are identified, they are often physically punished for their use of black magic. Most of the time, the accused have been women. In many cases, some victims of witch-hunting were made to eat human faeces. The existence of witches cannot be answered with certainty but why some people are branded witched in rural areas of India can be answered. There are several factors that culminate in a person being accused of practising witchcraft. This essay will analyse the role of factors like patriarchy, socio-economic conditions, and superstitions in sustaining the practice. Towards the end, a case study from rural Gujrat drives the point home.

Witch Hunting is the process of finding women who use black magic and bring bad luck to others. When such “witches” are identified, they are often physically punished for their use of black magic. In many cases, some victims of witch-hunting were made to eat human faeces. The existence of witches cannot be answered with certainty but why some people are branded witched in rural areas of India can be answered. Several factors culminate in a person being accused of practising witchcraft. The most prominent factors which are part of this process are Patriarchy, Socio-Economic Conditions and Superstitions. Victims of witch-hunting describe incidents leading up to their them being called witches and their escape from death.

We believe witches to be supernatural creatures who use “dark magic” for selfish reasons and to harm others. Dayan, a type of Witch, as represented in Indian folklore, has been used to describe women who feast on the flesh of people. They are usually malevolent spirits, with the ability to cast an evil eye on people. Throughout history, people have accused others of being witches and subjected to trials for their “evil work”. I cannot say with certitude if witches or witchcraft exist beyond stories and folklore. To say such things might offend some and go against their faith. The only thing proved are the atrocious witch hunts, which still take place.

The problem of witch-hunting in India is not exclusive to eastern states like Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand. There have been witch-hunting cases in Gujrat and Rajasthan also. Times of India claims that according to a report by National Crimes Record Bureau for the year 2019, there were 19 murders in Jharkhand and 22 witch-hunting cases in Chhattisgarh[1]. 23.7% (32 out of 135 cases) of murders due to witchcraft were reported from Jharkhand. Jharkhand (8), Uttar Pradesh (7), Andhra Pradesh (4) & Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Telangana (1 case each) reported murders due to a child/human sacrifice[2].

The taboo has shadowed the subject of witchcraft. This has created a sense of mystery around it. If the murders and attacks carried out are the evidence of the presence of witchcraft, the main question is why then, the witches seem only to belong to poor, tribal, uneducated, underdeveloped, and patriarchally dominant communities of India?

A Case of Gendered Violence?

The majority of victims of witch-hunt in India are female, indicating gendered violence. Not only in India but all around the world, we have perceived women as the weaker gender. The use of violence maintains male dominance. Men may feel offended by denial of sexual favour, land and property dispute or even a woman trying to stand up for herself or being liberal and going against the norms. The combination of superstition and the need to establish dominance plays well with people whom women have offended. Declaring a woman, a witch would isolate her from the rest of the village and in extreme conditions push her down the road of violence meted out by villagers. Patriarchy and religious systems are devoted to moulding men and women in their “perfect” role, as explained by Connell as “complicit masculinity” and “emphasised femininity”. These stereotypical roles require women to be empathetic, family-oriented and toe the line. Men are to don the role of bread earner who protects their family and command respect in society by having “control” over their family. These typecast are so well woven into the society that it is difficult to escape them. These social norms and fear of social punishment lend to the practice.

Women who try to escape these roles and social cues are branded, witches. When women take up the baton and manage their land or means of production and earning, men feel threatened.[3] A glimpse of Marxist feminism is clear here. They target women to control the capital. Most times, women are often branded witches so that other party can seize their land. To vent out Frustration is also a reason. This is done by blaming someone for a loss on which the community had no control over. We often observe that many of the cases of this violence take place when there is an unpredicted change in weather.[4] People from lower strata are used as scapegoats. This is because these people cannot defend themselves as well as their counterparts, making them an easy target.[5] An interesting aspect is a role played by the Ojha. An Ojha is a “supernatural healer” who identifies and kills a witch. Villagers often go to the Ojha and expect them to solve their medical problems through the use of magic. The problem is no use of magic rather the use of magic by women for her gain. This is apparent from the fact that women are rarely appointed as the Ojah. This is a clear example that men seldom tolerate women having powers, whether “supernatural” or otherwise.

Role of Socio-Economic factors

Witch-hunting and gendered violence cannot be seen in a vacuum. Focusing more on rural areas, people are inherently suspicious of each other and trying to amass as many resources, assets and property as possible.[6] One way of acquiring property is through taking it from someone else through the wrong means. The dominant group of the villages, like the panchayat men or the Ojha, have the respect and faith of the people. These groups use this power to their advantage. Most times, widows are branded witches and attacked. This was so because following the death of her husband when she becomes the owner of the property. After being accused of being a witch, the fear of life chases her out of town and the land going back to the panchayat.

Another facet that can be dissected in the discussion of witch-hunting is the underdevelopment of rural areas where these incidents take place. Some observe often that these areas lack proper medical facilities and educational institutes. There is often an immediate trigger that leads to witchcraft accusations. In most cases, it is the onset of illness in neighbour, death of a family member, death of cattle etc. because of the lack of medical infrastructure, there cannot be a proper

diagnosis of medical problems. Villagers are forced to rely on the Ojha. Ojha is not a real doctor but quacks. In case they cannot treat the problem or want to take revenge on someone, they declare the illness as a casting of an “evil eye” by a witch. The “Witch” is then identified by the Ojha and punished with inhumane methods. With tension and suspicion in the air and no light of reasoning to clear the doubts, people are caught on the web of their lack of knowledge and superstitions. Lack of proper education plays a big role in sustaining the wretched practice of witch-hunting. It is the barrier between the exposure that would liberate the people and let them see their actions with the light of reason. The low literacy rate is often an element always found in areas of these incidents. Jharkhand has been found to have the maximum number of murders in name of witchcraft. It should come as no surprise that the literacy rate in Jharkhand has a literacy rate of 66.41% as opposed to the national literacy rate of 74.04%.[7] It has been noticed that following a change in weather, there has been an increase in the hunting of witches[8]. Witches are believed to manipulate the weather to spoil the harvest. If it were for education, people would know about whether cycles, rain cycles and understand the change in weather. Not only this, but education would help people break free from the grasp of violent and unnecessary superstition which lead to such extreme violence.

Superstition and Custom

Why are witches bad and Ojha good when both use magical power? Why are most witches are female? The answer to all these questions is Superstitions and customs. Unignorable and perhaps the most important factor in cases of witch-hunting is superstition. This superstition has been used as a measure to control women so that they may not cross the line otherwise, they would be branded a witch and taught a lesson.

It is the superstition that gives power to Ojha. Even though the maximum number of times they do not have academic qualifications to be me treating medical conditions, the power of superstition uplifts them. The customs have dictated that even though witches and Ojha have similar power, Ojha will always use his power to help villagers and witches to hurt other people. This superstition is used by power groups to personal advantage.

The people who carry out witch hunts genuinely believe that witches are real. They do not understand why there is a change in the pattern of rainfall or why a person died even after taking him to Ojha. When they do not understand events taking place, the only logical answer for them is to use magic by someone, a concept embedded in their head since childhood. That certain women had acted against them or had got into a fight with them taken as evidence of a woman behaving out of character and thus being possessed or a witch. The fight to get people to leave this belief behind will be a long one but can be aided with Education, upliftment of poverty and underdevelopment.

Case Study

This case is about three women belonging to the Dahod district in eastern Gujrat in Gujrat who were branded witches and beaten up remorselessly. The names have been changed to avoid further inconvenience to the victims. [9]

Madhubhen, Sushilabhen and Kamlabhen had been married into the family in Gujrat. They used to grow corns, lentils, and peas in their plot. This plot lay at a four-road junction, was prime estate property and extremely fertile. In 2012, these women found their male relatives defecating on the same plot. The women objected to this and asked how one could defecate in the same place where one grew food to eat. The male relatives took offence at this objection. They did not stop with their actions and beat the women.

Two years later, one relative developed Renal Kidney failure and another cancer. Because of the lack of medical infrastructure nearby, they could not be treated properly. They both soon died. This was taken as a sign by the villagers that the three women were witches and had cursed the relatives to die so that they could feast on their souls. Women were later taken to their plot where they were forced to sign over the deed of the plot to other male relatives of their family and later, they were beaten black and blue.

As is clear from the following case, when a woman tried to step out of the defined role, she is objected against. This is how the patriarchal system works against a woman. With a set of right circumstances at hand, i.e., the death of family relatives, the women were termed witches, and the land was taken away from them. This case ultimately turned out to be an elaborate plan to take over the women's property.

Witch-hunting is deep-rooted in patriarchy, superstition, and socio-economic circumstances. It may then seem impossible to end the problem, but small steps at a time may help. At present, only 7 states have legal recourse for victims of witch-hunting. This could be made into a central law for protecting men and women from witch-hunting. The most important thing government can do is make medical facilities more accessible to people and impart education to people. We can then hope that this world will be a better and safer place to live.

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[6] Deshpande. Supra note 3

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[8] Miguel. Supra note 4

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