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UNEQUAL BURDEN - WHY WOMEN BEAR THE BRUNT OF WITCH HUNTS

AUTHORED BY - DEEKSHA KUMARI

“There is no social evil, no form of injustice whether of the feudal or the capitalist order which has not been sanctified in some way or other by religious sentiment and thereby rendered more impervious to change.”¹

Abstract

Witch hunts have historically targeted women Unfairly, reflecting deep-rooted gender biases, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and patriarchal power structures. This paper explores why women bear the brunt of witch hunts across different cultures and periods. It examines the intersection of gender, superstition, and socio-political factors that fuel these persecutions. Women, especially those who are elderly, widowed, or economically independent, are often scapegoated for misfortunes such as disease, crop failures, or unexplained deaths. The study also highlights how modern manifestations of witch hunts persist in various regions, often linked to poverty, lack of education, and systemic discrimination. By analyzing historical records and contemporary cases, this research underscores the urgent need for legal protections, awareness campaigns, and societal reforms to dismantle the structures that perpetuate violence against women in the name of witchcraft.

Keywords: Witch-hunt, Black magic, Law, history, IPC, Constitution

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a country where women are looked upon as tokens or symbols of their caste, community, and various other divides. Whereas they are killed because they are thought to be witches, but people revere them in the name of goddesses. For Indian society, killing is not a recent behavior; rather, it has a long history. When the term "witches" was first used, people immediately associated it with ugly women who could fly and disappear while wielding a broom. The meaning of the word "witch" has evolved over time to currently refer to women who develop supernatural abilities and engage in bad deeds that are portentous. The most

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr

vulnerable groups to contemporary "witch hunting" include women, children, the elderly, the disabled, socially isolated individuals, and those with lesser incomes, though men can also become victims. Additionally, witch hunts are more common in places where there is a lot of societal unrest. There are moments when people are held accountable for the state of the economy, unequal development, starvation, drought, broken medical systems, capitalism, and political rivalry. For example, it is said that rural women in India are afraid of being called witches, which prevents them from making decisions that would demonstrate too much "independence of initiative"—a quality that is at odds with women's traditional roles in society. It is said that they are connected to negative energy and that they murder defenseless people in order to strengthen their position and increase their power. They go by a variety of names, such as "Dayan," "Chudail," "Tohni," and so on, but what unites them all is their use of supernatural abilities to harm people. Thus, the procedure of "Witch Hunting" involves the execution of these individuals to prevent any harm they may cause to society. People murder and rape innocent women in the name of witch hunts in order to obtain their possessions, and occasionally they do it as a means of obtaining revenge. Witch hunts and accusations of black magic continue to plague parts of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, disproportionately targeting women. This chapter explores the factors that render women especially vulnerable in these regions and examines relevant case laws highlighting this gender bias. The Times of India newspaper revealed police statistics that showed that between May 2016 and 2019, rioters in Jharkhand killed almost 123 persons. These individuals, the most of whom were women, were charged with sorcery. As per the National Crime Records Bureau, 134 individuals nationwide were slain in 2016 on suspicion of doing "black magic".²

Many women are tortured every day by such superstitions and many become victims of these superstitions. Even in today's scientific era, man believes in such superstitions that we cannot even imagine. He even performs human sacrifice to fulfill his desires. We saw in a recent incident In Elanthoor village, Pathanamthitta district, Kerala, India, two women were tortured and killed as part of human sacrifice rites. This incident is known as the Elanthoor human sacrifice case of 2022.³

² Deutsche Welle. (2019, July 23). *India's witches: Victims of superstition and poverty*. DW

³ Laila Bhagaval Singh v. State (Kerala high court 2023)

2. DEEP DIVE INTO SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS OF WITCH HUNTING IN INDIA

- ❖ **Patriarchal Society and Vulnerability** -The profoundly ingrained patriarchal culture in India fosters allegations of witchcraft directed towards women. Their limited ability to make decisions frequently leaves them in charge of neither family decisions nor finances. Their reliance on their economy makes them easy pickings, especially in hard times when they become scapegoats for bad luck. Moreover, the persecution of unusual women is fueled by the social stigma surrounding them. People who defy gender norms or speak up are viewed as "different" and are more likely to be accused of witchcraft. For many Indian women, the combination of societal prejudice and economic fragility puts them in risk. In **Mahendra Meena vs. State of Rajasthan (2006)**⁴ an elderly woman who was suspected of practicing witchcraft was brutally tortured and killed. The victim was an easy target because of her marginalized status within the family and the patriarchal standards of the community, which were stressed in the judgement.
- ❖ **Lack of Education and its Consequences** -Further fueling the fires of witch-hunting are superstition and a lack of education. In communities lacking strong scientific understanding, unfounded beliefs about witchcraft can flourish. This makes women, who are often targeted in these accusations, more vulnerable. Furthermore, the absence of proper education leaves them disadvantaged. They struggle to challenge these baseless accusations or even comprehend their legal rights, hindering their ability to defend themselves. In landmark case addressed the issue of witch-hunting in adivasi (indigenous) communities. The judgement recognized the crucial role of education in empowering women and dispelling superstitious beliefs.⁵
- ❖ **Property Rights and Economic Dependence**-Women's lack of property rights puts them in a difficult situation and increases their susceptibility. It first encourages financial reliance on men. Women lack financial autonomy since they cannot inherit property or own land. Because of their reliance, they are easily accused of witchcraft, which can be used to control them or resolve property issues. Second, these charges may have disastrous societal repercussions. It is possible for women who are shunned

⁴ (2023/Rjjd/009148) on 6 April, 2023.

⁵ National Commission for Women v. Union of India & Ors., (2001).

for being witches to be forced from their homes and lands, depriving them of their scant possessions and putting them in danger. Due to their inability to own property, women are thus economically disadvantaged and more vulnerable to violence and social isolation. In the Case **Soni Sori vs. State of Chhattisgarh**⁶ Tribal rights advocate Soni Sori faced bogus accusations of witchcraft in an attempt to stop her work advocating for adivasi groups' land rights. This story serves as an example of how property issues and witch hunts can collide.

CULTURAL BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITIONS FUELING WITCH HUNTS IN INDIA

- ❖ **Belief in Evil Forces and Gender Bias-** India's rich tapestry of cultures includes a deep-rooted belief in the supernatural. This belief system often incorporates malevolent spirits and the concept of witchcraft. In some communities, women who fall outside societal expectations are particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. This can include widows, those childless, or women with disabilities. These marginalized groups are already ostracized and sometimes seen as conduits for evil forces. Similarly, women who challenge the status quo, be it through unconventional behavior or a strong will, can be seen as wielding unnatural power and become targets for accusations. A mother and daughter in Jharkhand were taken from their home by villagers in November 2013, who then led them to a neighboring forest and cut their throats.⁷ Rumors that the women were witches started after the mother's husband passed away years before, and the locals held the women responsible for the illnesses of several of their children.⁸
- ❖ **Unexplained Events and the Blame Game** - In many societies, misfortunes are attributed to supernatural causes, leading to witchcraft accusations. For instance, in early modern England, women working in multiple households faced higher risks of such accusations, often merely for being present during another's misfortune.⁹ When faced with misfortune, like illness, crop failure, or livestock deaths, a community grappling for explanations may turn to superstition. In such a situation, ostracized or different women become convenient scapegoats. For instance, the "evil eye"

⁶ Supreme court of India 2011

⁷ Mishra, A. K. N. (2013, November 13). *Mother, daughter hacked to death for 'witchcraft'*. The Times of India.

⁸ Zee News. (2013, November 25). *Boy killed for witchcraft in Odisha*.

⁹ University of Cambridge. (n.d.). *Witchcraft, work & women: Why the witch hunts targeted female laborers*. University of Cambridge

superstition suggests a woman's envious gaze can bring misfortune. Even more fantastical notions, like those of "night flying" – where women are seen shapeshifting into nocturnal creatures responsible for harm – can take root.¹⁰ Additionally, some communities hold beliefs about women's bodies being susceptible to possession by malevolent spirits, further marginalizing them during hardship.

- ❖ **Witch Hunts in Tribal Communities-** Tribal communities with strong faith in traditional healers and rituals are particularly vulnerable to witch hunts. In India's tribal cultures, witch-hunting is a common practice that frequently targets weaker women. Ignorance combined with deeply held convictions can be hazardous. When accusations are motivated by illness or bad luck, they might result in violence and social exclusion. There is some protection provided by the law. Examples of convictions under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for offenses including assault (Section 323) against people accused of witchcraft. In the Sonitpur area of northern Assam, a group of people allegedly burned an Adivasi woman alive because they thought she was a witch. Based on data from the Assam government, 107 persons were killed in the state as a result of witch hunts between 2011 and 2019.¹¹
- In 2021, the Odisha State Commission for Women (OSCW) and ActionAid conducted a joint study that found that the districts of Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Keonjhar, Gajapati, and Ganjam account for 83% of the state's incidences of witch-hunting and witch-branding. Cases from the districts of Nabarangpur, Balasore, Nayagarh, Koraput, and Kandhamal were also mentioned in the study.¹²

THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE: ACCUSERS, HEALERS, AND MEDIA FUELING WITCH HUNTS IN INDIA

- ❖ **Village Power Dynamics-**Exploitation and Vendettas Local healers (babas, ojhas, bhopas), particularly those who are men, hold considerable sway within rural communities. This power, however, can be misused in several ways. Some healers may identify alleged witches to bolster their own reputations as protectors against evil, solidifying their standing within the community. Accusations can also be a tool for

¹⁰ Financial Times. (n.d.). *The 17th-century Swedish witch trials that led to mass hysteria*. Financial Times.

¹¹ The Wire. (n.d.). *Assam tribal woman killed over witchcraft allegations*.

¹² Odisha State Commission for Women, & ActionAid India. (2021). *Witch-Hunting in Odisha: A Compilation of Case Studies*. ActionAid India.

settling personal scores. A healer might target a woman to eliminate a competitor in the traditional medicine space or retaliate for a past disagreement. Even more disturbingly, witch hunts can be manipulated to control resources. By ostracizing women, the healers can make them vulnerable to land grabs or economic exploitation. The Jharkhand Witch Hunting Case (2016)¹³ exemplifies this dark side of healer influence. A powerful healer, reportedly driven by a personal vendetta, instigated a witch hunt that led to the brutal murders of three women. This case highlights the chilling reality of how local healers can exploit their position to inflict violence. Accusations frequently result from interpersonal conflicts or bad luck that occurs within a family or group. These charges may be stoked by self-described "witch doctors" or "healers" who take advantage of the circumstances, persuading the relatives of the victims that a witch is to blame and proposing costly and frequently dangerous rituals as a remedy.

- ❖ **Sensationalized Media: Fanning the Flames of Fear-**Witch hunts in India thrive on a toxic combination of power dynamics, opportunism, and sensationalized reporting. Witch-hunting in India is fueled by a troubling collaboration between accusers, healers, and occasionally even the media. Sadly, sensationalist media coverage has the power to worsen the issue by drawing attention to these allegations without conducting a thorough investigation, which exacerbates the community's already existing dread and paranoia. Irresponsible media coverage can act as a dangerous accelerant to witch hunts. Sensationalized reporting can whip a community into a moral panic, creating a climate rife with fear and paranoia that can trigger a domino effect of accusations and violence. Furthermore, media outlets often act as judge and jury, portraying the accused as inherently guilty without proper investigation. This not only prejudices the legal process but also tramples on the right to a fair trial. Finally, the media's focus on dramatic visuals and lurid narratives can overshadow the human cost of witch hunts. By prioritizing spectacle over substance, they hinder public empathy for the victims, making it easier for violence to continue unabated.¹⁴

¹³ *Court on Its Own Motion v. The State of Jharkhand*, (2016, June 29).

¹⁴ ActionAid India. (2021). *Witch-Hunting in Odisha: A Compilation of Case Studies*.

IMPACT OF WITCH HUNTS ON WOMEN

❖ Witch Hunt Violence: (Physical and Sexual Abuse)

Witchcraft accusations escalate into horrific acts of violence against women. Accused women face a brutal reality of physical assault, including beatings and mutilation. This violence can be driven by mob mentality, a desire to extract confessions, or simply inflict punishment. The situation takes an even darker turn with sexual violence. Rape and other forms of sexual assault are used as tools of humiliation, control, and forcing "confessions." These acts are further fueled by the warped belief that witches possess unnatural sexual desires. In Chattishgarh in August of 2013 Three boys killed two fifty year-old women. One boy's father was sick, while the dads of the other two sons were dead, according to the authorities. They "questioned those women about their involvement in witchcraft practices, but they refused to speak," thinking the women were at fault. The boys were enraged by this and proceeded to slit their throats after strangling them.¹⁵ Witch hunts are common in tribal-dominated rural areas with little access to justice, medical care, and education, as well as a high prevalence of superstitions and beliefs. Crime connected to witch hunting has several facets.¹⁶ The victims endure torture, social exclusion, and extreme humiliation in addition to the executions. Things like being severely beaten, nude, feeding excrement, or bound to posts happen frequently. The majority of the victims are women, widows, the unmarried, and those who are out of the ordinary and work as healers or community workers. Superstitions that are aggressive, dangerous, destructive, damaging, and inhumane are the result of a lack of good education, economic progress, scientific temper, and widespread awareness campaigns.¹⁷

❖ Social Exclusion of Witch-Hunted Women

A heinous violation of women's fundamental rights is the social marginalization that ensues from allegations of witchcraft. The effects on other women who are ostracized are severe. Their own communities have the power to deny them access to basic necessities like food, water, shelter, and medical attention, endangering their health and maybe lives. In addition to isolating children from essential social support systems, this

¹⁵ Times of India. (2013, August 14). *2 women killed on suspicion of witchcraft in Chhattisgarh*. The Times of India.

¹⁶ rudayam, A., Mangubhai, J. P., & Lee, J. G. (2006). *Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence Against Dalit Women in India*. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights.

¹⁷ Iswar Attaka and Others v. State of Orissa, (2015).

seclusion leaves them vulnerable to additional abuse. In terms of the economy, the excluded woman might not be allowed to work, possess property, or even shop. This sets up a vicious cycle of reliance on other people, who might then take advantage of their weaknesses. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) guarantees fundamental rights, including the right to life, security of person, and freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (Articles 3, 5, and 9). Social exclusion can violate these rights. The Supreme Court case, *Gaurav Jain v. the State of Bihar* (1991)¹⁸, addressed witchhunting as a violation of human rights. The court directed state governments to enact laws and enforce existing ones to protect victims, including ensuring access to essential services.

❖ **Psychological Trauma from Witch Hunts**

Case Studies and Legal Recognition Witch hunts leave a trail of deep psychological wounds on the women they target. The constant threat of violence can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, and hypervigilance. Social isolation, loss of livelihood, and public humiliation inflicted on the accused often result in severe depression. Furthermore, the fear of being ostracized or attacked creates chronic anxiety and a constant sense of insecurity, further crippling these women. The trauma inflicted by witch-hunting goes beyond physical harm. Some women, as a coping mechanism for the intense social rejection, may experience dissociation, a psychological state of detachment from their thoughts and feelings. This trauma is increasingly being recognized by courts. Landmark cases like *Saleema Begum vs. State of Jharkhand*¹⁹ and *Philomena Musambayi vs. The Republic*²⁰ highlight this. In these cases, courts acknowledged the psychological impact of ostracization and social exclusion, ordering the reintegration of one woman and awarding compensation for emotional distress to another. These rulings demonstrate a growing legal recognition of the psychological trauma caused by witch-hunts.

❖ **Loss of Property and Livelihood in Witch Hunts in India**

The economic devastation caused by witch hunts goes beyond the immediate violence and social exclusion. Accusations of witchcraft can strip women of their livelihoods.

¹⁸ 1991 *Supp (2) SCC 133*. Supreme Court of India.

¹⁹ (2018, India)

²⁰ (2014, Zambia)

Land, a crucial asset in rural India, is often grabbed by family members, the community, or even law enforcement influenced by the accusations. Homes, crops, and other belongings are vandalized or destroyed during mob attacks or as forms of "punishment." Furthermore, daughters or widows facing witchcraft accusations can be ostracized and denied their rightful inheritance, further deepening their economic marginalization. In Dohra village in the Latehar district on September 11, five members of a family—two of whom were women—were stabbed by relatives who accused them of being witchcraft practitioners. They were blamed for the demise of a buffalo and a woman in a car crash.

Police discovered that the attack was motivated by a plot of land.²¹ In the Namkom area of Jharkhand, a local land dealer allegedly concocted witchcraft tales to get control of a woman's property. This was reported by the Indian news website FirstPost. Reporters were also informed by activists that many of the ladies who are suspected of being "witches" are widows who live alone on their estates.²² The Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 435 (Mischief by destroying or defacing property) and 440 (Mischief committed after preparation for causing damage): These sections can be used to prosecute those who damage or destroy the property of women accused of witchcraft. The landmark case in which, the dead was carried away by force by the defendants, and he was slain and buried alive after being suspected of practicing witchcraft. When the police arrived in the hamlet after learning that the deceased had been slain and buried, there were signs that some of the people were involved because they were preventing the authorities from conducting the investigation.²³

WITCHERY: FROM THE EYES OF PSYCHIATRY

Because of deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about witchery and a lack of knowledge about the symptoms of psychiatric illness, the symptoms of undiagnosed psychiatric morbidities can occasionally resemble shamanic practice, possessing supernatural power, and something of a demonic nature, all of which are classified as witchcraft practice. Both auditory and visual hallucinations are frequently seen in schizophrenia; the hallmark of hallucinatory activity is a person muttering to themselves or to unidentified, invisible objects. Furthermore, the symptoms of schizophrenia include aimless wandering, messy appearances, maintaining

²¹ Hindustan Times. (n.d.). *Greed for property and power behind Jharkhand witch hunts*.

²² Deutsche Welle. (2019, July 25). *India's witches: Victims of superstition and poverty*.

²³ CRL.A(J)/76/2015 (Jharkhand High Court, October 29, 2021).

strange posture for extended periods of time, aggressive behavior, pervasive suspiciousness, hyper vigilance, and persistent fearfulness.²⁴ These symptoms can be mistaken for the practice of black magic or other ominous activities depending on cultural beliefs. A person experiencing manic symptoms frequently displays elevated mood and enhanced psychomotor activity, which manifests as wandering tendencies, increased socializing, Reducing the need for sleep, acting aggressively and violently, boasting about having enormous resources or power, being celebrities or having other supernatural identities—manic episodes are often accompanied by increased hypersexuality and religiosity. Furthermore, the symptoms of delusional illnesses, schizotypal, paranoid, and transgender personality disorders, as well as possession disorders, closely align with the cultural beliefs surrounding occult practices. Although there is a significant theoretical likelihood of mistakenly designating people with mental illnesses as witches, there is a low practical likelihood of this happening.

CONCLUSION

In India, a complex web of causes that disproportionately target women fosters the growth of witch hunts. Strongly established patriarchal conventions make women easy targets, especially for those who don't conform to society's norms. Educational programs can encourage critical thinking and debunk falsehoods. Women who are economically empowered have greater social status. Last but not least, enforcing the legislation against witch hunting more strictly and encouraging community discussion are essential measures to guaranteeing everyone's safety and dignity. That's when we may break free from the web of vulnerability that ensnares women in the atrocities of Witch hunts. In India, witch hunting is still a common practice today. The absence of national legislation, a lack of supporting documentation and reports, and a lackluster application of existing regulations are the causes. Therefore, the issue can be resolved by enforcing the law strictly, enacting an anti-witchcraft legislation that will also stop witch-hunting activities, raising awareness within the police and welfare departments, and establishing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that will promote awareness. Since witch hunts are more common in underdeveloped places, teaching witchcraft as a subject in schools is vital to change society's perception and replace superstition.

²⁴ World Health Organization. (1992). *The ICD-10 classification of mental and behavioural disorders: Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines*.