

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WITCH CRAFT AND THE WITCH HUNTING: A CONCEALED RITUAL

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Abstract : This paper examines the witch-hunting phenomena in India especially in the states like Rajasthan and Gujarat with a comprehensive perspective of violence against women. With the view of case studies, in India, it can be seen that many incidents occur in the places where people are poor and marginalised. Tribal women and widows are more beleaguered. The paper intends to discover the root causes of witch-hunting in order to terminate this horrendous practise. India being a patriarchal society, Indian women are labelled as subordinates to men and such demotion is echoed in male-controlled resources, exploitation and discrimination in the society. Women who try to defy the patriarchal norms have fallen prey to the supposed witchcraft practices and are labelled as witches. The number of witch-hunting cases keep swelling at a startling rate, yet there is no defined law for addressing this issue. The paper concludes that though Indian women have equal rights to all productive resources, improper healthcare facilities and education system act as a hindrance in enhancing their livelihood and legitimate tools and implementations are needed to address this violence.

IndexTerms - witch-hunting, witch crafts, India, witch-hunting laws, Indian women.

I. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in any society and community is true indicator of its advancement and a factor that helps to define and rank a nation (Towns, 2009).

Issues against women, like another historical phenomena of violence, is embedded in the socioeconomic and political setting of power associations. It happens only within the caste, class and the male-controlled society. It may be well-defined as defilement of women morality, physical and mental integrity. It is the consequence of inadequate power relations between men and women. India, a country with a rich culture and traditions, deifies and worships women and believes that when women are honoured and glorified, the god resides with them. But 'Bharat Mata' herself feels threatened by her own children. The irony is that Indian women go through and face so many issues like domestic violence, honour killing, illegal trafficking, rape, dowry, sexual harassment. One of the rarest and concealed issue is the witch hunting. Even with so many laws that are being enforced, this ritual is still practised for years and is kept hidden from the eyes of the law. The 'witch-hunting' practise in many parts of India gives the idea that it is prevalent amongst some tribes and castes particularly within the native communities like Hindus from lower class and Dalits.

Today, not in the swanky cosmopolitan suburbs, but, in a tribal village that still thrives in fire lamps, where all these horrors remain hidden to the outer world. Witch hunting is slowly spreading to other areas and many woman have lost their identity and life in the name of ritual. With a constitution that mentions everyone has equal rights, yet, India is not an exemption to many superstitious beliefs and practices, transfusing the wild thoughts of the human mind and consciousness on an enlarged level. Witch-hunting occurrences and violence associated with it are happening under our noses. One thing that remains the same for years is that, women who are weak, poor and illiterate are the sufferers of this atrocious crime. This papers proffers to unveil the horrible ritual and exemplifies the suffering of women, the key difference between public and private violence. Witch-hunting is an instance of public violence against women usually caused by their own family members. There are numerous definitions provided for the witch-hunting, this study explores the exact form of witch-hunting violence as a reflection of irregularity in power between the genders and which continues to subordinate and discriminate woman.

II. HUNTING THE 'WITCHES'

There is a self-contradictory in the word 'witch' which originally means 'a wise person. A witch – hunt means searching and hunting down the people especially women, branded as 'Witches 'or those who practise witch craft invoking ethical panic. In our society, Hunting has basically become bequest of vehemence against women. Burning the witches is generally considered to be an old theory in the contemporary society. Yet, many men and children habited the effect of the superstitious customs and beliefs.

India having a largest democracy with an ever budding economy still has its large populace tainted by illiteracy and poverty. Indians, both literate and illiterate, have been heading towards superstitious customs to cure sickness, disorder and vindicate bad proceedings. This contemporary belief system is having lethal consequences. A person suspected of being a witch or 'dayan' in India can be laid open to endless torture and worse, can even be smothered and burnt alive. Women, especially Adi vasis and Dalit are accused of practising witch crafts when there is a fall in production, cultivation and when there is any other disaster in that area.

She is considered as misfortune to the society. In most of the cases, people silently suffer and are not able to come out of this because of poverty and illiteracy. Today, it has become a comprehensive phenomenon. Because of many reformations and movements, other countries are free from the clutches of witch hunting but in India particularly in the states like Jharkhand Rajasthan, Gujarat, Assam and Bihar are still engulfed by this threat.

Indeed, the accusations about the black magic use or possession of powers by the victim are common in many witch hunting cases. But then again, during inquiries and investigations, one can always find the jealousy, obsession for land and property and many other trivial issues amongst the natives. Thus, the paper further delves deep into the concealed delinquency of witch hunts, promulgated because of increased illiteracy rates and lack of awareness that results in evoking spiteful thoughts.

III. THE SCAPEGOATS OF THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

In a widespread idea, witchcraft is commonly connected with the infliction of harm on property or people by means of alleged mystic powers possessed by individuals and are labelled as witches. This can also be an anthropological or sociological phenomenon, where ideas and concepts are besought to find an explanation for the troubles and misfortunes inflicted on others. Thus, witchcraft has traditionally been used to bring the death of some abhorrent person, to instigate the desire and love, to wake the dead and even to bring impotence or calamity upon nemesis, foes and oppressors. On the other hand, witchcraft is generally connected with shamanism and neo-paganism.

The notion of a scapegoat denotes the penal or undesirable treatment of groups or people known to be liable for problems or crises, they did not cause (Jensen, 2007). Most of accusations against men are stated by men. Those women who are known to be trouble or quarrelsome are usually kept away from the local communities and eventually fall an easy prey for the patriarchal society to brand them as witches. There is also a common notion that the gossip and rumours play an important role and it ultimately develops into allegations. Facts and figures about the Indian witch-hunting show that the 'whispering' campaigns have played a crucial role in banishing a witch and also for gathering support against her. This statement proves that rumours put reality out of its place. Thus, this provides the condition of alleged and reproached women as reliable targets or simply the scapegoats.

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IV. HISTORY OF WITCH HUNTING

A witch – hunt is a purgative search to find and hunt down the witches. The conventional passé of witch - hunts in the world especially in North America and Europe occurred between 13th century and 16th century and it continued till the reformation upheavals of the Reformation. It resulted in execution of about 100,000 women while more than 200,000 women were tortured, hanged or burnt alive in the name of witch hunting all over the world. While the last killing of witches took place till 18th century, there are countries like Saudi Arabia, Papua New Guinea and many other regions of Asia and Africa that still follows this ritual even with the implementation of much legislation against it.

India has a long history of Witch-hunting in the time the medieval age but proof and confirmation of witch hunting in India were not documented till 16th century. The proofs of witch – hunting in India was first known through the Santhal witch prosecutions in 1792. During the British regime in india, there was a city called Chhotanagpur with a district known as Singhbhum was hugely populated with tribals and Adivasis, locally known as the the Santhals. The presence of sorceresses and witches were the most common beliefs among the Santhals.

Witches were dreaded and were thought of being involved in anti-social activities. People thought that these witches had enough power to destroy humans and animals. Consequently, to cure sickness and diseases, Adi vasis concluded that eradication of witches would do the deed by removing the evil eye.it was said that the witch hunting practice and rituals amongst Santhals were even more ruthless and cruel than that in Europe. Contrasting to Europe where sorceresses and witches were usually strangled and then burnt, the Santhals forced the women to drink blood and eat human excretions before being thrown into flames.

Fortunately, the British barred the torture and tyranny inflicted upon witches in Chhotanagpur, Rajasthan and Gujarat between 1850s. The british men considered this practice as barbarous and planned to undo the beliefs and views of witch craft by giving people proper medical facilities. Nevertheless, they destabilized the level to which the custom was socially rooted. Regardless of the ban, some of the cases are not considered as a crime. The Santhals assumed that prohibition actually brought about flourishing of the witches. Therefore, the upshot of the ban was differing to what the British had envisioned. For the period of 1857-58, a swell in the witch hunting was seen. This was later viewed as an approach to resist the British rule, which then led to the great revolt of 1857.

V. LAWS AGAINST WITCH-HUNTS

The implementation of national legislations against the witch-hunts did not take place even during post-independence era, because the Indian penal code, 1860 itself provided penalties and punishments for the offenses associated with witch-hunting.

The Indian Penal Code furnishes a penalty up to a year in prison or pay a sum of 1000 rupees as a fine for those who voluntarily inflict harm and the same penalty applies for offenders who beat or torture the witches. Section 323 takes legal action against the offenders of witch hunts. The Indian Penal Code also proscribes man slaughtering by issuing a life long imprisonment or even death penalty. Section 354 levies a penalty for those who disgrace the modesty of women by assaulting her and such people are put into prison for two years. Section 382 issues a verdict for ten year, for those who commit theft, cause death or obtain the property by accusing the women of practicing witch crafts. Various other Penal Code provisions that are significant to crimes and misconducts against the alleged witches narrate wrongful confinement and restraint such as instigating serious hurt, rape, abduction and even defamation.

One of the most recessive state in India is Bihar, yet it was known to be the first Indian state to issue a law- 'Prevention of Witch Practices Act, 1999', against witch hunting. This states that those who inadvertently abet, aid, conspire and instigate the identification of women as witch that leads to physical and mental torture as well as humiliation has committed an offense. A person who categorizes a women as witches could be sentenced to jail for 3 months or fined a sum of 1,000 rupees, while a person who physically or mentally tortures a woman by branding her as a witch could be sentenced to jail for almost 6 months or will be fined a sum of 2000 rupees. This Act also forbids any infliction of harm to a woman in the name of curing her and the punishment provided is a year imprisonment or a fine of 2000 rupees. It is also very essential to note that these laws are far less than the laws under the IPC.

Likewise, the government of Rajasthan passed the 'The Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015, for providing proper measures and actions to wrestle the hazard of witch-hunting and also to stop the witch crafting. It is known to be the most inflexible law legislated to prevent witch hunting. A person committing this serious crime will be imprisoned for more than a year and it might even extend up to 5 years or has to pay a sum of 50000 and sometimes both are issued.

VI. JUDICIAL RESPONSES TO WITCH-HUNTING

Many State Governments should form a Committee consist of experts and professionals from various fields of public administration and management in order to look over the occurrence of the witch hunting practice especially in tribal zones. The Committee has to provide the collected information within 6 months duration.

The Committee has to specify about the areas and its extensive prevalence of witch hunting in the state, so that the government might be able to take proper measures against this practise by forming a special cell. The Government can also carry out activities like surveillance, gathering information by forming an intelligence team. By this way, witch-hunting can be brought down by taking necessary remedial measures.

The sufferers from this practise witch hunting shall be assisted through legal authority services in the districts under the act of 1987. The services should include proper psychological and remedial treatment to the helpless victims.

The State Government should also find the possibilities in articulating a complete compensation scheme for the Victims under the criminal code in section 357A.

Maharashtrian government initiated to pass a law against witch hunting and the related practices, fortunately disapproval did not take place. The draft bill from Assam Assembly is still anticipating the president's approval. However, the states of Haryana and West Bengal still have not taken any necessary step to curb superstitious practises. States that have already enacted law to punish have not proved to be much effective. There are so many cases in Rajasthan registered under the Act, yet there was no single verdict on it. In Jharkhand, the penalty for one who mentally or physically torments a witch is jailed for six months along with a fine of 2000 rupees and this is significantly less compared to IPC. This in correspondence with both the state and national laws has resulted in the flagging of the government and created a gap in legislation. Witch-hunting cases are generally dealt using section 323 of IPC in the olden days. The Section suggests a very improper punishment and is similar to the offense of slapping someone. Also, there is a catastrophe in prosecuting the lawbreakers in spite of all these general and special laws.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study done throughout India has efficiently exposed that the witch-hunting is a hoax and generally is a scheme to extract property, money and land that was lawfully entitled to woman. As usual, the community are in compliance with committing such awful violences and abuses. Though, authorities tried to curb these issues but because of medieval mindsets and corruption, the problem continuously lies ahead.

Along with the Indian Penal Code, there are many state laws against witch-hunting and witch crafting. Nevertheless, there is a gap in formulation that has to be addressed for better effectiveness. For example, Debjani Bora, a national level athlete from Assam who secured many gold medals was accused of practising witchcraft and was viciously attacked by her own villagers. This incident showed that when a national level athlete had fallen as a prey, then it is not difficult for the perpetrators to bring down others.

Hence, this can only be avoided only by effectively educating the nation, especially in the rural areas and inculcating the sense of prudence and rationality. Proficient laws has to be implemented for effective social welfare and eradication of these customs and beliefs. Thus with proper health, transport, drinking water and sanitation facilities, this crimes can be significantly reduced.

There are many countless stories in India. Women in remote areas are not aware of these laws and this is the major advantage for some miscreants. Many NGO's helped women to fight against these practices and learn the laws. Thus, the paper concludes that the outlawing of the witch hunting and witch craft is the only option available.

plan and method that how the study is conducted. This includes Universe of the study, sample of the study, Data and Sources of Data, study's variables and analytical framework. The details are as follows;

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