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# WITCH-HUNT TRIALS AS A PRECURSOR TO FEMINIST LEGAL REFORMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A CONSTITUTIONAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The witch-hunting concept can be traced in the deep roots of our history, travelling across various decades and centuries- the ancient age to the medieval and modern ages, and now spreading into the industrial age. The faith in witchcraft, has always fuelled people by fear, negligence and superstition which has persisted through centuries, practicing in different ways across different societies. Though we went through civilization and the development of modern science, the belief in spells of witch-hunting continues to make its way, adjusting itself to modern socio-cultural themes. It is mostly related to a contagious disease, steadily spreading into new era and digital world. In the Indian context, witch-hunting is a persistent social worm, specifically in rural areas where deep-rooted superstitions and patriarchal norms and mindset prevail. The persistence of this practice at large can be attributed to the entrenched belief systems that associate women, especially widows, elderly women, and socially or economically marginalized individuals, with supernatural harm. Many women who are labelled as "witches" (commonly referred to as daayans or chudails) are often led to horrific forms of violence and inhumane behaviour, including social ostracization, physical violation, public humiliation, rape and even murder.

A significant reason for the sustenance of this practice in India is the intersection of gender hegemony, economic disparity, and a lack of legal enforcement. Women belonging to the rural communities are denied autonomy and are treated as subordinate to men, making them potentially easy targets for accusations of witchcraft. These accusations often serve grave motives, such as land disputes, disputes in inheritance of property, or personal vendettas.

This dissertation aims to address the multifaceted nature of witch-hunting by delving into its historical evolution, its socio-cultural underpinnings, and its implications for Indian society. The study examines various aspects of the phenomenon, including the belief in witchcraft, the conduct of witch trials, and the mechanisms of witch-hunts, all from a historical perspective.

Additionally, the research highlights the consequences of witch-hunting on the victims and society at large, shedding light on the urgent need for legal and social reforms to combat this practice effectively.

**Keywords:** Witchcraft, social, abuse, women, power, rights

## INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft has always been a multi-polar and disputed phenomenon in human communities, the place of religion and folklore, medicine, as well as gender relations of power. Although the common imagination tends to narrow it down to the details of broomsticks, cauldrons, and magical powers, the truth about the witchcraft goes much further than that. It has served in the past and in the present as a belief system and a social construct based on existing fears of morality, authority, and gender roles. Witchcraft therefore cannot be comprehended as a spiritual or religious process but it should be viewed within the larger socio-political contexts that define and govern human behaviour.

The following analysis is based on the basic question: is it the mere expression of religious conviction, or is it somehow representative of a symbolic place of conflict of feminine identity, independence and empowerment? Such a query gains even more relevance in the context of patriarchal societies, where women who break the norms in the society have often been accused of being witches. In that regard, the role of the so-called witch is not only in the superstition but also in the resistance, fear, and control, which were even more profound underlying problems in society in terms of female agency.

In the history of persecution, women have been disproportionately targeted because of the accusations of being witches, and one can observe the tendencies that go beyond the cultures and territories. The witch trials that occurred in the early modern Europe, such as the example of witch trials, led to the death of thousands of women names in the name of religious and moral cleansing. Nevertheless, these experiments were not predetermined entirely by the fear of the supernatural; they were under profoundly entrenched political, economic, and religious changes during that period. Widows, economically independent, and non-conforming women were the most vulnerable, and it can be argued that witch hunting served as the tool of re-enforcing patriarchal values and undermining the female autonomy.

The concept of witch-hunting is still a modern trend in the Indian system especially in the rural and tribal areas. These trials are usually based on the localized power structures, unlike the

European institutionalized trials, where witchcraft charges are employed to resolve various conflicts, appropriate property, or ostracize women who oppose the roles of the conventional societal order. The women referred to as daayans are often punished brutally both by being ostracized socially, abused physically, and in the worst case, killed. Such continuation shows an overlap of gender with caste, class and economic vulnerability which brings to the fore the structural inequalities which perpetuate them.

It is against this background that the dissertation attempts to understand the connection between witchcraft trials and feminist legal reforms in the 21st century. It looks at the ways persecution patterns in the past have contributed to the current knowledge of gender justice and legal protection. Although most western cultures no longer physically persecute witches as it was the case previously, the historical narrative of this widespread practice has been transformed into a feminist discourse where the witch has been restored as a figure of rebellion, empowerment, and self-sufficiency. Conversely, in a country such as India, the war against witch-hunting is in the process of being waged, and even the current legal systems have failed to ensure that the social and cultural contexts that have continued to perpetuate this kind of violence are effectively eliminated.

Besides, this paper examines the changing identity of witchcraft as a broader power, identity and social power struggles. The comparison between the symbolic recovery of the witch in feminism movements in the West, and the fact that women accused of the alleged witchcraft were still victims of violence in India indicates the existence of obvious gaps in the worldwide history of gender justice. It is this inability to find a common language that makes it necessary to take a multifaceted and case-sensitive approach to legal reform, the ability not only to treat the symptoms of witch-hunting but also to approach the root causes.

Finally, this dissertation claims that persecution of witches in historical Europe or modern India, is culturally entrenched in the patriarchal fears of female autonomy and self-sufficiency. Through examining the theme of witchcraft as a location of oppression and resistance, the paper will bring out the presence of legal systems, cultural myths, and social structures in defining how women lived. By so doing it aims to play its part in developing a wider grasp of how past wrongs still shape current realities and suggest ways of more successful and inclusive ways of approaching gender justice.

## **SINCE WHEN WAS WITCHCRAFT A RELIGION?**

### **Concept and Meaning of Witchcraft**

The word witch is a historical relationship with a person, mostly a woman, who is thought to possess supernatural abilities to manipulate occurrences, especially due to black magic or sorcery. This definition, however, is not a simple neutral description of spiritual power, it is very rooted in social perceptions that construct such power as dangerous, deviant and, in essence, threatening. In many cultures and in many historical times, the word of witch has been associated with the most negative attributes, making the individuals accused of this charge objects of dread, suspicion and hatred of their respective societies. The people labelled as witches are often stigmatized and face extreme types of social exclusion and violence, not because they are practitioners of alternative belief systems or indigenous knowledge.

The vocabulary of this phenomenon in the Indian context which is employed to classify alleged witches also demonstrates the cultural and gendered aspect of the phenomenon. Such words as daayan, tohni, and chudail are widely used to identify women as witches with their individual connotation regional and cultural connotations but bonded together by the purpose they serve: to categorically socialize women as other dangerous individuals. The labels themselves are hardly ever used in harmless or symbolic way, but they are usually rather used as the instruments of accusation, which justifies ostracist, humiliating, and physical acts of violence. Although the word tohna is sometimes also applied to male counterparts of witchcraft in places like Chhattisgarh, it is women who are virtually the majority of the victims of witch-hunting activities. This unbalanced targeting highlights the explicitly gendered character of the crime and indicates that the charge of witchcraft is not about believing in supernatural interference as much as it is concerned with the management of the roles and identities of women in the society.

The supernatural abilities ascribed to a person or rather a woman are almost all rolled in a negative manner and create fear and uphold the general anxieties of the group. Women who are viewed as different, be it their social position, economic autonomy, age, marital state or even personal attitude are more susceptible in getting tagged as witches. In a number of instances, these accusations do not grow out of any true conviction in supernatural evil but rather some form of a social conflict, property issues, self-scoring, or even opposition to women who oppose the usual standards. The accusation of witch is then turned into a constructed social

identity that can be imposed on any citizen as a tool of control in the society, as communities can use this to excuse the instance of discrimination and violence in the name of being culturally apt belief.

### **Witchcraft as a Social Construct**

In the past, the concept of witchcraft has been largely considered an evil in the society, mostly caused by ignorance, un-scientific knowledge and deep-rooted belief. The black magic/sorcery, or the execution of rituals aimed at invoking/controlling supernatural beings, has been recorded in the old, medieval civilizations in Europe, Americas, Africa, and Asia. Such practices were not necessarily regarded as being negatively in a number of these societies; they were in fact part of spirituality or curing practices in specific places. But in due course, especially when organized religion and state power became consolidated, demonization of such practices started and anyone allied to it was persecuted as such.

The case of alleged witch persecution took its extremist forms in patriarch societies because the fusion of both gender and power decisively influenced the situation. Being the unfortunate victims of their disenfranchisement in the social structures, women were readily accused to the effect that they posed a danger to the welfare of the community. Female anxiety on independence especially when women acquired knowledge or freedom that was not male dominated was usually concealed in the fear of witchcraft. As an example, women who used traditional medicine, were not within the traditional family set-up and those who had financial means were more apt to be suspected as witches. In this regard, witch-hunting was actually a tool of structuring patriarchal authority, putting nonconformers into line and deterring other potential nonconformers.

Therefore, the idea of the so-called witch cannot be interpreted as the one that is purely superstitious and unreasonable. Instead, it is a case of general social trends where gender, power and cultural discourses intertwine. The continued identification of women with destructive supernatural elements shows not only the continuation of some system of beliefs but also how such beliefs are arranged to perpetuate inequality and control. Analyzing the way the term of witch was historically and culturally constructed, one can easily guess that the accusations of witchcraft are not as much concerned with the presence of supernatural forces but with the social desire to find, isolate, and control those entities that are perceived as non-conforming to or even dangerous to it, most frequently, women.

## **Historical Evolution of Witchcraft Beliefs**

The notion of witchcraft is something that has been deeply rooted in the human society, diffusing throughout religion, culture and even law in various historical times. It did not exist in one place at any one time but has developed with the societies and influenced and been influenced by their fears, values and structures of authority. Witchcraft as a term is a product of etymology as in the Old English terms *wicce* and *craft*. *Wicce* is based on *wicca* meaning a practitioner of magical or supernatural arts and *craft* refers to skill, knowledge or ability. The combination of the two words implies what is referred to as the exercise of professional knowledge or authority that is usually perceived to be beyond the scope of the normal human ability.

Conventionally, witchcraft was a practice linked to being able to control unseen or supernatural energies; either in their good or evil practice. Such powers were thought to heal, protect or bring good luck in certain cultural context and individuals who had these powers were respected or even worshipped. Nevertheless, in most of the societies even in India, the practice of witchcraft has largely been positioned negatively and it is linked to ill luck, bad omen and evil orientation. This deconstruction has succeeded to breed a lot of fear and suspicion whereby those who are said to practice it have been marginalized and persecuted. Notably, these charges have not been used uniformly; they have been used selectively against women, which points to greater gender biases that are implicit in society structures.

Stigma, exclusion and violence are the two vices towards individuals suspected of witchcraft that have existed since historical times. A prime example documented in the largest amount of literature is the wave of witch trials that rocked medieval and early modern Europe in the 15th to 18th centuries. Thousands of people, mostly women, were subject to inhuman treatment during this period in which they were burned at the stake, drowned or tortured and even executed after trials that mostly did not produce any credible evidence against them. These trials were not only the consequence of the superstition or religious passion, but they were closely associated with other socio-political processes, such as the establishment of the church authority, the creation of a centralized system of laws, or the necessity to preserve social order. Witchcraft accusations were often employed as the tools of control and were used against those that were considered deviant, independent, or those that posed a threat to the authority.

The witch trials of the European continent made a substantial contribution to the development

of the legal and cultural reactions to the case of witchcraft, becoming the predecessors in the way societies approach and address the alleged supernatural threat. These instances are also an eye opener on how justice structures can be abused to justify violence and discrimination in the name of the moral or religious obligation. These gendered nature of these persecutions highlights the degree to which accusations of witchcraft were mixed with the male anxieties of women role, independence, and power. The situation in the Indian subcontinent is more grounded in its cultural and historical setting, but it tells a very disturbing story of witch-hunting. As opposed to the formality of the judicial procedures witnessed in Europe, the concept of witch-hunting in India is in most cases informal, community-based, and heavily entrenched in the belief systems of that specific community. It is informed by the complicated convergence of superstition, social-economic disparity, caste structures, and deeply engrained patriarchal principles. Here, witchcraft is not just a belief but a social system whereby the community recognize and attack those people who are seen as vulnerable or unwanted mostly women.

### **Gender, Power and Witch-Hunting**

The nature of witch-hunting in India is the accusing women, (particularly widows, old age women or women without male protection) of harming through supernatural powers. Such accusations frequently occur in personal conflict situations, in the case of property, sickness or ineffective misfortune in the society. After the labeling of being witches, these women are then treated harshly and sometimes even inhumanely. Violence can entail humiliation in the presence, physical force, forced displacement, sexual violence, and in the worst-case scenario, murder. The social impacts are also equally devastating since the victims are often ostracized, deprived of dignity, and access to basic rights and protections. The personalities that play a big role in the continuation of these practices include people like Ojhas, self-proclaimed witch doctors or faith healers who are claiming to be able to tell the witches in the community. By taking advantage of existent superstitions and terror, these characters can be used as the trigger of violence that will make mobs against the accused. Their power is not formal yet is highly undisputed in the community and their accusations are very serious. Consequently, the situations of witch-hunting often lead to mass violence, which becomes hard to hold anyone responsible and is one of the reasons that make such crimes under-reported.

The language that is employed to explain women who were accused of witchcraft further

enhances dehumanization and marginalization of the women. Words like Daayan, Tonahi, Beta Khauki (son-eater), Adam Khauki (man-eater), Bhai Khauki (brother-eater), Maradmuhi, Kheldi (characterless woman), Bisahin (poisonous woman), Bhootni and Dakan are not merely associative words used to label others, but a potent instrument of social exclusion that denies women. These labels legitimize the violence of their actions by relating them to the images of consumption, danger, and moral corruption, and they propagate normalizing the maltreatment of this group in society. The prevalence of the witchcraft belief therefore plays the role of justifying and continuing the acts of violence against women. It permits societies to justify behaviour that would be otherwise thought to be criminal, instead of acts of responding to perceived threats with social legitimacy. Therefore, witch-hunting is not a case of superstition but a serious human right concern that indicates more structural inequalities in the society.

The legal ban is not enough in resolving this problem; it needs to be a holistic strategy that requires that the underlying problems of such beliefs be addressed such as the absence of education, economic deprivation, gender prejudice and the traditions of patriarchy. The possibility to locate the witchcraft in its socio-cultural and historical context makes it clear that it was not about some supernatural forces and much more about how societies create and manage discourses of fear, power and difference.

### **The Daayan: Myth, Folklore, and Gendered Violence**

One of the most immersed characters in the Indian folklore of witchcraft is the Daayan, whose name is surrounded with fear, mystery and cultural meaning. Daayan originates in Sanskrit, namely, Dakini, which in the ancient times was used to mean the type of supernatural female being thought to live in Patala, or the underworld. According to religious and mythological Hindu traditions in early Hindu times, the concept of the Dakinis was never consistently considered entirely wicked, instead it is a complicated spiritual energy that was associated with the divine energy and in particular with the goddess Kali. Such entities are mentioned in a number of ancient sources, among which there are Bhagavata Purana, Brahma Purana, Markandeya Purana, and Kathasaritsagara. According to these writings, Dakinis were strong female spirits who were commonly portrayed as servants or the personifications of divine feminine energies that were capable of going beyond the normal human constraints.

Nevertheless, as time passed by, these mythological characters were transformed greatly in the meaning that they carried. The character of the Dakini finally became that of the Daayan, a

very evil and dreaded creature of folk fantasy as religious stories intertwined with the community folklores and fears. This transformation is more than just an overhaul in cultural narration it is also the work of the social phobias about authority and power, or in this case the female power. The Daayan became perceived as a threatening supernatural being which could hurt people and whole communities and was often the cause of any inexplicable disease or deaths, failures of crops or other bad phenomena.

The Daayan folklore is rich in symbolic imagery, most of which helps to identify her as other and differentiated in the eyes of ordinary human beings. It is said that she has plaited hair that is long known as Choti which is assumed to be the origin of her supernatural power. This hair in most of the stories is not simply a physical feature but a continuation of her power and in some way acts as a second limb, where she is able to apply additional control over the individuals who she is victimizing. Long black nails and feet turned backwards are other physical appearances that often feature in Daayans. Such traits do not happen by chance; they serve as visual indicators of her presumed inhumanity, which adds to the notion that she is living beyond the walls of the ordinary society.

The fear of the Daayan is also heightened by the belief of the evil eye. Among some quarters of the population, it is believed that whenever a Daayan looks at a person, or a family, ill fortune will imminently follow. She can be blamed as being the cause of illness, financial ruin, familial discord, and even death. Although these beliefs are based on folklore, they have immense real-world implications. Perceived different women, whether because of their behaviour.

Even the outward looks or social situation or individual factors can so easily be suspected to have such powers. By doing so, mythological accounts are used as instruments by communities to recognize and punish individuals usually resulting in violence and ostracism.

The most visible displays of how these beliefs have been acted out in structured social activity have been the so-called Daayan cult, supposed to have developed in the fifteenth century in the village of Harangul in the Maharashtra district of Latur. As per local legends, this was a secret society who centered around the ideology that Daayans lived within average people, who harboured some destructive supernatural abilities. Fear of these so-called individuals in the society resulted to a systematic suspicion and victimization of women whose traits were considered to be such. These women were subjected to often extreme actions as in being

expelled out of the village or even executed but these were done based on belief and not necessarily any physical evidence.

Such systematic practices might not be in its present form but the fear of Daayans still looms in some sections of India especially in places like Jharkhand and Bihar. Superstition, lack of education, and deep-rooted social stratifications are some of the factors that propagate witch-hunting in these areas. The image of the Daayan has remained in the way in which the communities interpret bad things and assign the blame usually at the cost of the vulnerable women.

Notably, recent studies and testimonies of women activists on the issue show that the allegations of being a Daayan may hardly be based on pure belief. On the contrary, they are often linked to a socio-economic and inter-personal struggle. The women most were the ones with most widows, the aged, or those who do not have robust social or family security are usually the people who are targeted. In numerous scenarios, there are charges that are made in the sphere of land disputes, inheritance disputes, or monetary disputes. When a woman is called a Daayan it is a socially reasonable cause of having her deprived of property or of being kicked out of the community.

Also, these allegations are frequently employed as a tool to dominate the women who exhibit independence or breach the conventional gender roles. Any woman who does not conform to the usual or even demands her rights or cannot be exploited can be labelled as a Daayan to silence and punish her. To this degree, witch-hunting is a form of patriarchal control and is used to strengthen a power system and suppress opposing ideologies.

Therefore, the character of the Daayan is not just an object of mythological fantasy but a socially constructed identity that has a realistic and in many instances catastrophic effect. It shows the cross of faith, fear, and power, showing that the cultural narratives may be used to mobilize the belief and enforce social hierarchies by means of violence. It is imperative to comprehend the change and influence of such people to better understand the greater problem of witch-hunting and to design the most efficient legal and social interventions to potentially safeguard vulnerable people especially women against these types of persecutions.

### **Daayan vs. Churel: The Intersection of Superstition and Gender Oppression**

The character of the Daayan is mixed frequently with the one of the Churel, another highly

notable figure in the Indian folklore, though the two are quite dissimilar as they are forms of the cultural imagination under the influence of various social phobias and symbols. Although they both are connected to witchcraft, danger, and female supernatural power, the origins of both, their particulars, and their functions in the narrative vary significantly. It is important to understand this difference in that it shows how folklore creates numerous archetypes of dangerous femininity which play certain functions within patriarchal societies.

A Churel is generally supposed to be the restless and vindictive soul of a woman who passed away in some tragic or unfair events specifically when giving birth or carrying a child or due to neglect and abuse to the woman by her family. This creation narrative is important since it makes the Churel related to the real experiences of women and the lives of those women who were either neglected, abused by their husbands, or lacked proper care at their point of need. To a large extent, the Churel represents unfinished pain and unfairness since it turns a victimized woman into the dreaded supernatural being after death. This change is an attempt at acknowledgement of wrong by the culture, but rather than confronting social factors that have caused such misery, it shifts them onto the terms of fear and superstition.

Physically described, the Churel can be a horrific shape changing creature. It is claimed that she has the powers to transform into a sexy young lady to seduce unsuspecting victims who are usually men after which she discloses her real nasty looks. The most commonly mentioned aspect is the backward facing feet, which she uses to serve as a subtle indication of her supernatural identity. This appearance of two things at once makes a symbol of deception and danger, which makes the impression of the fact that something that looks nice or safe might be a lethal trap. The cultural knowledge of the Churel is also enhanced by regional differences. In the North Indian states like Rajasthan, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, the Churel is said to be roaming about graveyards, forests and barren places. In this case, she is mostly related to seduction and revenge on men. Allegedly, as it is believed, she seduces young men by pretending to be an attractive woman only to suck the life out of them, kill them, or make them stay in the loop of spiritual or physical fatigue. This story is about inner fears concerning female sexuality which is both a seductive and destructive one. In this respect, the Churel turns into a pessimistic character because he warns about the uncontrollable desire but in the process, he demonizes the sexual agency of women. However, in other parts like West Bengal, Odisha, Maharashtra the churel is frequently represented in different ways. Rather than inviting men by flirting, she is dreaded to steal and consume small children. Such a depiction makes her

more akin to universal fairytale images of child-consuming witches and the feminine image, as the created is built to be threatening to innocence and family continuity. Such difference indicates another group of fears of society, especially fear of maternal failure, mortality of the child and the helplessness of the little. The story also supports gender roles of women as nurturers by linking the Churel to situations of harming children, and any sign of cultural values not fit in this gender role is condemned.

Essentially, Daayan and the Churel are not just the features of folklore, but the projections of the attitudes towards women, power and control in the society. They are also different in origin and representations, but they all serve the idea of upholding patriarchal ideologies of presenting feminine independence and agency as a danger to the social order. With a closer look at these figures, one will notice that the fear they produce is not as concerned with the supernatural threat, as the symbolized challenge that independent and non-conforming women present to the established norms.

### **History Of Witch-Hunting**

The tradition of witch-hunting is long and highly rooted, and it cuts across the civilizations, intersecting the belief systems, hierarchies, and control mechanisms. The roots of it are in a complicated fusion of religious beliefs, superstition, fear of the unknown and the presence of deeply rooted patriarchal systems that influenced the societies in their interpretation.

misfortune and difference. Instead of being a single or a one-off event, witch-hunting was a trend of uncertainty response, in which some unaccounted event like illness, death, natural calamity or economic crisis was ascribed to the actions of some individuals who were perceived to have supernatural powers.

In other parts of the world like in Europe, North America, and South Asia, there was the development of witch-hunting and in specific cultural, political and legal systems, although it bore remarkable resemblances in the logic and consequences behind it. The supernatural harm belief in all these societies offered an easy way to explain the misfortune, and this enabled the communities to find scapegoats and bring a sense of control to the otherwise uncontrollable situations. Religious institutions tended to contribute greatly to the legitimization of these beliefs, and presented the witchcraft as a moral and spiritual menace which had to be eliminated. Meanwhile, new systems of law introduced these concepts, and a formalized

accusation and punishment were enacted based on trial, investigation, and institutionalized punishment.

Regardless of these regional differences, it is one of the most stable elements of witch-hunting in the civilizations due to its overwhelmingly gendered quality. Most of the accused, persecuted and executed women. This trend could not be explained as accidental; instead, it is the symptom of the overall role of women in the world of patriarchy when it was commonly thought of women as inferior, morally questionable and requiring control. The witch character was a strong icon that allowed expressing and managing the fears of female independence, autonomy, and sexuality. Women who lived beyond the norms or those who opposed norms were especially susceptible to the accusations.

The targeted women were in most instances those who were marginal or precarious in the society. An example would be widows who were considered as socially and economically weak and they did not have the protection of a male and hence they could be easily accused and attacked. Older women, especially those who live alone or are dependent on the community were also common targets because they are older and isolated, and therefore, they are prone to suspicion. In a similar manner, women that had knowledge of traditional medicine, midwifery or healing rituals were considered as both being reliant and fear among others and were thus easy scapegoats during crisis. Their own knowledge that might make them powerful in their communities also characterized them as possible threats to the main structures of authority especially when such knowledge was used outside the formal or official structures male dominated institutions.

Although the accusations of witchcraft could be expressed in religious or mystic terms, they could be of practical and material use. In most of the cases, witch-hunting was a form of oppression to resolve personal conflicts, eliminate competition or even acquire property and resources. Accusing a woman of being a witch was a socially acceptable way of depriving a woman out of her possession of land, wealth, or inheritance. In societies where property rights of women were already constrained or challenged, these allegations were easily used as a tool to strengthen economic inequality and put the resources into the hands of those with more power or groups.

Other than the economic reasons, witch-hunting was also a type of social control. Through the punishment of individuals suspected of being witches publicly, the communities enforced the

rules of proper conduct and discouraged them to act contrary to them. Accusations and punishment were a lesson especially to women of how they could not go beyond the stipulated role. By doing this, witch-hunting was not simply about getting rid of perceived threats, but a more general system of discipline and conformity. It established a climate whereby fear controlled the behaviour so that it made people internalise what was expected of them in the society, lest they engage in activities that may raise eyebrows. The presence of community involvement in the witch-hunting also highlights the importance of community participation as a group exercise of control. Prosecution was not always mandatory but has been formed by the community, within the community, as a result of gossip, rumour, joint belief systems. This group aspect contributed to the fact that it was hard to oppose or go against such practices given that it was supported by a great level of social belief. Witch-hunting victims were often solitary socially and physically, depersonalized and turned into signs of danger and deviance.

Notably, the endurance of witch-hunting in various parts and at various times suggests the flexibility of the practice. The particular shapes and causes may have changed, but the dynamics of the fear, power, and inequality have been quite similar. Witch-hunting is still practiced, even in modern times, especially in some areas of South Asia and Africa where poverty, illiteracy and inability to access formal justice systems make people more susceptible.

Therefore, witch-hunting cannot be interpreted as the characteristic of superstition or ignorance only. It is both a very social and a very political phenomenon, it originates in the manner in which societies build difference, vulnerability and power. It strengthens the hierarchies and creates the cycles of violence and exclusion by targeting the already marginalized population, especially women. This historical and structural context is important in understanding the persistence of witch-hunting and in finding the right strategies to war on it, both at the legal and social levels.

### **Witch-Hunting In India: A Legacy Of Gendered Persecution**

Whereas European and American witch trials were motivated by religious and legal systems, witch-hunting in India has been closely linked to patriarchal oppression, caste-based hierarchies as well as socio-economic exploitation. In contrast to the West witch trials, which were mostly limited to the early modern era, the witch-hunting in India still prevails modern society, especially the countryside and tribal societies. India has a paradoxical relationship with

women where goddesses are worshipped and cherished but on the other hand, women in the society are not valued.

Often are discriminated against, beaten and excluded systematically. Witch-hunting, especially, has been a symptom of misogyny, in its most rooted forms, of which females are charged with using supernatural forces to a malevolent end to have them persecute and murder them. The conventional picture of a witch has changed with time; being viewed as the ugly woman riding on a broom, the contemporary Indian witch is viewed as a woman who is having supernatural powers to inflict evil on others.

Women considered witches are punished in the most barbaric ways such as being beaten in the open, exiled, raped, and killed. The language that is applied in the designation of these women depends on where one lives and the words used like Chudail, Daayan, Tohni and many more serve to entrench the notion that these women are dangerous in nature.

### **The Role of Caste, Gender, and Politics in Indian Witch-Hunting**

In India, witch-hunting targets widowed or elderly women, and childless women, in addition to women who belong to the lower-caste or tribal groups, disproportionately. This is the intersectionality of gender-based violence and caste discrimination with Dalit and Adivasi women being one of the most at risk of being accused. The charges of witchcraft are in most instances exploitation of land, sexual exploitation or as a means of settling personal scores. The tribal and rural societies, in which faith healers (Ojhas or Tantriks) are dominant, are the most vulnerable to witch-hunt since these so-called spiritual leaders tend to trigger violence against the suspected witches to increase their legitimacy.

Witch-hunting is widespread in India as it is demonstrated by the official figures on crimes, but underreporting is the significant problem. Based on government records, about 1,700 women were killed during the period between the year 1991 and 2010 on suspicion of witchcraft, with many others victimized to violent actions. In the year 2012 alone, 119 individuals were killed in witch-hunting cases, but again these are only estimates that do not reflect the actual level of the issue because of fear and apathy by the law.

### **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, it is important to note that witch-hunting remains a severe and horrific crime against

humanity, which still prevails even in the era of scientific advancement, constitutional rule, and increased understanding of gender equality. The fact that people, mostly women, are still called witches and the violence that ensues of this is not just a relic of superstition, yet a measure of structural inequalities which are long-standing, male domination and socio-economic vulnerabilities. It reveals a severe gap between the constitutional ideals in India and the actualities that the marginalized communities face.

The fact that this practice has been evolving indicates that there is a lot to be desired in the legal and institutional structure. Although there are several statelevel legislations and interventions, they are not as effective as they are fragmented, with poor enforcement, and awareness levels. The lack of a central law is another problem that contributes to the discrepancies in protection and accountability. In addition, the judicial processes and the law enforcement agencies have not been adequate in most scenarios and are not able to deliver justice or protection to the victims in time. This explains why there is an immediate need to strengthen the legal system and its enforcement.

Discussing the problem of witch-hunting, thus, needs a multidimensional and holistic approach. Simultaneously, a continuous process of encouraging education, specifically, scientific temper and critical thinking, both institutional and community-level, should be encouraged. It is also important to sensitize the law enforcing and the judicial authorities so that the cases are dealt with seriousness and empathy that they require. Also, the availability of healthcare and alleviation of the financial disparities can go a long way as the dependability on superstition as a reason of misfortune.

Finally, witch-hunting is not just legally, but also morally and socially required to be eliminated. It requires joint effort to maintain the dignity, equality as well as rights of all individuals. Another society that still tolerates violence based on irrational beliefs cannot say that it is actually progressive. The only way forward would be to be able to challenge and break these practices by means of informed, inclusive, and sustained action. It is through the combined efforts of both law, education, social reform and community efforts that the cycle of fear, superstitions and violence can be broken and that no person can ever again be persecuted in the name of witchcraft.

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