

# Blinded by Superstition: A Case Study on Witch Hunting

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Encouraging critical thinking through open discussion in public forums, thereby challenging traditional beliefs about witches being the cause of all the misfortunes that tribal communities face is perhaps the only way that the bane of witch-hunting can be eradicated from society

**O**N THE FREEZING MORNING of 9 December 2016, at around 5 a.m., when there was relatively low visibility and a deep silence had enveloped the area, three people barged into a house in Tapkara *panchayat* of Torpa block and attacked a 60 year-old woman named Susari Budh. They attacked her from behind without saying a word. She was dragged mercilessly out of the house, her hands and neck were tied and kerosene was poured on her. The poor frail lady begged for her life but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Nature was a mute witness to the men lighting a matchstick and setting her on fire, burning her alive in front of her rented house.

An innocent woman lost her life, accused of indulging in witchcraft. Hatred and violence enveloped the area. Hearing about such incidents always had me wonder whether witches actually existed or was someone pronouncing an innocent person a witch. Why would a human being pronounce another a witch? How did this start?

I barely knew anything about witch-hunting except that it was a social evil. When trying to understand the above incident, many facts, myths, beliefs and superstitions came to the forefront. On 18 December 2016, a community meeting was called to examine the facts and to demystify the event that took place. The meeting was held in the Panchayat Bhawan, where about 150 people had gathered,

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although only 25 to 30 were expected.

The participants included the Governing Board members of Torpa Mahila Sangh (a block-level Federation in Khunti district, Jharkhand), a PRADAN professional, SHG members, change vectors, the local administration, Auxillary nurse midwife (ANM), journalists, regional NGOs, representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Subhash (a resource person from JAGORI for the gender initiative) and several people from the neighbourhood. Some people, who attended the meeting, were aware of the purpose of the gathering, and some were not. The meeting started with a briefing about the case; following this, the incident

was discussed in detail with all the participants, in order to gather as many facts as possible.

The people present were told that on 15 November 2016 at around 2:30 a.m., a woman named Aneeta Sabhasoy was taken to the Torpa Sadar Hospital by the ANM because her labour pains had started. At 6:30 a.m., she gave birth to a daughter and after one hour to another, and the weight of both the infants was critically low, that is, 2.4 kg and 1.2 kg, respectively. Despite the low weight of the infants at birth, the mother and the twins were discharged from the hospital late in the evening the very same day.

The woman already had three children and she had conceived after a long gap of 11 years,

which apparently had been an overwhelming and immensely emotional moment for her. And because she had given birth after a long time, she was not able to breastfeed her baby girls and fed them powdered milk. Unfortunately, the younger daughter died on 3 December 2016 and the mother was grief-stricken. She was unable to contain her emotions and then, tragically, the older twin also died on 8 December 2016 at around 12:30 a.m. In a matter of 23 days, the lady's world turned upside down.

The cause of death of the girls was not known because the public health system in the area is extremely poor and none of the doctors or nurses came to examine the infants. The



**Community meeting at the Panchayat Bhawan**

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yellowish body colour of the children at the time of death was an indication that both the baby girls were suffering from jaundice.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of the matter. The mother of the twins went into a frenzy, and blamed a lady living in her neighbourhood for the death of her daughters; she pronounced the lady to be a witch. And, in Jharkhand, witches have no right to live.

Witch-hunting involves the branding of people, usually women, as witches, either after an observation made by an *ojha* or *bej* or a witch doctor. The victim, branded as a witch, is then subjected to numerous forms of torture—from beating, burning, being paraded naked through the village, being forced to eat human excrement to, sometimes, even being raped. In some cases, their hair is cut off, the victim and her children are socially ostracized and even put to death, and that too, in a brutal manner.

As described in the newspaper, *India Times*, "Witch-hunting dates back to the 14th century when certain people were labelled as 'witches' and executed across Europe, Africa and Asia. The victims included Joan of Arc, who was burnt alive at the stake, at

the tender age of 19 for heresy, on 30 May 1431." In places like Jharkhand, where we have a large population of tribal communities, elderly women/widows live in fear of being killed as 'witches' when neighbours become ill or their livestock die unexpectedly.

Jharkhand represents a modern-day paradox. Superstition, health, illiteracy and property dispute are the four major reasons for incidents of witchcraft in the tribal areas of Jharkhand. Cerebral malaria, TB (tuberculosis), diarrhoea, malnutrition and anaemia are very common in the villages here. The cause of death could be an illness or lack of healthcare centres or because people cannot reach the hospital in time because of the distance, the bad roads or just because they believe in superstition more than science. Regardless of the cause, however, witch-hunting is an evil practice that has been continuing.

"The Santhal theory of the origin of witchcraft attributes gender tensions as the reason for witch-hunting. The Kharia women were excluded from religious festivities and rituals because the tribal people feared that menstrual blood attracted evil spirits. Women in the tribal communities were left out of Adivasi rituals

and religion because of fear and suspicion of their sexuality," says Sashank S. Sinha in a research paper 'Adivasis, gender and the evil eye: The construction of witches in colonial Chotanagpur'.

Allegations of witchcraft that result in community murder have long been a part of rural India's history. Scholar Ajay Skaria, for instance, explored the torture and murder of women accused of being witches in British India. This practice has continued, although with increasing irregularity, into the present. The modern practice of witch-hunting in India includes violence and torture and murder of alleged witches.

The practice of witch-hunting is also connected to the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and an opposition to women's right to property. The emerging patterns suggest that independent, strong-willed women, who might have challenged the status quo, have been targeted, and subjected to suspicion and violence. Women have been blamed for everything from a bad harvest to an unexplained illness. Behind these targeted attacks are reasons such as property disputes, local politics and power control, which develop into allegations of witchcraft and then to violence.

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Lack of education and health services have contributed to the continuation of this antiquated practice of witch-hunting.

In the rural areas of present-day Jharkhand, instances of women facing humiliation and brutalization, after being branded as witches, are common. The practice of sorcery to identify the witches and to prescribe a cure for various troubles and diseases often end in allegations that lead to branding, banishing or murdering of women.

The data of the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) show that as many as 464 women, a majority of them from tribal communities, have been branded 'witches' and killed in cold blood in Jharkhand between 2001 and 2014. India has seen the killings of 2,290 persons, mostly women, for practising witchcraft in the same period. Jharkhand clearly is the worst-affected state, accounting for more than one-fifth of the victims.

Whereas NCRB is yet to post updated figures for post-2015, it is unlikely to present a better picture than before in Jharkhand, which has continued to witness the mindless killing of women. Witch hunts are so rampant in the state that whenever a new

disease sets in that affects either people or cattle, and the villagers fail to comprehend it, they look for witches to kill so as to propitiate the spirits. Reportedly, Jharkhand has again topped the country with 32 murders in 2015. In all cases, the victims were killed after being branded as witches.

Social interactions at micro-levels have also confirmed that superstition is so deep-rooted in Jharkhand that it easily prompts villagers to murder witches. In the case of Susari Budh, there were multiple factors that led to her being branded and killed, although poor health services in the area is the prime cause of it all.

Several malpractices and some chilling facts also came to light during the community meeting, causing more anger among the people. Initially, the ANM of the area refused to participate in the public meeting; however, she was pressurized to do so by the *gram panchayat mukhiya*. Participating against her will, and filled with anger, she tried her best to falsify the facts about the registration and check-ups of Aneeta Sabhasoy. When she failed in her attempts because some of the neighbours questioned the facts given by her, she eventually

changed her story and blamed her superiors for mismanagement.

However, the superiors had already cleared their names by telling the local media that such incidents only take place due to the careless and casual attitude of the ground-level staff. The mother of the twins was registered by the ANM at seven months of pregnancy and other than some random weight-taking, there was no follow-up. There were no regular check-ups and no ultrasound was conducted, that is required as per government rules. The mother was not breastfeeding her newborn babies; the ANM was unaware of this fact till the death of the younger daughter.

When the people asked for accountability to be assigned for the incident, the PRIs and the *gram panchayat mukhiya* gave an amusing response, saying, "See, in this case both the perpetrator and the victim were living as tenants in the *panchayat* and they were not permanent residents, so in no way am I accountable for this."

Interestingly, when the discussion went deeper, it was revealed that the *panchayat* was not keeping any records of births and deaths, and none of the representatives of PRI including the *up-mukhiya* (deputy *mukhiya*), the Ward

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members and the block *pramukh* had any clue about the pathetic functioning of the health department in the area, be it at the *panchayat* level or at the block level.

No one had any idea why the Public Health Centre (PHC) had not been functioning for the last six months and whether it even had a doctor posted there. More shockingly, some of the participants in the meeting revealed that the *panchayat* office remains closed on most days, and even if opens for a couple of days in a week, there is no representative of the PRI. At best, you can meet with the *panchayat sewak* or the *rozgar sewak*.

This situation was not new to anyone but after hearing of these series of lapses, the community was alarmed at the extent of compromise in service delivery before and after this horrific incident. It left almost every person present in the room wondering about lack of accountability and responsibility of the PRIs and the front-line functionaries. They questioned whether there was anyone who was serving the communities.

The Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act 1999 was enacted in Bihar and adopted subsequently

by Jharkhand as the Prevention of Witch Hunting (Dayan Pratha) Act 2001, to protect women from inhuman treatment and to give victims the opportunity for legal recourse. Despite the enactment of this Act, there are barely any breakthroughs made by the government in checking the menace of witch hunting.

In several cases, the perpetrators are many and, at times, includes the relatives of the victim, and the case remains unreported. If reported, there is not much progress due to the absence of witnesses. Changing attitudes includes exposing fraud and also teaching critical thinking about superstition, which sometimes runs counter to long-held, indigenous beliefs. Indeed, legislation is not a cure for superstition; improving critical thinking is the key.

Education and medical care in the tribal areas is an urgent necessity to bring an end to witch-hunting. Moreover, medical bodies, educational bodies, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), PRIs, and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) have to work collaboratively to educate people so that the next time they hear some stories, they can make an informed choice rather than becoming a part of a violent mob.

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In the meeting, many participants took an oath to fight this social evil; yet, one can still hear whispers that witches do exist. This clearly indicates that there is need for numerous meetings like these because without a concerted effort, it is not possible to pull out the root of this evil. The *mukhiya* of the Tapakara *panchayat* took responsibility for organizing campaigns for creating awareness and educating people and also for ensuring meticulous record-keeping of births, deaths and other health-related information. The *panchayat* office is also planning to start a helpline number, with an objective to save people from being victimised and will also ensure that people are educated through wall paintings about the Prevention of Witch Hunting Act.

In conclusion, we can say that witch-hunting is based on false beliefs and deep-rooted superstitions and is practised as a weapon by patriarchal societies so as to deprive women of their rights and keep them restricted to being second-class citizens. Even

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though women are not the only victims of witch-hunting, the facts clearly prove that it has been a major threat for women and has not harmed men much. In fact, in this case, the victim was a woman and she was killed by multiple perpetrators, including men, but only the woman (Aneeta Sabhasoy) was accused for committing the crime, giving the other perpetrators a clean chit.. The powerful figures of the community often use the label of 'witch' to misguide the people and create crowd frenzy in order to meet their hidden intentions, social, political or economic in nature.

People often say that poor development and infrastructure

have led to the continuity of these social evils in tribal areas despite various efforts to end them. It seems to be the truth because tribal communities are often sandwiched between government apathy and Maoists insurgency. Today, witch-hunting is a blot on Jharkhand, which ranks 26th out of 29 states, in terms of literacy, and has consistently ranked first in the number of witch-hunting cases. The facts and figures of witch-hunting paint a pathetic picture of Jharkhand, and the glory and resplendence of tribal culture gets lost under this cloud.

Communities have to take charge and begin a community-led action, aimed at educating people and changing their beliefs and

attitudes. Outside intervention in rural communities is frowned upon, and development practitioners find it challenging to win the support of people, who have deeply ingrained beliefs about witches. Witch-hunting has not only led to violence and murder but also to collateral violence in many cases. PRIs and the CBOs need to work hand-in-hand to create spaces for discussion and build platforms such as the *gram kachehri* so that women can voice their issues with confidence and a sense of security. There is need for strong social and political will, to eliminate the roots of this deep-rooted social evil.

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