Witchcraft and Witch-Hunting Practices in Jharkhand, India

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Abstract

Witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in Jharkhand present a complex and multifaceted phenomenon deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of the region. This research paper delves into the historical roots, socio-cultural significance, and contemporary manifestations of witchcraft and witch-hunting in Jharkhand. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from anthropology, sociology, history, and law, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of this issue. Historically, witchcraft has been practiced by various indigenous communities in Jharkhand. However, the colonial period brought about significant changes, with Western influences leading to stigmatization and persecution of individuals accused of witchcraft. Post-colonial India continues to grapple with the legacy of colonialism, as superstitions and beliefs in supernatural powers persist in many tribal communities, often resulting in instances of witch-hunting and violence. The consequences of witch-hunting are profound, with victims, predominantly women, facing physical, psychological, and economic hardships as a result of false accusations and persecution. Families and communities are torn apart, trust is eroded, and social cohesion is undermined, creating a climate of fear and suspicion. Efforts to address witchcraft and witch-hunting in Jharkhand have been undertaken by government agencies, NGOs, and grassroots initiatives, focusing on raising awareness, providing support to victims, and advocating for legislative reforms. However, challenges remain in eradicating these harmful practices and promoting social justice and equality. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of witchcraft and witch-hunting in Jharkhand, with the aim of informing policy interventions and promoting human rights, social justice, and cultural diversity. By examining the root causes of witch-hunting and identifying strategies for prevention and intervention, this study seeks to empower communities and promote positive change in the region and beyond.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, Jharkhand, Indigenous Communities, Superstition, Gender Inequality, Legislative Responses, Victim-Centric Reparation, Social Justice.

1. Introduction

Witchcraft and witch-hunting practices have persisted across cultures and societies throughout history, often invoking fear, superstition, and violence. In the tribal lands of Jharkhand, located in the eastern part of India, these phenomena are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric, shaping social interactions, religious beliefs, and community dynamics. This research paper aims to explore the intricate nuances of witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in Jharkhand, shedding light on their historical roots, socio-cultural significance, and contemporary manifestations. Jharkhand, known for its rich tribal heritage and diverse cultural traditions, provides a unique backdrop for the study of witchcraft and witch-hunting. Home to various indigenous communities such as the Santhals, Mundas, and Oraons, Jharkhand is characterized by its rugged terrain, dense forests, and close-knit tribal societies. Within these communities, beliefs in supernatural forces, spirits,

and magic are deeply entrenched, influencing everyday practices, rituals, and social norms. The history of witchcraft in Jharkhand dates back centuries, with tribal communities practicing various forms of witchcraft, sorcery, and divination [1]. These practices were often intertwined with religious rituals, healing ceremonies, and cultural traditions, serving as a means of understanding and navigating the natural world.

However, the arrival of colonial powers in India brought about significant changes in tribal societies, leading to the marginalization and demonization of indigenous beliefs and practices. During the colonial period, witchcraft and sorcery were often portrayed as primitive and irrational, leading to efforts by colonial authorities to suppress these practices through legislation and missionary activities. The imposition of Western legal systems, along with the spread of Christianity, undermined traditional tribal customs and weakened the authority of tribal elders and shamans. This disruption in traditional belief systems and power structures laid the groundwork for stigmatization and persecution of individuals accused of witchcraft. In post-colonial India, the legacy of colonialism continues to influence attitudes towards witchcraft and witch-hunting in Jharkhand. Despite efforts to promote secularism and religious tolerance, superstitions and beliefs in supernatural powers persist in many tribal communities, often leading to instances of witch-hunting and violence. Moreover, socio-economic factors such as poverty, land disputes, and unequal access to resources exacerbate tensions within communities, making individuals more susceptible to accusations of witchcraft. The consequences of witch-hunting in Jharkhand are profound, often resulting in loss of life, displacement, and social ostracism.

Victims, predominantly women, face physical and psychological trauma, as well as economic hardship, as a result of false accusations and persecution. Families are torn apart, communities are divided, and trust is eroded, creating a climate of fear and suspicion that further perpetuates the cycle of violence. Despite the challenges posed by witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in Jharkhand, there has been growing recognition of the need to address this issue at various levels [2]. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots initiatives have been working to raise awareness, provide support to victims, and advocate for legislative reforms to combat witch-hunting. However, much work remains to be done to eradicate these harmful practices and promote social justice and equality in Jharkhand. This research seeks to enhance the understanding of witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in Jharkhand by examining their historical origins, cultural significance, and contemporary manifestations. By exploring the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that shape attitudes towards witchcraft, insights into the root causes of witch-hunting can be gained and strategies for prevention and intervention can be mooted.

2. Faith, Human Rights and Witch-Hunting

The temporal progression stages for Homo sapiens reveal a trajectory marked by the development of cranial capacity, the advancement of technology, and the development of custom and religion. In the tribal customs of Jharkhand, these stages find resonance in the evolution of their societies. For instance, the development of cranial capacity parallels with the advancement of knowledge and understanding among tribal communities, shaping their social structures and interactions. Belief in supernatural powers is strengthened through instances of famine, death, and natural disasters, leading to the gradual parallel positioning of religion and magic within tribal customs. In Jharkhand, as in many tribal societies, supernatural explanations often accompany natural phenomena, influencing their religious practices and cultural norms [3]. Magic in tribal societies is often classified into white and black magic. White magic involves socially acceptable practices aimed at subjugating supernatural powers for the benefit of the community, while black magic encompasses rituals with evil motives of domestication. These distinctions shape the tribal worldview and influence their interactions with the supernatural realm.

Manifestations of witch-hunt induced human rights infractions are evident as boundaries are transgressed from rural to urban areas. Vulnerable sections, mostly women, become targets of witch hunts, facing death, shunning, and inhumane treatment by their communities. In Jharkhand, witch-hunts reflect deep-seated social

issues and power dynamics within tribal societies. Beliefs about suspected witches in Jharkhand revolve around their perceived powers to alter and de-rail the nature's course. Rituals of 'search' and torture by the community are employed to identify and punish those accused of witchcraft. These beliefs and practices contribute to perpetuation of violence and discrimination against women in tribal communities. The cultural and socio-economic contexts of these regions contribute to persistence of witch hunts and related human rights exploitations. Economic factors, such as exorbitant costs charged by witch doctors, further exacerbate the plight of those accused of witchcraft. Despite economic growth, superstitions continue to hold sway over many tribal communities, perpetuating harmful practices. Factors contributing to the acceptance of witch hunts include lack of education, poor sanitation and health facilities, political loopholes, and superstitious beliefs prevalent in tribal societies. These factors create an environment where witch hunts thrive, despite efforts to address them.

The paradox of economic growth and superstition is evident as majority in tribal communities continue to resort to sorcery despite advancements in other areas. Legislative responses to witch hunts in Jharkhand and other regions are often inadequate, with a lack of central legislation and state-level measures criticized by human rights activists for their ineffectiveness [4]. The historical trajectory of witch hunts reveals how superstition has evolved into concocted fears and beliefs, perpetuating violence and discrimination against vulnerable groups within tribal societies. Origins of witchcraft, its negative connotations, and geographical associations with unfavourable events contribute to the perpetuation of witch hunts in Jharkhand and other regions. Historical occurrences of witch trials, from ancient civilizations to Europe and Colonial America, highlight the widespread acceptance and persecution of those accused of witchcraft. In India, references to witchcraft in traditional folklore and scattered documentation of witchcraft studies underscore its presence within indigenous cultures. Colonial impact on witchcraft in India includes missionary investigations and reformation attempts during British rule, shaping perceptions and responses to witch hunts.

Witch hunts during colonial resistance played a role in anti-colonial movements, with accusations often used as a tool of oppression by colonial powers. Exploitation of beliefs by colonial powers, such as blaming women for witchcraft, further entrenched patriarchy and superstitions within Indian society. The impact on women, exacerbated by poverty, and infrastructural inadequacies, highlights the intersectionality of oppression faced by marginalized communities. Methods of witch identification often involve witch doctors and personal vendettas, leading to the targeting of not only accused women but also their peers within tribal communities. Resistance to witch hunts is often silenced, with a minority opposing witch killings amid widespread acceptance of such practices. Judicial records serve as sources of information on the prevalence and impact of witch hunts on tribal communities, highlighting the need for comprehensive legal and social reforms [5]. Long-term consequences of witch hunts include the escalation of victimization through generations and perpetuation of superstitions and violence within tribal societies. Addressing these issues requires multi-faceted approaches that address underlying socio-economic inequalities, promote education and awareness, and empower marginalized communities to challenge harmful practices and beliefs.

3. Gender, Powerplay and Witch-Hunting

In the tribal customs of Jharkhand, witch-killing is perceived as a means to end malafide sorcery. These customs reflect deeply ingrained beliefs and practices within the tribal communities, where traditional rituals and sacrifices hold significant cultural and religious significance. However, these practices often result in the marginalization and victimization of certain groups, particularly women from poor and backward castes, who are majorly targeted in witch killings. The structural conditions for women's subordination are framed as a by-product of patriarchy, perpetuating gender-based violence and discrimination within these societies [6]. The gender conflict and social changes have further exacerbated violence against women in Jharkhand and

other tribal regions. These changes have led to shift in power dynamics and traditional hierarchies, resulting in increased tensions and conflicts within communities.

Modern witch killings in Jharkhand increasingly reflect power dynamics rather than mere superstition, with accusations often serving as tools for political intimidation and punishing disloyalty. The development of victim-perpetrator and insider-outsider concepts in witch-hunts highlights the social and psychological mechanisms underlying these practices. Witch-hunts are instrumentalized for political intimidation and social control, with victims subjected to public humiliation and ostracization as a means of enforcing social norms and maintaining order within communities [7]. Witchcraft beliefs, rooted in sickness, death, or misfortunes associated with evil sorcery, contribute to the perpetuation of fear and suspicion towards those accused of witchcraft. Witch-hunts in Jharkhand are also associated with intimidation, discovering subversive activities, and moral panic, reflecting broader societal anxieties and tensions. Superstition has given way to planned attacks in modern witch-hunts, with accusations often serving as pretexts for violence and retribution [8]. The pervasiveness of black magic in societies revering supernatural phenomena further complicates the dynamics of witch-hunting, with socially acceptable techniques of purification often involving violence against accused witches.

The glaring presence of witchcraft practice among indigenous or tribal communities in rural India underscores the enduring influence of superstition and traditional beliefs in shaping social relations and cultural practices. Accused witches are often blamed for crop destruction, health degradation, and deaths in the community, leading to their persecution and victimization. Despite efforts to address the issue, there has been a high incidence of witch-hunting cases in Jharkhand. Poverty and health infrastructure inadequacies exacerbate reliance on witch doctors and traditional healers, perpetuating harmful practices and reinforcing social inequalities [9]. Inadequacies in legislation and poor implementation contribute to the rise in witch-hunt cases, with gaps in documentation and community cleansing drives further exacerbating the cycle of violence against women. The tragic consequences of witch-hunting, including murder, rape, and the lack of effective legislation, perpetuate the cycle of violence and injustice against women in tribal communities.

4. Witch-Hunting in Jharkhand

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on witch-hunt violence in India, including Jharkhand, is primarily limited to cases of witchcraft-motivated murders, providing an incomplete representation of the prevalence and impact of witch-hunting practices. This limited focus on murders fails to capture the full extent of witch-hunting, which often includes a range of atrocities beyond killings and is further exacerbated by under-reporting due to social stigma and fear of reprisal within tribal communities. Poverty, lack of education, and poor health facilities in the region have significantly contributed to the proliferation of such cases in the province [10]. Witches in Jharkhand are often targeted as scapegoats for the politics-induced development projects in mineral-rich pockets. Accusations of witchcraft are used as means to justify displacement, land grabbing, and other forms of exploitation, further marginalizing vulnerable communities and perpetuating cycles of violence and injustice. Various reasons contribute to the accusations of women as witches in Jharkhand, including land grabbing, personal vendettas, and disputes over resources or property.

These accusations often serve as convenient tools for settling scores or conflicts within communities, exploiting existing social tensions and power dynamics. The atrocities committed against accused witches in Jharkhand extend beyond mere accusations, often involving thrashing, sexual assault, and other forms of violence. These acts reflect deep-seated social prejudices and patriarchal norms that perpetuate the marginalization and victimization of women within tribal communities. Emerging instances of witch-hunting in regions with no historical practices suggest the spread of these harmful beliefs and practices beyond their traditional boundaries. Accusations of witchcraft are increasingly used as a means of social control and intimidation, reflecting broader socio-economic and political tensions within these communities. Bizarre

rituals are often used for witch identification in Jharkhand, crossing rational boundaries and perpetuating harmful stereotypes and superstitions. These rituals further marginalize accused women and contribute to their social ostracization and victimization within their communities.

Legislative safeguards at the international level emphasize the protection of individuals, particularly women, against gender-based violence and discrimination [11]. Core themes of international instruments include gender equality, non-discrimination, and the promotion of human rights for all individuals, regardless of gender or social status. The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, Bihar, 1999, was one of the initial state legislations addressing witch-hunting, providing punishments for witch-branding, subsequent savagery, and abetment of such practices. Subsequent legislations were processed in states of Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Assam, Jharkhand and Karnataka. Offenses related to witch-hunting in state legislations are largely cognizable and non-bailable, with punishments varying based on the severity of the crime, including fines and imprisonment. These laws aim to deter witch-hunting practices and provide support to victims through legal mechanisms and institutional frameworks [12]. Despite legislative efforts, challenges remain in the enforcement and awareness of laws to combat witch-hunting effectively in Jharkhand and other regions. Overcoming these challenges requires concerted efforts from government agencies, civil society organizations, and community leaders to address underlying socio-economic inequalities, promote gender equality, and raise awareness about the harmful effects of witch-hunting.

5. Legislative Interventions and Judicial Challenges

In the tribal customs of Jharkhand, legislative efforts to address witch-hunting are mirrored in various state-specific acts across India, such as the Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015. This legislation imposes imprisonment ranging from one to seven years, depending on the severity of the crime. In extreme cases where unnatural death results from witch-hunting, life imprisonment is mandated, showcasing the seriousness with which the issue is approached. Similarly, Assam's legislation prescribes punishments extending up to life imprisonment, particularly if the victim is driven to suicide, demonstrating the recognition of the dire consequences of witch-hunt violence. Relief and rehabilitation provisions are embedded within Assam's anti-witch hunt legislation, highlighting a holistic approach that goes beyond punitive measures. Moreover, Assam's legislation adopts a gender-neutral framework for addressing witch-hunt violence, acknowledging that men can also be victims of such atrocities. In Karnataka, the Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act, 2017, aims to create awareness and foster a safe environment by prohibiting various ceremonies associated with witchcraft practices. These legislative interventions represent a concerted effort to combat the deep-rooted superstitions and violence associated with witch-hunting in India [13].

In Jharkhand, offenses resulting in death or endangering the life of the victim are also subject to provisions under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Legislative enactments view punishment as a crucial tool in curbing witch-hunt violence, emphasizing the importance of deterrence and accountability. However, the efficacy of such measures relies heavily on enforcement and implementation at the grassroots level, where awareness and education play pivotal roles in changing societal attitudes and behaviours [14]. Despite these legislative efforts, India lacks a comprehensive national data on witch hunts, relying instead on National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that primarily focus on murders and human sacrifices related to witchcraft accusations. State-specific laws should consider victim profiles, causal links, and gaps in reparative justice to effectively address the multifaceted nature of witch-hunt violence. Empirical studies have revealed that married women in their 40s-50s are more prone to witch hunts, indicating specific demographic vulnerabilities that need to be addressed through targeted interventions.

Offenders' motivations often stem from familial conflicts rather than genuine superstition, highlighting the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play in witch-hunt cases. Recent state legislations adopt rigorous

measures akin to IPC provisions for addressing human rights infractions related to witch-hunting, reflecting a growing recognition of the gravity of such offenses. Lesser manifestations of witch-hunt violence are also penalized under state legislations, indicating a nuanced understanding of the various forms of abuse and harassment faced by accused individuals. In states lacking specific legislation on witch-hunting, IPC and national statutes serve as legal recourse, albeit with certain limitations. However, the explicit recognition or formulation of central legislation may not necessarily subdue the intensity of witch-hunt violence, as the issue is deeply entrenched in social and cultural norms. Indian judiciary also lacks adequate judicial perspective on witch-hunt cases due to under-reporting and societal stigma associated with such allegations [15]. Courts have, at times, acquitted accused individuals or reduced sentences due to lack of evidence or prevailing superstitious beliefs, underscoring the challenges in adjudicating witch-hunt cases.

Some instances have led to the formulation of special cells to deal with witch-hunt issues, indicating a growing recognition of the need for specialized interventions. Judicial concern emphasizes the importance of awareness and dispelling primitive beliefs that perpetuate violence and discrimination against vulnerable individuals. Instances of violence against women often go unreported or unresolved due to lack of witnesses or out-of-court settlements, highlighting systemic gaps in addressing witch-hunt violence. Human rights aberrations persist despite state enactments and judicial interventions, pointing to the need for sustained efforts to protect vulnerable individuals and communities. The protection vacuum left by inadequate legislation and enforcement measures can lead to long-term consequences such as social ostracization and psychological trauma for victims and their families. Judicial reluctance to intervene in witch-hunt cases perpetuates impunity and further entrenches societal stigma, creating barriers to justice and accountability. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legislative reform, judicial activism, community engagement, and awareness-building initiatives. Only through concerted efforts at multiple levels can India effectively combat witch-hunt violence and ensure the protection and dignity of all its citizens, regardless of gender, caste, or socio-economic status.

Courts predominantly focus on physical injury covered under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), often overlooking the nexus between witch labelling and subsequent manifestations of torture. This oversight creates a gap in addressing the root causes of witch-hunt violence. Consequently, diversion of attention from the core issue nullifies the intended impact of legislation, hindering efforts to combat witch-hunt violence effectively. Institutional inactivity and sluggish implementation further impede effective prosecution, contributing to high acquittal rates in witch-hunt cases [16]. Despite socio-political complexities associated with witch-hunts, legislative amendments often overlook these nuances, failing to address structural flaws and indifference within the enforcement machinery. Reparative justice demands a broader outlook that not only addresses individual cases but also tackles systemic issues to prevent future occurrences of witch-hunt violence. Comparative analysis of legislative frameworks reveals variations in crime definitions and victim protections across different states. Victim compensation and rehabilitation measures also vary, with states like Rajasthan and Odisha emphasizing victim support in their laws. Gender-specific protection for women is highlighted in the those acts, with provisions for stringent punishment for perpetrators of witch-hunt violence. Deterrence through punishment varies among state laws, with Assam imposing a maximum imprisonment of 7 years for such offenses. The Odisha Act incorporates provisions to punish repeat offenders, enhancing corrective deterrence.

Despite these legislative efforts, state laws often lack effective preventive measures against witch-hunt violence. Some laws include awareness and educational schemes as preventive measures, but their practical effectiveness is questionable. Implementing special legislations requires addressing targeted mischief and engaging in ground-level interactions with stakeholders. Over-emphasis on punitive provisions may not fully address preventive demands, necessitating the implementation of robust preventive safeguards. State-specific laws also lack provisions for grassroots involvement in combating witch-hunt violence. Involvement of

village panchayats and creation of vigilance committees could promote scientific temper and social justice at the grassroots level [17]. Such grassroots involvement requires sufficient state funding to ensure effective implementation and sustainability. The creation of separate machinery, such as vigilance committees, could oversee the magnitude of witch-hunt practices and providing of legal aid. Additionally, grassroot involvement in combating witch-hunt violence could promote rationalistic approaches and community awareness creation. This grassroots approach is essential to combat superstition and promote social justice within tribal communities and beyond. Robust preventive safeguards are also necessary to achieve a superstition-free society and address the root causes of witch-hunt violence effectively, ensuring the protection and dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender, caste, or socio-economic status.

6. Combating Witch-Hunting and Witchcraft Violence

Addressing witch-hunt violence necessitates a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity and state-specific problems. Enforcement of laws alone is insufficient to tackle this social menace; practical measures grounded in community engagement and long-term developmental solutions are needed. Creating community safeguard mechanisms against emotional upheavals requires investment in education, healthcare, and socio-economic development to address the underlying causes of vulnerability [18]. Promotion of scientific temper can serve as a powerful antidote to the superstitious beliefs underlying witch-hunting. In Jharkhand, where tribal customs intersect with modern influences, efforts to combat superstition and promote rational thinking are crucial. Victim-centric reparation, rather than punitive measures, are essential for addressing the root causes of witch-hunt violence. Reparative justice involving reparation, resettlement, and rehabilitation, focusing on victim/survivor and family restoration, hold paramount importance. Restorative schemes must be just and equitable, ensuring victims are not further disadvantaged by the processes meant to support them. Witch-hunt violence transcends regional, caste, and community boundaries, necessitating a broader regime of social awakening and awareness campaigns.

Proactive strategies are also needed to change mindsets and prejudices, including media involvement and sensitization of law enforcement agencies [19]. In Jharkhand, where infrastructural inadequacies intersect with political, patriarchal, and familial factors, addressing witch-hunt violence requires a multifaceted approach that tackles these root causes. The psychological trauma inflicted by witch-hunting practices must also be considered in remedial measures, with focus on providing mental health support and counselling to survivors and affected communities. Media sensitization and educational initiatives can play a crucial role in promoting scientific temper and combatting superstition [20]. Proactive restructuring efforts from women's groups, NGOs, and local authorities are essential to address the dislocation caused by witch-hunt violence, providing support and resources to affected individuals and communities. Merely enacting more laws is not sufficient; there must be focus on structural analysis and addressing ground realities. Also, it is time to move ahead and tackle the realities of witch-hunt violence in contemporary society by prioritizing community engagement, education, and empowerment.

7. Conclusion

The phenomenon of witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in Jharkhand is a complex and multifaceted issue deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The cultural diversity of Jharkhand adds another layer of complexity to the issue, with different tribes and communities having their own beliefs and customs regarding witchcraft. While some tribes may have traditionally held beliefs in supernatural powers and practiced forms of witchcraft, others may have adopted these practices due to external influences or socio-economic pressures. Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial for developing effective interventions to address witch-hunting practices in the region. Despite existence of anti-witch hunting law in Jharkhand, challenges remain in its implementation and enforcement. The lack of comprehensive data on witch-hunting

cases and the underreporting of incidents further complicates efforts to combat this phenomenon. In addition to legislative measures, importance of community engagement and awareness-raising initiatives in addressing witch-hunting practices, is of paramount signifiance. Grassroots organizations, NGOs, and local authorities play crucial role in empowering communities and challenging non-scientific beliefs and practices. By fostering dialogue and promoting education, these initiatives can help dispel superstitions and promote a culture of tolerance and respect.

Furthermore, holistic approaches to address the underlying causes of witch-hunting, highly solicited. Long-term developmental solutions, including investment in education, healthcare, and socio-economic development, are essential for creating resilient communities that are less susceptible to emotional upheavals and social tensions that fuel witch-hunting practices. Empowering women and marginalized groups, promoting gender equality, and addressing structural inequalities are also crucial steps in this process. Finally, the importance of adopting victim-centric approach to address needs of those affected by witch-hunting, is another crucial step in this direction. Reparative justice, including reparation, resettlement, and rehabilitation, should be prioritized to ensure restoration of dignity and justice for victims and their families. This requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and the broader community. Through this, creation of a more just and equitable society where all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their beliefs or social status, can be ensured thereby leading to elimination of cases of witchcraft violence and witch-hunting.

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