

## THE ACADEMIC JOURNEY OF WITCHCRAFT STUDIES IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to build a knowledge base in India around witchcraft studies. There have been very few, and far in between, serious academic researchers in the domain of witchcraft studies in India. We fill the void by putting together these academic endeavours that have been undertaken. Moving beyond disciplinary compartmentalisations and not claiming to be exhaustive, the paper delineates salient points in ten important academic researches which have been published in the last two decades ranging between 1997 and 2017. These chosen articles represent not just under-represented area of academic study but also the geography and social outreach. Groomed in our attempt for inclusiveness, this paper has been broadly categorized into three sections. The first one expounds the historical aspects of witchcraft studies in India, the second section elucidates the empirical studies conducted in this domain, whereas the third section takes the analytical perspective into consideration. We attempt to comprehend what was, what is, and what ought to be. The undercurrent of this paper is prepared in useful dimensions for deciphering gender relations as well as issues of power and dominance.

**Keywords :** Witch, Witchcraft, Witch Hunting, Women, Power, Education.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is a curtain raiser for witchcraft studies in India. To begin with, it acknowledges the importance for nuanced witchcraft studies. We perceive media, literature, and cinematic discourses galore with renewed interests in witches and witchcrafts. Rowling and her versions of Harry Potter has re-contextualized left-handedness, black cats, blemishes, and being women. Although men have been accused of witchcraft but women are more likely to be labelled with it. This goes back to Biblical era when Eve bit the forbidden apple. Witchcraft is about that which is forbidden, that which is considered profane, and that which needs to be corrected. It has been used as a negative gender stereotype and to ascertain women's inferiority. Like a tourist guide that must show important locales and discuss their significance, we delineate those pivotal research and publications that helps chart the territory of academic studies of witchcraft studies in India.

The current venture rests on the analysis of the findings of ten research articles published over the last two decades (1997-2017). The selection of these articles has been done in a manner which aims to representatively present the trend in the trajectory of witchcraft studies in India. The conceptual framework is geared for

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social inclusion, especially for people and practices which have been stereotypically labelled and used as a ploy for discrimination. We believe most women have not been able to live their lives meaningfully. When it is tribal women and more so tribal labelled women in such a manner, the level of discrimination is manifold. This endeavour is not based on what people think but on the practice of knowing from multiple perspectives. Good and informed comprehension is the necessary and first step for a quest for positive social change for inclusivity of people and practices not considered normal by the forces in the established mainstream.

This work is presented in three categories with the urge that it will help understanding better. The first, historical, suggests what was/were the relevant academic works in this domain. The second, empirical, which points toward what are the important works being done presently. The third is an analytical attempt which draws from the first two and yet considers the quest incomplete. The interjection comes in the form of what reasons suggest for a well-meaning and rigorous academic endeavour for good academic study of witchcraft in India. These categories are presented in the labyrinth of the paper after a very brief discussion on what is witchcraft.

### **Witchcraft and Witchcraft Studies**

Etymologically the term 'witchcraft' is a compound of two words 'wicce' and 'cræft' wherein the word 'wicce' derives its origin from the old English word 'wicca' which refers to 'witch' and 'cræft' denotes 'skill or ability' (Dilts, 2015). Characterized to be spiritual, divinatory, and mystic in nature; witchcraft infers to the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities which are believed to influence the mind, body, or property - of others in a malicious manner. Being connoted as well as contextualized negatively, it is more prominently visible in societies whose religio-cultural framework incorporates reverence towards mysterious super-natural realms (Illes, 2010). Alleged to be the instigating instrument for diseases, physical deformities, famine, bad crops, deaths and other non-favourable stances; witchcraft is purported to be the considered intervention of negative supernatural powers.

It has been well depicted, documented, and believed that witchcraft has mainly been practiced mostly by females (see Richter, 1982; Karlsen, 1998). Owing to its feminine affiliation, the practice has been widely known and popular as witchcraft and not its male counterpart, wizard-craft. Females practicing this craft are often portrayed and attributed as ominous looking scary females, brandishing a broomstick and doing chores that were considered to be wicked and malevolent (Oblau & Wrogemann, 2015). Alleged of causing detrimental influences, such women are trialled, branded as witches and thereafter hounded, banished, flogged, raped, burnt alive, and in most of the cases, ruthlessly murdered. These trials and hunting have existed as socially acceptable tools for weeding out the anti-social, *mala fide* intention driven witches from the society.

Witchcraft, in some form or the other, has been a predominant cultural phenomenon in almost all existent communities of the globe. Faith in its actuality and presence has been unmoved in societies and religions, across the world. It is validated by evidences from the Old Testament, New Testament, Protestant Culture, Babylonian societies, Hebrew Bible, Jewish culture, Islam, Hinduism and almost all the documented indigenous communities (see Driver, 1943; Malina and Neyrey, 1999; Clark, 2001; Free, 2011; Scott, 1868; Williams, 1865; Bravmann, 1980; Russell, 1972; Davies, 2017). Geographically also, witchcraft is ‘almost’ omnipresent - as marked by documentations, paintings and other testimonies emanating from African, American, European, Middle East, South Asian and Island nations.

Amidst its global footprint, the practice of witchcraft has been pervasively customary in India as well (Saletore, 1981). However, the relative absence of academic researchers in the domain of witchcraft studies has been a serious handicap for its nuanced comprehension in India. Building on fragmentary sources, the paper endeavours to explore the trajectory of witchcraft studies conducted in India. It does not claim to be comprehensive. However, an effort has been made to reflectively draw from studies conducted in the disciplines of anthropology, gender studies, development studies, sociology, history, tribal studies or for that matter any discipline, which has attempted to cover witchcraft from the pre-colonial era till the current times. The paper attempts to put together the academic endeavours which have been undertaken by different scholars to create a knowledge base pertaining to witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in India.

### **Historical Aspects in Witchcraft Studies in India**

During the colonial times, missionaries and colonial administrators were the ones who had attempted to record and investigate matters related to witch hunting and witchcraft with the motive to control and regulate the subjugated people in the territorial domain of colonial India. Thereafter, we get bits of information from around the 1857 war (what the British called the ‘Great Mutiny’ and the Indians call the ‘First War of Independence’). This war has been studied in great depth by historians. However, it has received lesser attention as ‘the first mass witch-hunt among tribal communities’ of Chotanagpur (Sinha, 2007, pp. 1672).

Sinha (2007) draws from secondary sources of data, including old historical writings, notes written by colonial administrators, letters to the administrators, judicial pronouncements, district gazettes, folktales and books by other historians and proclaims that sepoy mutinies and the civilian outbreaks during 1857 had some clear interconnections and linkages with the policy imposition of the Britishers. In Chotanagpur there was growing discontent among the tribals concerning the newly implemented system of written oaths, annual visits by the commissioner, insistence

on regular payment of taxes, and, attempts to increase the rate and mode of assessment. These imposed regulations triggered the tribals against the Britishers. Apart from these, the Britishers also attempted to axe-down the customs and traditions of the tribals as well, with an attempt to reform the 'jungletery' of Chotanagpur into a 'civilized' tract (pp. 1675). In this line, the practice of witchcraft was banned by the Britishers owing to its barbarous nature of trialing and killing women.

Contrary to the Britishers, the tribals considered witchcraft to be a great trouble for their community. Considered a general social threat for the community at large, hunting of witches to rid the community from the evil influence was deeply soaked and ingrained into the traditions (and even in the folklore) of the tribals. Banning of witch huntings and the imposed rule of trialing accused witches in the court of law and their subsequent judgmental pronouncements in favour of the involved sorcerers and accused witches, on the grounds of non-production of scientific logical evidences by the then English magistrates, were not received well by the community. Overtime, steadily the belief that - witches were 'flourishing' under the 'benevolent power' of the British - significantly gained ground among the tribals. Amalgamated with the other triggering causations of revolt, the growth of belief on induced promotion of witches in the community by banning witch hunts by the Britishers, became the contributing motivation for the havoc that followed in the form of the uprising of 1857 in the region. All administrative regulations, including the ban on witch-hunts were schematically violated. The climax came during the political disturbances around 1856-57, when the hold of the East India Company's administration was temporarily loosened. Law and order collapsed in the region and the tribals took this freedom to clean sweep the witches and sorcerers who had accumulated in their midst, under the influence of British authority. Sinha (2008) in his paper, states that witch hunting spurt that occurred in 1857 in the Chotanagpur plateau, was actually a 'symbolic retaliation' against the Britishers in a localized form and was a 'conscious contour of resistance combining both gender as well as anti-colonial tensions.' (Ibid., pp. 1672 - 1673).

Mallick (2008) rebutted Sinha's claims that the rise in witch hunts during the colonial time could not be solely ascribed to the anguish confronting the Britishers (Mallick, 2008, pp. 118 - 119). She holds that Sinha's interpretation is only 'partially correct' and based on an 'idealistic' understanding of the tribal community. Without discounting the intense feeling of community solidarity among tribals, Mallick states that it was 'erroneous' to assume that the entire tribal community supported the ceremonial killing of witches. She holds that '*Adivasis* did not regard the occurrence of deadly diseases or other calamities as a natural phenomenon, but as symptoms of a grave disorder in nature, caused by the intervention of some malevolent spirits or by the mischievous activities of a witch'. To tackle these 'mischievous activities' the local witch finders (variously known as the *khonses*, *sokha*, *janguru* or *ojha*), through certain rituals, identified the witch(es) and was/were put to death by the community members.

However, a section of the *adivasis* raised objections about witch-hunts even during those times as well. Testifying from recorded cases, Mallick (2008) held that during 1850s – “alleged witches were not universally accepted to be the ‘real’ witches. Intra-village differences did exist especially when those identified as witches, belonged to their own family or kin group.” Reporting such instances, the tribals often sought assistance from British authorities on the plea that ‘their daughters/wives had been identified as witches and they therefore needed help.’ She criticizes Sinha’s declaration of 1857 revolt, as a ‘consequential response to the banning of witchcraft practices in Chotanagpur region possessing sanction from the tribals’ (Sinha, 2007, pp. 1672 - 1673), on the ground that it fails to take into account the voice of the ‘silenced’ minority within the tribal villages - who protested against witch-hunting but were forcefully subdued by the dominant elites of the village. The author, through judicial records, relating to the trial of witch-hunters during the time of 1857 rebel, tries to put-forth that ‘personal enmity’ and ‘materialistic gains’ were the major factor behind the massive incidence of witch-hunting. People took advantage of the chaos and disorder during the revolt to ‘settle scores’ with their rivals and foes. Judicial records suggest that there were a number of cases, where not only the ‘wiche(s)’, but his/her entire family was also killed for encroaching the property of the deceased. This was quite different from the traditional form of witch-hunt wherein only the alleged witches were persecuted. She also uncovers another important domain of witch killings in the region, which was completely left out by Sinha (2007) regarding the hunting of male(s) as ‘witches’. Although relatively less in number, the hunting of males as alleged wizards, was also seen during the colonial period. Hence, Sinha’s argument that witch-hunt had brought to light the underlying ‘gender tensions’ within tribal society cannot be regarded as ‘absolute’ truth.

Among the historicity debates, the analysis of evolution of witchcraft from an even remoter time frame, depicting it as an outcome of gender struggle which led to labelling of women as witches and ‘keepers of demons’, was forwarded by Nathan et al. (1998). Contextualizing the struggle prevalent among the Santhals and Mundas of Jharkhand, India; and the Dai, Naxi and Mosuo communities of Yunnan, China; their paper attempts to explain as to how patriarchy/male dominance came into existence or in other words, if male dominance was not always the order of the past, then - how did male ascendancy come into existence? and how did the gender roles change over-time for establishing male supremacy? The authors present specific examples of Naxi women (who were denounced in large numbers on charges of keeping evil demons); Dai women (who were ousted on the grounds of being evil spirits) and Santhal women (who were killed on the grounds of practicing witchcraft); to establish that there was large-scale violence happening against women and that such incidences were ‘not isolated or stray event.’ They were happening because of the conflicts and social changes that were taking place all around the region, including India and China.

Focussing on witchcraft, the authors considered witch hunting among the Mundas and Santhals, as attempt by men to change the established order of female dominance (Ibid., pp. ws-59). Citing examples from other cultures as well, especially in context to witchcraft killing in medieval Europe (for gaining control over the healing process from non-professional women), France (in the name of acculturation) and among the Iroquois (for changing their matriarchal setup); the authors affirm that witch-hunting was an attempt of the males to change the 'existing order of female dominance in social relation, gender relation, religious rites, symbols, marriage, inheritance system, economic rights, sexuality, norms of behaviour, accepted forms of social excellence, access to knowledge and other spheres of social behaviour.' Female who professed intimacy with the spirits were looked upon as a witch and were perceived as 'prodigious danger' to the community. They were believed to have their own system of secret incantation, rites and magical codes through which deleterious influences could be inflicted upon the community. To cope up with these negative influences, the men took up the task of identifying the females responsible for bringing sorrow to the community. This is how, over the period of time, witch identifiers in the form of *ojha*, *deora* and *jan guru* etc. came into existence. This instituting of power of one section of the community (men) to declare the other section of the community (women) as witches was propounded to be an essential part in the process of establishing the 'authority of men and denunciation of women.'

This transition coupled with systematic exclusion of women from all major spheres of religious activities, suspension of land rights, and gender struggles in the realms of rituals, symbols, meanings, inheritance systems etc., resulted in socio-religious devaluation of women, which over the period of time paved path for the prominent visibility of androcentric dominance in all realms of public and personal life (Nathan et al. 1998).

After historical aspect, the ensuing section of the paper elucidates a few field-based studies which have been steered by researchers to throw light on the ground realities of witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in the country.

### **Empirical Witchcraft Studies in India**

This section analyses the research findings of select academic empirical studies and puts forth the suggestive measures which have been communicated therein.

Among the few empirical initiatives, the study conducted by Joshi et al. (2006) is an outcome of the intensive field study conducted amongst the Oraon tribals of Jashpur Nagar, Chhattisgarh, India. Their research pivotally deals with the concept of witch, witchcraft, and the role of the traditional healer(s) in combating the perceived ill effects of supernatural powers, 'prevalent' in the community.

The authors present the embedded faith of the Oraons on witches (colloquially known as *bishahi*), who are profoundly believed to use magical powers to 'attack the fertility capacity of humans, cause harm to domestic animals, destroy crops, fly through night to engage in cannibalism, incestuous acts, assume animal form etc.' They are also perceived to cause misfortune, sickness, and even death by casting 'evil eye' (Joshi et al., 2006, pp. 145-147). Due to these deleterious capabilities, witches are considered as threat to the society and often looked upon with fear and suspicion. Both men and women could become *bisahi*, although reference to female *bisahis* is more frequent than males. They are not considered to be hereditary and are believed to go through secret trainings, to acquire power to control the spiritual world. To acquire more powers, witches propitiate their deity '*masan-dev*' and other evil spirits. Once the witch masters these skills, s/he has to kill his/her own child or any member of the family. After completion of training, witches have to try their witchery on tree, and if it dies, it is indicative that the art has been mastered (Ibid., pp. 147). For countering the influence of witch/es, the Oraons have faith on the socially recognized sorcerer (colloquially known as *baiga*, *dewair*, or *ojha*) who performs magic for the benefit of the society. Usually a male, it is believed that the *baiga* possesses special powers which can counter the malevolent activities of witches. Bearing similarity with witches, his power is also neither hereditary nor inborn, but is acquired through training. Usually not confined just to one village, he may go anywhere when summoned by people in need (Ibid., pp. 148).

The *baiga* differentiates between - naturally caused ailments and supernaturally caused ailments. Accordingly differential curative measures are applied. Naturalistic ailments are treated without invoking supernatural aid, whereas treatment of illness instigated by supernatural element(s) is carried out within the realm of magico-religious healing. The *baiga* diagnoses the illness by dehusked rice. He puts the rice on a *saal* leaf marked with *sindoor* (vermillion) and *haldi* (turmeric) and reads his spells on the rice to detect whether a *bishahi* has caused the illness or any other malevolent agency is the cause. Once identified, treatment or sacrifices are made accordingly. If the disease is serious, offerings of sweets and rice beer are made at home. If the illness is serious or evil spirits sent by *bishahi* are adamant on not leaving the patient's body, then in such cases the spirits or *bishahi* demand sacrifices, which then needs to be carried out ceremonially, under the directions prescribed the *baiga*.

As a preventive measure, annual ritualistic ceremonies are also carried out by the Oraons for driving away the evil spirits sent by *bishahi* (or any other evil agency). Mentioning about the deep faith of the Oraons on witches and witchcraft, being embedded in their socio-cultural milieu; Joshi et al. (2006) prominently puts forth that once it is confirmed that the disease/illness or any other misfortune occurring

in the community, has occurred due to the ill influence of a particular witch/*bishahi*; the matter no longer remains restricted merely to the 'victim's' family members. It rather becomes a public affair. All the blame is put on the accused witch, leading to public outrage and ousting of the identified witch. However, such accusations have been analysed to be mostly directed against widows with the underlying motive of grabbing her property or related with envy with the person, who has more wealth or prestige in society (Ibid., pp. 149).

Echoing in the same line with Joshi et al. (2006), Konwar and Swargiari (2015) through their study conducted on the Napaam, Badagaon and Daifangkuthi villages of Assam, India - iterated that the people of Assam also have the deep rooted faith in witchcraft. It is widely believed that the person, who is suspected to be practicing witchcraft, causes harm to his or her community through 'abuse of magical powers'. To curb this, destroying the witch (by killing or inflicting severe punishments) is the best solution which has been internalized by the people of the region. Such a faith, in recent times, has resulted in killing of numerous people (mostly comprising of females) among the Bodo, Mishing, Rabha and other communities of the region (Konwar and Swargiari, 2015, pp. 133). In this scenario, the notion of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' is quite bewildering; *i.e.* who is the victim and who is the perpetrator? - does not come out very clearly. In fact, the cognition of victim and perpetrator is quite antagonistic among the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders.' Here 'insiders' include the people who live in the village/community/society/place, where the incidence of witch-hunting takes place; whereas 'outsiders' are those, who are unknown to the accused witch and are not the residents of the concerned place. For 'insiders', the one who brings harm to the community - is the 'perpetrator' and the person who suffers the brunt is the 'victim.' By this analogy, the accused witch is the 'perpetrator' and the individual(s) who are inflicted with ill-effects of the evil powers of the witch, is/are the 'victim' (Ibid., pp. 133).

In order to curb the cause of the misfortune and to prevent any further damages, the 'insiders' resolve to ex-communicate, oust or kill the witch. Contrastingly, for the 'outsiders', the witch who has been ex-communicated, ousted or killed is seen as the 'victim' and the people (the insiders) who are involved in this act are perceived as 'perpetrators' (pp. 133). In order to provide a better elucidation of these antagonistic viewpoints, Konwar and Swargiari (2015), developed the 'standpoint model of witch-hunting' to present the viewpoint of the 'insiders' and 'outsiders' regarding their conceptualization and contextualization of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' (Ibid., pp. 134). Cautioning that the nature, mode of punishment and causations of witch-hunting is 'almost same' across cultures throughout the world, still, a sweeping generalization should not be tendered until a broad idea about the issue is gained via thorough investigation. Generalizing the problem shall dilute its severity as a social challenge and a narrowly conceived understanding



(limiting just to its immediate context) shall lead to a constricted understanding. Hence, the 'specific nature' of the issue clubbed up with 'commonalities' that it shares with other such practices across the world - needs to be understood simultaneously (Ibid., pp. 138).

Another in-depth empirical conducted by Chaudhuri (2012) among the tea plantation workers of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India; over a period of seven months spanning between 2005 to 2007, attempts to figure out the reasons as to why women are popular targets during witch hunting occurrences? Based on in-depth interviews of victims of witch hunt, relatives of victims, accusers, passive participants, relatives of accusers and local tribal activists, it was put forth that there are two categories of witch hunting - 'calculated' witch-hunting attacks and 'surprise' witch-hunting attacks (Ibid., pp. 1219).

In cases of calculated attacks, gender relationship between the accuser(s) and the accused, plays an important role in the selection of 'target/s.' Such attacks are pre-planned and serve as the means for seeking revenge of pre-existent personal conflicts. Men, who are the decision makers, use such conflicts to serve their ulterior interest of grabbing property, sexual harassment etc. The women are thus scapegoats in this crafted conspiracy by men (Ibid., pp. 1219-1222). Contrarily, in cases of surprise attacks, the women or her family members, prior to the attack, are unaware of the accusations. The attacks happen randomly without any instigation in the form of prior conflict or any history of witchcraft accusation. Comparing the scale of violence, the intensity is relatively more in the case of surprise attacks, wherein the goal of the accuser/s are not ulterior, rather focused on 'elimination of evil' from the village (Ibid., pp. 1223-1224).

Gender conflict, lack of education, conspiracy against accused women and faith of women being manipulators of super-natural powers for causing illness in the community - act as crucial factors for selecting women as witches. In the identification of witches, physical features like old age, hunch back, or weird hair or skin colour are the pivotal considerations. Usually, anything off-track to the ideally accepted feminine image of 'good' can be tendered as reason for labelling as witch. Along with physical characteristics, quarrelsome nature of the woman is also used as an excuse to select targets during hunts (Ibid., pp. 1228). In some cases, sexual relationships outside marriage are also considered as a legitimate excuse for witch accusation. Usually the credible targets are those who have little or no power of retaliation and are usually chosen among groups and people who had been involved in prior conflicts, and witch hunts were directed at other members of the same social system (Ibid., pp. 1227).

After empirical studies, the succeeding section of the paper illuminates on a few analytical studies which have been directed by researchers to enlighten on the law, policy and developmental veracities of witchcraft and witch-hunting practices in India.

### **Analytical Perspective of Witchcraft Studies in India**

The prominence of witchcraft, especially in context to human rights violations, including witch hunting and witch trials; has been prominent in the states of Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Reports indicate that around 2,097 women were assassinated on charges of witchcraft during 2000-2012. (Masoodi, 2014). These are statistics which have been logged-in, however the unrecorded ones is anticipated to be far more than this number. Keeping these figures in mind, academic interventions which have kept law, policy and developmental interface at the centre stage, have been considered in this section of the paper.

Sundar (2001) on the basis of her empirical experiences spanning over a decade in the Bastar district of erstwhile Madhya Pradesh (currently Chhattisgarh), India; puts forth the explanation to comprehend witch killings, not as 'remnant of some traditional or superstitious past (which will disappear over the time with the coming of modern education or religious conversion), but as part of a modern experience, in which people are part of a nation state, which exercises coercive power and control over them' (Sundar, 2001, pp. 426). The study, largely resting on testimonies of people sentenced in witch killing cases, who were then serving their term at Jagdalpur Central Jail, provides an interface between the state actors and witchcraft related killings in the region.

In incidences of witch accusations in the region, the local sorcerer's (*sirsha*) assistance is sought, who goes into a trance to diagnose the cause. Sometimes, the cause is detected as an unappeased god/goddess, while in other cases, s/he may name a person and her/his evil spells as the cause. In majority of the cases, it is mostly the females who are suspected of having the malevolent super natural powers. However, the involvement of males has also been detected in the study. The suspected witch/es are then subjected to various ordeals to prove their innocence. If unsuccessful, punishments for such acts include chopping off of hands, knocking off the teeth, mouths burnt with hot oil and banishment from the village. The community at large does not have any doubt and are perfectly justified in taking law into their own hands in 'dealing' with such cases of witchcraft (Ibid., pp. 436). The local police, in such cases book the villagers for committing crime and put them behind bars. Later on, the courts also take the same course and declare them guilty. Cases covered under the study bring out that land disputes or envy over property, forms the prime reason for such acts of vehemence (Ibid., pp. 444). Apart from this, illness related deaths are also significant contributors in this phenomenon. This raises the concern that - when the state actors deal with witchcraft cases they should perhaps examine the processes through which the people are integrated into a larger system wherein the only option for the villagers is to blame for their misfortunes is on those - whom they know. Thus, witchcraft accusations are a way of coping with the uncertainties

of human existence. The state actors concentrate only on coercive measures (like imprisonment) for preventing such practices rather than redressing the concerns which give rise to such violence, such as abysmal health services or the lack of land or means of livelihood (Ibid., pp. 445).

Roy (1998), based on her study among the tribals of West Singhbhum and Deoghar districts of Southern Bihar (currently Jharkhand), suggests interventional approach and strategies to be adopted by developmental workers for amelioration of witchcraft related crimes. She puts forth that since the practice of witchcraft and witch-hunting fall within the boundaries of social sanction of the community, hence such practices cannot be condemned as violent. They are culturally acceptable and form a part of the traditional values and beliefs of the community (Roy, 1998, pp.136). This 'sanctioned violence' has major implications for developmental workers working in the area. The most difficult aspect involves countering the society's belief system, especially when it is a part of the community's ethos and culture. Being linked with local sanction, any intervention shall require a sensitive approach 'without hurting the pride and sentiments of the local population and without creating a tribal-non-tribal divide.' The community people might perceive the interventions of development agencies as a direct attack on their beliefs and culture. Hence, a very careful and balanced approach must be adopted by the developmental practitioners working in this domain. (Ibid., pp.145).

The role of local witch doctors is very crucial in the practice of witchcraft. Faith on his powers and skills is deeply entrenched in people's minds. Once a person has been named as a witch and the accusation has been verified by the witch doctor, action against him/her is definite. Hence, the pivotal cause is the way in which the witch doctor is revered by society. If the witch doctor's power is questioned by the developmental agencies, it can prove to be really fruitful. However, his/her hold over the village is something that development workers must consider seriously in terms of its detrimental effect on their programme/s as well (Ibid., pp. 143). Victimized women as witches can be seen as the height of patriarchal suppression which devalues woman in the society, and 'keeps her in a property-less and resource-less state' (Ibid., pp. 137). Developmental workers need to address this basic issue and work towards economic equality between men and women.

Traditional village administration in tribal areas, allows the headman (and his council) to unilaterally decide village affairs and settle disputes. The system follows a hereditary pattern of leadership wherein women are often neglected. She advocates that developmental workers must try to make women politically conscious such that they are given space in the village-level administration, and for village councils to be gender-sensitive and provide support to women for their inclusion (Ibid., pp.146). Death and illness in the community are the most common excuses - that instigate the situation of witch-hunting. It has been suggested by the author

that the involved developmental workers must analyse and work towards improving the standards of health in the community. Improved health services coupled with health-awareness programmes shall restrict people in prescribing illness as an excuse to brand women as witches, and that the power of the witch doctor in health-related matters shall eventually diminish (Ibid., pp.146). Apart from all these, the author also recommends for - forming support group for women, sensitizing police and government officials on the issue of witchcraft killings and increasing access to education; which eventually shall be prove to be fruitful in combating the practice of witch hunting.

Apart from the developmental perspective, studies concerning witchcraft have also put forth the legal dimension into the centre stage as well. Singh (2011) draws attention towards the reasons for failure of the anti-witchcraft initiatives due to which the practice is still 'active' and 'kicking' in the country. In a delimiting atmosphere, where there is lack of resources, poverty is rampant and education is in an abysmal state, people tend to develop strong superstitious beliefs and anything bad - like bad crop, diseases, sudden unexplained death of someone, or drying of well etc.; is considered to be the work of evil supernatural powers directed by some 'witch' (Sinha, 2011, pp. 16). Thus begins the 'hunt' to locate the person responsible for such misfortunes. The state of anguish outbursts in the form of series of acts, often involving gruesome actions of human right violation directed against the accused individual. In majority of the cases, it is female(s) who are been 'declared and branded' as witches. The accused is/are subjected to extreme tortures - both physical and mental. Gruesome acts of violence are faced by the women including being stripped naked, paraded around the villages, hair - burnt off, head - tonsured, face - blackened, nose - cut off, teeth - pulled out, forced to eat human excreta, raped and even whipped to death. All these happen in open public, with a cheering crowd supporting the act. If in case, the accused witch is spared for life, she is considered inauspicious, malevolent and is socially ostracized. All these, often lead to losing of their mental balance (Ibid., pp. 16).

Given the lack of education and poverty, usually women suffer silently, as most of them are unable to reach out for help. Through accusation of females, the dominant men of the community perhaps want to send a message to the women folk that 'only docility and domesticity shall be rewarded, anything else shall be punished' (Ibid., pp. 16). Witch hunting serves as a useful tool for political lobbies that use the obscurantist sorcerers to influence the community. Apart from this, witch-hunting also acts as a means to rob-off women (especially widows) from her property or inflict punishment for turning down sexual advances or even settling grudges with the women or her family members. In such events, the witch finders (often the local medicine man or village sorcerer commonly known as *ojhas*) play the crucial role of identifying of witches. However, police investigations in several instances revealed the dubious nature of *ojhas*, wherein they had accepted bribe to name a particular woman as a witch (Ibid., pp. 18).

Sinha (2011) draws attention towards the existence of specific anti-witchcraft laws in force in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, for prevention of witchcraft related crimes. However the paltry term of punishment, provision of bail in certain instances and the meagre amount of fine recommended in these laws, demean the stringency of the laws. He recommends that the laws should be made more stringent and rigorous. Apart from legal reforms, sensitization of police, judiciary, governmental officers and NGOs; large-scale anti-witchcraft campaigns against superstition and witch-hunting practices; and promotion of women's groups for enhancing economic independence; are the other possible measures which need to be put in place for effectively curbing the menace of witchcraft (Ibid., pp. 20).

In this very line of concern, the analysis of the report of Partners for Law in Development covering 48 case studies from Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, 85 police records and 59 High Court / Supreme Court judgments from ten states; conceived by Mehra and Agarwal (2016), covering both the insider's as well as outsider's perspective, stands out for the cause of ameliorating witchcraft related crime against women.

In case of Bihar, the law in force is the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act 1999; in Jharkhand, it is the Prevention of Witch-hunting (Dayan Pratha) Act 2001 and in Chhattisgarh, it is the Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act 2005. However, subsequently other states like - Odisha, Assam, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Rajasthan have also legislated (or are the process of legislating) similar laws for countering witchcraft practices and crime. The authors contest the 'basic assumption' behind the formulation of these laws and put forth that all such enactments should not be taken as 'sufficient response to the problems originating in the society due to evil practices, irrationality or superstition' (Mehra & Agarwal, 2016, pp. 52). Such legislations cannot end superstition, provide redressal to victims or inject scientific approach and rationality in the community. These legislations do not take into account - (a) the conditions under which such practices flourish, (b) the gaps in the existing laws, (c) the mode of reporting of cases, (d) the investigation carried after reporting, and (e) the emergent needs of the victims/survivors. Hence, a more social approach must be adopted, than just being strictly legal (Ibid., pp. 52).

The only unified source of data concerning witchcraft in India is from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The authors raise concerns regarding the authenticity of the data as only 'murders - motivated by witchcraft' are covered in this category. Apart from murders, other forms of witchcraft violence (disrobing, parading, stoning, tonsuring the hair, blackening face, rape etc.) are not covered at all (Ibid., pp. 52). Hence, NCRB data cannot put forth a reliable indicator of the crime(s) and violence which surround the allegations of witchcraft.

The authors, in their study, also put forth that majority of the witchcraft cases are never taken to the police or court. Even if taken, more than half are dismissed due to factors such as lack of proper investigation, absence of witnesses, minor punishments to the perpetrators or 'compromise' between the victim and the perpetrator. In the event of cases been taken to court, the legal system interacts with victimisation only when it pertains to involvement of murder. Other forms of violence are often looked away as 'non-serious' crimes. All offences in anti-witchcraft state laws are cognisable and non-bailable. However, in majority of the cases, the police files case under provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which relate to beating, hurting, trespassing, theft, murder, conspiracy, etc. with more number of bailable charges than non-bailable charges; thereby diluting the gruesomeness of the crime. Due to this, the anti-witchcraft laws are unable to achieve their desired spirit and purpose for which they were legislated (Ibid., pp. 55). IPC (till 2013) was severely inadequate for addressing sexualized and gender-based violence occurring in witchcraft related crimes. Acts such as forced disrobing, parading, stoning, tonsuring the hair, blackening face etc. were dealt as 'hurting' (Section 323); or 'outraging the modesty of a woman' (Section 354/509), for which the punishments prescribed was disproportionately less in comparison to the severity of the crime (Ibid., pp. 56).

Mehra & Agarwal (2016), also contest that the factors and contexts that trigger witch-hunting - are no more static or limited. Apart from casting 'evil eye' and 'causing bad', it has evolved as one of the prime ways of settling scores and conflicts within the community. Violence associated with 'caste based atrocities' is often similar to that of witch-hunting and often coincide with incidences of witchcraft. Due to this, there is a pressing need for distinctly naming the crimes related to witchcraft (like parading, tonsuring and blackening the face etc.), so that such acts are not trivialized as 'simply hurting' as evaluated by the Indian Penal Code. Henceforth, there is need to name and recognize these as distinct offences within the framework of the IPC as well.

The authors also hold that, criminalization of witchcraft related offences is only one aspect of justice. Other domains also need addressal. Police apathy, poor investigation and indifferent prosecution are among the major barriers in providing respite to the victims. Simultaneously, reformative measures also need due attention - without which such redressals cease to be just rhetoric (Ibid., pp. 57). Reparative remedies involving compensation, community dialogue, protection, livelihood support, shelter, promise of non-recurrence of violence; also needs to be put in place. Awareness programmes (often mooted to be the long-term solution for eliminating witch-hunting and creation of scientific temper and rationality) cannot deliver until a parallel transformation in the material conditions of the regions and

communities, is ensured. Structural changes guaranteeing accessibility to quality education, public health, along with an accountable administration, and a responsive law enforcement agency - are also pivotal (Ibid., pp. 57). Unless sufficient attention is paid to these deprivations, neglects and institutional mechanisms - amelioration of witchcraft related practices and crimes shall be a distant dream.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can put forth that studies relating to witchcraft in context to India, do exist, but are too scarce. Although slow, the studies are steadily expanding the domain and discourse of witchcraft, and pushing it beyond generalizing grand theories and simplistic explanations. However, more studies, especially focussing on the view-point of the witchcraft victims and the people involved in the act of witchcraft, are required to comprehend the inherent nature of this social practice. Apart from this, empirical in-depth studies hailing from states like Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh; where there have been recorded instances of witchcraft killings - are almost negligible. There is a pertinent need for emergence of study from these states. Furthermore, witchcraft is prominently traced in rural regions (having non-tribal population) and scarcely in the urban regions as well; but still, most of the studies have been focussed only on the tribals. The expansion of research domain to these regions and social groups is also highly solicited.

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