

Witchcraft Allegations and Gender Divide: Unmasking the Disproportionate Impact on Women

Meena Kumari

Department of Contemporary and Tribal Customary Law, Central University of Jharkhand, India.
E-mail: meena.kumari@cuja.ac.in | ORCID : 0000-0002-5561-7812

Shamsher Alam

Department of Contemporary and Tribal Customary Law, Central University of Jharkhand, India.
E-mail: shamsher.alam@cuja.ac.in | ORCID : 0000-0001-5593-831X

ABSTRACT

The enduring presence of witchcraft and the practice of witch-hunting has been deeply rooted in numerous societies globally. India, like other nations, also experiences the widespread influence of this phenomenon, which has gained notoriety due to its perceived links with malicious intentions and malevolent forces. Notably, these practices have consistently implicated women, resulting in a significant number of them unjustly facing accusations and being targeted for allegedly causing harmful effects. This paper delves into the reasons underlying the disproportionate prevalence of witchcraft accusations and violence directed towards women, as opposed to men, in context to India. By drawing upon previous researches as well as empirical investigation, this study aims to elucidate factors contributing to this gender disparity. Analysis of past studies revealed that elements such as economic and property-related disputes, gender-based power struggles, absence of scientific rationality, perception of women as source of malevolence, degradation of status of women, and dominance of patriarchal socio-cultural structures, play pivotal role in undue labelling of women as witches. Contributing to this, the conducted empirical inquiry in Ranchi (India) unveiled that - animosity among women, influence of witch-finders in identifying females, non-conventional worshipping practices, sexual harassment, vulnerability of widowed and unsupported women, purported ability to attract evil forces, and restrictions on female education, also contribute to perpetuation of unjust stigmatization of women in instances of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting. The comprehensive understanding of these intricate factors shall assist in developing more informed interventions to combat the unjust stigmatization of women in communities grappling with witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting.

Keywords: Superstition-Based Violence, Witchcraft, Witch Hunting, Women, India.

1. Introduction

The prevalence of witchcraft and witch-hunting is particularly notable in societies that hold un-moving faith in supernatural powers. Often associated with sinister motives, witchcraft has garnered ill reputation as a 'malevolent knowledge,' thought to be harnessed by evil forces to further their deleterious agendas. Its perceived harmful effects, ranging from diseases and physical deformities to famine, crop failures, and deaths, have contributed to its negative perception. Over time, witchcraft has acquired a negative reputation due to its perceived anti-social character focussing primarily on malicious objectives. Throughout history, witchcraft has predominantly been linked to women, resulting in the popular use of

the term 'witchcraft' rather than its male equivalent, 'wizardcraft.' Female practitioners of this alleged craft are frequently labelled as witches and unfairly held responsible for causing harm. This phenomenon is not exclusive to western or European cultures. It is also present in India, where the term 'dayan' is commonly used to refer to witches, originating from the Sanskrit word 'dakini,' signifying a feminine supernatural being, akin to malevolent female in other cultures.

The prevailing belief is that these female practitioners manipulate malevolent supernatural forces to trigger harmful events. Consequently, public resentment escalates into mass anger, leading to egregious human

rights violations, including physical assault, public humiliation, forced head-shaving, degradation, sexual assault, and even execution. Shockingly, reports indicate that nearly 2700 people in India have been killed since the year 2000 on charges related to practicing witchcraft, with women constituting a significant portion of the victims. In this context, the current study draws on past researches and the conducted empirical investigation in Ranchi (India), to address the question: *Why do females face higher degree of targeting in cases of witchcraft accusations, than males?*

2. Adopted Methodology

Instances of witchcraft accusations and accompanying violence have exhibited sustained presence in India, particularly in rural and tribal dominated areas. According to the latest report from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a unit operating under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, there were 2694 reported cases of individuals being killed due to accusations of engaging in witchcraft practices between 2001 and 2018. A detailed analysis of this data reveals that such occurrences were more pronounced in Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar and Assam. Amongst these states, Jharkhand surpasses all others, accounting for over one-fifth of the total cases. Given the prevalence of witchcraft-related violence in Jharkhand, it was chosen as the research site. In Jharkhand, witchcraft accusations and allied violence are frequently reported from areas predominantly inhabited by tribal communities. As a result, the study focused on Ranchi district, which has the highest tribal population among all districts of Jharkhand. To ensure representativeness, two villages were selected from each sub-division of the district. Resultantly, the investigation spanned over four villages namely - Burmu, Mandar, Bundu, and Sonahatu.

In each of these villages, key informants were identified and rapport was established with them. Research-related information was gathered through quasi-participant observation, interview, schedule, and case study technique. A total of 113 participants including youth, village elders, witch doctors, elected representatives and alleged witches were interviewed to gather factual and contextual information. For effective capturing of data - genealogical table, photography and audio recording was also utilized. Ethical considerations, particularly those pertinent to field-based researches, were rigorously followed

throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and the involvement of informants was treated with utmost confidentiality and voluntariness. Additionally, anonymity was maintained for all research participants. Secondary data pertaining to study were gathered from NCRB reports, court judgments, online and offline newspapers, relevant websites, published reports, media clippings, online journals, books, circulars, office orders, and publications from non-government organizations. After data collection, key themes and sub-themes relevant to the study's central question - *why women are more targeted than men in cases of witchcraft accusations?* were identified. Thereafter, the commonalities and divergences were carefully sorted to arrive at the nuances of the research.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Vulnerability of Women: Insights from Earlier Researches

In India, terms such as *dayan*, *dakain*, *tonahi*, *chudail*, and *fuskin* are often used to refer to witches. These terms are inherently feminine, suggesting that witches are female (and not male) and that witchcraft is associated with women (and not men). This section draws upon previous studies convened in India to analyze the reasons, beliefs and circumstances that have contributed to the perception of witchcraft as a predominantly women-centric phenomenon. It also explores various aspects of witchcraft related violence and crimes directed against women. While studies on the status of women in Indian society are abundant, those explaining the heightened victimization of women (compared to men) in cases of witchcraft accusations and the greater number of female victims (compared to male victims) in instances of witch-hunting, are relatively very limited. Nevertheless, even limited number of such investigations, highlight the extent of this women-centric concern.

3.1.1. Economic and Property Related Factors

Economic considerations play significant role in targeting of women. Mishra (2003) highlights the impact of asymmetric socio-economic development as the catalyst for victimization of females, specifically focusing on widows who own property. Roy (1998) emphasizes the same and hold that there is establishment of a complex backdrop of economic subjugation before the actual mistreatment of widows in instances of witchcraft accusation. Grimassi (2000)

also draws connection between economic reasons and witch hunts, attributing them to the profound crisis inter-woven into social life due to globalization and new economic restructuring. Similarly, Epstein (1959) proposes that when rural women strive for economic self-sufficiency, it often leads to societal tensions, resulting in allegations of witchcraft orchestrated to hinder and deter the efforts of the concerned female (Hutton, 2004).

In tribal communities also, a clear correlation exists between women's rights and ownership of land. Accusations of witchcraft and subsequent persecution function to uphold the land ownership patterns within patrilineal systems. Sakaria (1997) contends that when women attain ownership of land, it grants them independence to exercise their own initiatives, confront injustice and disparities, and attain empowerment for the sake of enduring and viable livelihoods. This transition also influences how women are engaged and perceived in their everyday life. In short, witchcraft accusations serve as tool to extinguish the economic and property rights of women.

3.1.2. Women as Source of Evil

Another significant reason for victimization of women is the perception of them as sources of evil. Kelkar and Nathan (1991) have portrayed the prominence of denouncing women on this ground. Often associated with black magic, women were portrayed as bearers and agents of malevolent forces. Women have been labelled as possessors of evil spirits and subjected to abuse based on the belief that their mental and physical makeup makes them capable of casting evil eye on the happiness and prosperity of others (Coomaraswamy, 2002). It is also believed that since women are physically weak, they resort to witchcraft to compensate for their physical weakness. This paints women as manipulators of malevolent supernatural powers (Easlea, 1980).

Also, ancient depictions of magic, spells, and rituals portray women as performing ceremonies around corpses of children and pregnant women, imbuing them with power to harm others (Douglas, 1970). Such portrayals contribute to the notion that witches are predominantly women, resulting in harsh treatment of women accused of practicing witchcraft. Furthermore, in myths concerning origin of witches, the role of witch is consistently attributed to women. Conversely, men predominantly assume the role of witch finders. These myths depict women as making mistakes and causing harm, while men are represented as having authority to restrain them and curtail their wrongful

actions. This demonstrates how witchcraft has showcased an inherent gender bias, sustaining sentiments against women, right from its inception.

3.1.3. Subjugation and Demeaning of Women

Subjugating and demeaning women is another crucial factor contributing to perception of women as witches. Barstow (2000) discusses the demonization of women as portrayed in folklores and anecdotes about special powers and resourcefulness of females. These texts usually portray men as virtuous and patient, contrasting with women, who are depicted as greedy, passionate, and ill-tempered. This distrust of women, coupled with the belief that women excel at incantations and other supernatural activities, contribute to their perceived involvement in witchcraft practices. Macdonald (2004) highlights that it is often weak women, like young girls, childless widows, and single mothers, who are branded as witches. Similarly, Barstow (2000) portrays that tribal societies are guided by exorcists who single out vulnerable individuals under the pretext of summoning devilish forces. The aim is to control women and limit their assertion of rights. This is particularly evident in cases where women attempt to learn rituals in secret, to harness supernatural powers for detrimental purposes.

The practice of patrilocality further compounds the issue. After marriage, women leave their paternal households but are rarely embraced as full members of their husbands' families. They are often forbidden from learning rituals. Any attempt by women to learn such rituals is labelled as an endeavour to conjure spirits for malevolent purposes. This locational disadvantage perpetuates inferiority among women. Moving a step further, Mace et al. (2018) opined that women are labelled as witches, while men are witch-finders, because male authority is established by suppressing women's status. Male witch-finders initiate mistreatment and torture against women, sometimes driven by superstitions and other times by communal efforts, to prevent women from claiming equal rights and status (Mair, 1969).

3.1.4. Gender Struggle

The conflict for rights and dominance between males and females result in gender struggle. This clash has contributed significantly to the labelling of women as witches. Nathan, Kelkar & Xiaogang (1998) highlight the gender disparity among tribal communities and link the growing gender inequality to the practice of branding women as witches. In this power struggle, women are often over-powered, leading to their unjust branding as witches. Shaffer (2014) asserts that gender

has been fetishized in witchcraft rituals since the dawn of civilization. In earlier times, women held superior position due to their knowledge of the natural world. Their roles as mothers and givers of life, elevated their social status. This prowess was envied by men, prompting them to label women as witches to undermine and subjugate them in society (Srivastava, 2016). Singh (2016) opined that labelling of women as witches is not solely rooted in superstitious practices. It also stems from the struggle between genders. Historically, women held the position of power and knowledge that surpassed men. Their close connection to nature enabled them to administer herbal remedies and facilitate childbirth. This elevated their social status and challenged the dominance of males. To counter this, patriarchy was established to diminish women's societal standing. Shah (2007) echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that in various indigenous traditions, men have traditionally enjoyed superior status. Women who sought to challenge this dominance or attempted to carve their own space, were suppressed by branding them as witches.

Briggs (1998) also argues that witch-hunts originated from women's efforts to assert their rights. Vocal and knowledgeable widows were less tolerated by society. If they demanded their rights, they were coerced into re-marriage or were expelled from the village. If these attempts failed, witch accusation incited by witch-finders, was used as the tool for silencing them (Easlea, 1980). Such accusations aimed to discipline women and prevent them from asserting their rights (Summers, 2000). Additionally, women who exhibited outspokenness and assertiveness, were labelled and subsequently victimized as witches. Consequently, the struggle for dominance contributed significantly to labelling of women as witches. The gender struggle between men and women has also been analyzed through colonial lens. Sinha (2007), focusing on witch hunts during the 1857 revolt in Chotanagpur region, pointed that due to foreign rulers infiltrating the region, indigenous communities started losing access to forests, which affected their livelihoods, religious beliefs, and culture. This had distinct effects on both men and women, leading to tensions between the genders, manifesting in the form of witchcraft accusations and witch hunts.

3.1.5. Lack of Scientific Temper

Beyond gender struggles, the absence of scientific temper and rationality has also contributed significantly to portrayal of women as witches. Bleie (1985) explains that magic and witchcraft are deeply ingrained in the mindset of traditional pre-industrial

societies. He elaborates on how middle-aged tribal women are often suspected of witchcraft and hunted, based on trivial rumours fuelled by deep-seated superstitions. Hutton (2004) asserts that attributing witchcraft as the cause of death is a way to cope with the reality of death. Women, perceived as practitioners of malevolent arts, are accused of causing death and thus subjected to extreme treatments (Gurung, 2016). This uncritical faith, combined with disregard for rationality, becomes detrimental for women. Kelkar and Nathan (1991) also attribute widespread accusations and subsequent ostracism and torture of women, to superstitious beliefs.

3.1.6. Political Aspirations

The aspiration of women for political rights has also contributed to their branding as witches and subsequent violence against them. Coomaraswamy (2002) argues that women were historically excluded from village assemblies, which were largely male-dominated. Women were only called upon to provide testimony, not to deliberate or make decisions. Attempts by women to enter the political sphere often resulted in them being labelled as witches. Although affirmative actions in the contemporary era have provided women with opportunities for political expression, this is not very acceptable in traditional village assemblies. Consequently, women's efforts to establish and hold independent positions in a male-dominated environment are met with resistance, leading to accusations of witchcraft and, in extreme cases, hunting.

3.1.7. Socio-Cultural Beliefs

Last but not least, socio-cultural beliefs have also contributed to stigmatization of women as witches. Bleie (1985) asserts that witchcraft manifests in environment where individuals are closely familiar with one another. As men left for tasks such as agriculture and hunting, women found themselves engaged in frequent social interactions, which often led to conflicts among them. This resulted in unjust vilification of fellow women. Supporting this perspective, Stroeken (2010) also opined that women were more prone to envy and spreading falsehood about those who held ill feelings towards them. When these tensions remained unresolved, they festered, leading to strained relationship and nurturing of grudges. The accumulation of these resentments and social tensions provided foundation for construction of witches. Consequently, animosities present within the community significantly contributed to portrayal of women as witches.

In nutshell, the phenomenon of witches and witchcraft is a socially constructed reality widely accepted and endorsed by communities that believe in it. A closer examination reveals that in such societies females are the primary victims. This oppression is perpetuated through various forms of patriarchal domination, including restricting women's economic rights, portraying them as sources of evil, associating them with witchcraft practices, demeaning and subordinating them, engaging in gender struggles for dominance, suppressing women's attempts to assert their rights, employing superstitious practices to accuse women, limiting their political rights, and upholding socio-cultural convictions. All these mechanisms illustrate how women are subjected to oppression, and the belief in witchcraft becomes a tool for their oppression.

3.2. Targeting of Women: The Field Experience

Building upon previously convened studies, the preceding section shed light on vulnerability of women in cases involving witchcraft allegations and witch-hunting. In this section, the focus remains the same, but it is grounded on evidences emerging from the field. Drawing from investigation conducted across four tribal-dominated villages of Ranchi (India), findings indicate that women in the study area remain highly susceptible to allegations of witchcraft and concomitant violence. Nevertheless, prior to delving into these findings, an observation which serves as preamble to this section is the notable disparity in number of alleged witches and wizards. In the entire study area, thirteen alleged witches were confirmed, whereas only three wizards were identified. This stark contrast strongly underscores the gendered dimension of witchcraft prevalent in the region. The circumstances and factors contributing to this phenomenon have been expounded hereunder:

3.2.1. Women from Different Households

In patrilocal communities, women from different families come together under one roof after marriage. Due to difference in family backgrounds - competition, jealousy, and animosity often arise among these women. This competition for superiority within the family escalates from minor disagreements to accusations of witchcraft. Allegations are often pinned on women as the source of various misfortunes within the family, including issues related to pregnancy, illness, accidents and death. The animosity stemming due to hailing from different families fosters lack of harmony among these women, leading to

defamatory narratives that quickly spread within the community and result in the branding of women as witches.

3.2.2. Animosity Among Women

Residents of the study area hold the deep-seated faith that - all occurrences in this world are under the influence of cosmic forces. Disruptions to these forces, caused by witchcraft, are accountable for all unsolicited events. When such unforeseen events happen within the family, it is observed that women in the household experience heightened levels of anxiety (compared to men). The prevalent notion that 'witches are predominantly women' gives rise to strained relationships. This often leads the implicated woman to suspect those with whom she shares less harmonious relations - as the cause behind the negative incidents happening within the family. As a result of this underlying animosity, individuals often resort to superstitious practices for counteracting the perceived threats. To address these concerns, they often seek guidance from local witch-finders or turn to self-learned supernatural techniques to alleviate the perceived evil. Consequently, the strained relationships between women, either within their family or the broader community, plays significant role in labelling of certain females as witches.

3.2.3. Role of Witch-Finders

Witch-finders are ardently believed as intermediaries between the earthly and cosmic realms. They are revered as community healers capable of warding off evil forces. They play crucial role in identifying witches and administering healing rituals. They often extract names of alleged witches from individuals who have dispute with the aggrieved party. These witch-finders, being familiar with community dynamics and potential enemies of the party in concern, are easily able to identify the alleged culprits. Financial gains also motivate witch-finders to identify witches, as they earn handsomely for identifying the accountable witch and healing their alleged influences. The combined influence of receiving reverence for identifying the alleged witch, along with financial incentives, contribute significantly towards identification of women as witches in the community.

3.2.4. Non-Conventional Worshipping

Women deviating from traditional worship practices also contribute to their branding as witches. For countering misfortunes, women engage in non-traditional forms of worship and incantations. This

departure from traditional worshipping norms, draws attention of local residents who label these women as witches, accusing them of invoking malevolent forces outside the community's accepted gods. The community tends to associate such non-traditional practices with worshipping evil forces, and those who don't adhere to the established practices are often accused of practicing witchcraft. This narrative quickly spreads, stigmatizing such women as community criminals.

3.2.5. Sexual Harassment

The process of witch-hunting typically begins after confirmation by local witch-finders. Once confirmed, the community collectively enrages against the accused woman. If the perceived harm is irreversible, it often triggers the hunting of alleged witch. In such cases, violence inflicted upon the alleged women is not solely aimed at eliminating her. There is gendered and sexual violence involved in the act, such as forced disrobing, tonsuring and naked parading. These acts are carried with the intent of degrading, stigmatizing, and dehumanizing the identified woman. Contrarily, male witches (wizards) who undergo similar punishment, are not subjected to such gendered harassments and violence. This variation establishes that - women are susceptible to witch-hunts due to the deliberate evolution of this practice as a means to sexually harass them.

3.2.6. Vulnerability of Married Women

Observations in the study area revealed that women who were not originally from the community were more susceptible to witchcraft allegations and witch-hunting. This indirectly highlights the increased vulnerability of women who enter the community through marriage. Additionally, it also suggests that only married women are targeted for accusations of witchcraft, while younger females such as girls, daughters and sisters who originally belong to the community since birth, are exempted. This differentiation based on consanguinity (blood relationship) and marital status underscores the role of these factors in determining who is to be labelled and who is to be exempted? However, in both the cases, it is only the females who are under the threat of getting labelled as witches.

3.2.7. Elderly, Widowed and Unprotected Women for Property-Related Reasons

The desire for property also contributes significantly to labelling of women as witches. Women possessing

property but lacking heirs to pass on, were found to be more vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. Among these vulnerable groups are elderly women, widows, and those without familial protection. In such cases, these women are initially blamed for minor incidents, and negative rumours are spread about them. This negative image building sets the stage for their persecution when more significant misfortunes occur in the community. Accusations against such women often intensify due to potential financial gains linked to their property. In several instances, close relatives from the woman's husband's lineage conspire against her, ensuring that property remains within the control of patrilineal agnates. While this process can be gradual, spanning over years, the desire to control and own property is a major drive behind branding elderly, widowed, and unprotected women as witches.

3.2.8. Attracting Evil Forces

The idea that women's beauty and charm can attract malevolent supernatural forces has a substantial influence on categorizing them as witches. There is a prevailing notion that benevolent forces are inclined towards men, whereas malevolent forces are enticed by women. Consequently, women are thought to harness these negative forces to inflict harm within the community. Additionally, the practice of learning witchcraft in allegedly naked state is also perceived as an attempt by females to attract evil forces. These manipulative actions, aimed at drawing in negative powers, further contribute to the stigmatization of women as witches.

3.2.9. Barring Education for Maintaining Patriarchy

Restriction on education of females reflects the prevailing unequal gender and power dynamics in any community. The same pattern was observed in the study area as well. Male children were permitted to continue their education, while female children were prevented from doing so, due to reasons such as early marriage or financial limitations. This disparity in educational opportunities results in situation where women are more inclined to resort to approaches incongruent with scientific thinking when faced with instances of misfortune within their families or communities. Thus, absence of adequate education significantly contributes to lack of critical thinking and proliferation of ignorance. Collectively, these factors contribute to weakening of socio-economic status of women, ultimately paving path for their subjugation. This, in turn, reinforces patriarchal norms, which over time manifests in various ways, including labelling of women as witches.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Based on preceding findings, it becomes evident that witchcraft and violence associated with witchcraft, are deeply entrenched within gender dynamics, particularly with regard to females. Various factors, including economic and property-related concerns, portrayal of women as source of malevolence, gender conflicts, absence of scientific reasoning, and socio-cultural beliefs, contribute significantly to targeting of women as victims of bewitchment. Additionally, animosity among women hailing from different households, vindictive role of witch-finders, unorthodox worshipping practices, perceived ability of manipulating evil forces, and restricted opportunities of education, further compound this distressing situation. These challenges collectively render women as more susceptible targets in cases of witchcraft allegation and related violence. Upon critical examination, it becomes clear that - the key factors accountable for acceptance of witchcraft beliefs and consequent detrimental outcomes, including unjust pursuit of women, are deeply ingrained within

superstitious patriarchal customs, economic adversity, and healthcare concerns. To tackle these, measures including accountable governance, enhanced healthcare facilities, economic empowerment of women, pro-active law enforcement, and effective judicial framework, are of paramount importance. Alongside these, education which has the capability to deconstruct superstitious institutional norms, foster open dialogue within community, promote remedial actions, bolster support for livelihood empowerment, also needs tremendous boost. Conjointly, these endeavours can challenge the labelling of women as witches, dismantle the deeply ingrained faith in witchcraft, and ultimately purge the gratuitous practice of hunting females.

5. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors jointly declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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