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Witch Hunting and Women

Dr. Gunjeet Kaur

Associate Professor
Commissionerate of College Education
Government of Rajasthan, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

Abstract

As per the Report of 'Crime in India 2020' "Crime is manifestation of myriad complex factors. The causes of criminal behaviour lie in the social processes and structures. People commit crimes due to the process of socialization that does not develop strong sense of right or wrong and due to the emerging opportunities, the enlarging desires that act as strong motivation for taking to crime to fulfil these desires." While understanding gender equations, modern societies in an attempt to equalise the historicity of inequality of gender relations, have brought in a number of legal instruments and affirmative actions to ensure a gender-neutral environment. In the Indian context, equality of sexes, before law is ensured by the Constitution. Still violence against women continues unabated, in the most heinous ways. The question is what feeds and sustains gender-based discrimination. The present paper is an attempt to understand the social causes that perpetuate and sustain the cycle of violence against women. The paper, in particular, explores the barbaric practice of branding of women as witches and the causes that lead to this inhuman act. The analysis is based on secondary resources.

Keywords: *Violence, Gender, Witchcraft, Mythology, MEDUSA*

Introduction

The vulnerability of women as a function of their biology has not reduced with all the advancements made by Human society. Crime against women have not lessened despite the stringent legal provisions. Demonising women as witches is one such form of violence, associated with tribal & rural societies. The uniqueness of this violence lies in the fact that herein the victim, usually a woman is assumed to be in possession of occult powers which can harm others. A combination of superstitious beliefs, religious practices and patriarchal norms unleashes lifelong suffering on women accused of witchcraft, resulting in their social ex communication and at times in their murders and lynchings in the most barbaric ways.

According to oxford dictionary, '*Witch Hunt*' refers to a campaign directed against a person or group holding views considered unorthodox or a threat to society. Cases of witch-hunting are prevalent in many parts of India. The practice is most prevalent in rural areas and states like Assam, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Even men have also been accused of having supernatural powers due to which they also suffer the consequences. Usually, a woman who's already in a socially disadvantaged position is the target. The family and children of the woman who is branded as a witch also suffer as they are usually socially outcast and are forced to leave the village or in worse cases killed. As per the data of National Crime Records Bureau,

witchcraft is recorded as a motive of murder and some of the states have consistently shown high incidence of witch hunting of women.

Global Scenario

As per the United Nations General Assembly, 1993, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women -Violence against women is defined as any act of "gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of acts such as coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". The fact that women face physical and psychological harm irrespective of class and culture considerations, is much documented.

Over 20,000 victims of harmful practices: accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks have been reported in the last decade, across 60 countries. Around the world witchcraft has resulted in serious violations of human rights, including discrimination and stigmatisation, banishment from families and communities, and various forms of torture and ill-treatment, such as beatings, shackling, burnings, cutting of body parts and amputation of limbs; grave desecrations, exploitation in the context of human trafficking, and killings. Women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, including persons with albinism, are particularly vulnerable.

Experts in their Report to the Human Rights Council that human rights abuses carried out due to beliefs in witchcraft have "not featured prominently on the radar screen of human rights monitors" and that "this may be due partly to the difficulty of defining "witches" and "witchcraft" across cultures – terms that, quite apart from their connotations in popular culture, may include an array of traditional or faith healing practices and are not easily defined." It was further observed that "the fact remains, however, that under the rubric of the amorphous and manipulable designation of 'witchcraft', individuals (often those who are somehow different, feared or disliked) are singled out for arbitrary private acts of violence or for Government-sponsored or tolerated acts of violence".

Stories from the Field

Witchcraft, in the urban imagination, is part of myths and stories and foreign folklore. Many of us were regaled by stories of Baba Yaga in Russian folktales and the witch in the German fairytale of Hansel and Gretel. We learnt about the European witch-hunt of the Middle Ages through history textbooks which recounted the fact of women being charged with apostasy and heresy and consequently burnt at the stake for sorcery. Sadly, in many parts of India, witchcraft is neither a thing of the past nor a part of entertaining stories from abroad. In fact, witchcraft-related deaths are reported every third day, with the majority of the victims being women.

The incidents of witch hunting or demonising a woman are carried out with such barbarism that it's difficult to imagine such crime happening in present times. Browse through the following cases reported in the national newspapers:

- As many as 127 women were lynched in Jharkhand between 2012-14 after being branded as witches, as informed in Parliament. As per information provided by the NCRB, a total of 26, 54 and 47 cases were reported under murder for witchcraft in Jharkhand during 2012, 2013 and 2014 respectively.
- A forty-year old lady's throat was slit with an axe by a group of villagers while she was fast asleep with her five-year old son by her side, as she was believed to be the cause of the death of her neighbour's daughter who had died a month back and villagers suspected her of being a "dain" or "bisahi" (witch or sorceress) who ensured that death. The woman was a dalit.
- Three women were allegedly stripped and thrashed by a mob of around 50 people who accused them of practising witchcraft, and then paraded them without clothes through the streets of the village. Three women in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district were allegedly

forced to drink urine and their heads tonsured by a group of people who branded them as witches, following which nine people were arrested.

- Recently, Massachusetts lawmakers have formally exonerated a woman, clearing her name 329 years after she was convicted of witchcraft in 1693 and sentenced to death at the height of the Salem Witch Trials. The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts in 1693. Thirty people were found guilty, nineteen of whom were executed by hanging (fourteen women and five men).

State Response

In 2021, during the 47th session of the Human Rights Council, Member States adopted a resolution on the elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. This is the first resolution of its kind, calling for a more holistic approach in addressing harm resulting from accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. Several Indian States have also established laws against this inhumane practice. Bihar was the first state in India to pass a law against witch hunting in the year 1999, which was named "Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act." Jharkhand followed it and established "Anti Witchcraft Act" in 2001 to protect women from inhuman treatment as well as to provide victim legal recourse to abuse. Chhattisgarh government passed a bill in 2005 named "Chhattisgarh Tonhi Pratama Bill", which was established to prevent atrocities on women in name of Tonhi. Rajasthan government has also passed a bill "Rajasthan Women (Prevention and Protection from Atrocities)" 2006, which makes it illegal as well as punishable for calling any woman as "dayan" or to accuse a woman of practicing witchcraft, which extends to three years of imprisonment and Rs 5000 fine.

Those who survive the trauma of mob accusations and lynching and of neighbours and relatives turning against them, are often at their wits end to cope with the crisis. Rehabilitation and counselling to pull them out of depression and trauma is now recognised as a must besides mass education to stop the evil practise of singling out women with fake "witch" accusations. Help is also needed to ensue livelihoods as many continue to face social stigma because of the false accusations and very often cannot even return to their native villages. To address these needs, the tribal state has now launched a project called 'Garima' or honour, which aims at up-rooting the evil practise of branding women as witches and of rehabilitating victims.

An Analysis

1. Images of Women in Mythology: The quest and urge to understand the functioning of the universe has given birth to myths and stories. Human societies express their ideas about good and evil through stories and depiction of characters. The representation of characters in mythology gives us a peep into the collective consciousness of the society. Mythical characters have a powerful role in shaping our world view, they may become a powerful role model or an object of contempt. Mythology remains a valuable reference to understand the present day attitude and behaviour of groups towards each other and the basis of hierarchy between them. The depiction of women in mythology to understand the link, if any between the present-day attitude towards women. The character of Medusa in Greek mythology and of Ahalya in Hindu mythology are taken up to understand the response of society towards women.

MEDUSA in Greek Mythology: Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters – all dreadful and fearsome beasts. A beautiful mortal, Medusa was the exception in the family. "The best-known story of Medusa comes from the Roman poet Ovid. Medusa was seduced by Neptune (Poseidon) in a temple to Minerva (Athena), and in revenge, Minerva turned Medusa's beautiful head of hair into snakes." Transformed into a vicious monster with snakes for hair, she was killed by Perseus, who afterward used her still potent head as a weapon, before gifting it to Athena. Poets claimed that she

had a great boar-like tusk and tongue lolling between her fanged teeth. Writhing snakes were entwining her head in place of hair. Her face was so hideous and her gaze so piercing that the mere sight of her was sufficient to turn a man to stone.

AHALYA in Hindu Mythology: As per Hindu mythology Ahalya is described as the most beautiful woman created by God Brahma. Ahalya was married to the much older Gautama. The story goes that Indra – the king of Gods is attracted by her beauty and comes disguised as her husband, when the husband is away and seduces Ahalya and she falls prey to Indra's trickery. As Gautama comes back and finds them together, both Ahalya and Indra are cursed by Gautama. Ahalya is cursed to become a stone and regains her human form after she is brushed by Rama's foot.

From the above we understand that women have borne the brunt of perceptions of society about imagined wrong doings on their part. Men, wherever involved, are exonerated of their acts of wrong doings but women are haunted and punished in the most extreme way, to an extent that their physical beauty is destroyed beyond redemption. Present day practice of witch hunting bears similarities to that. The physical defacement of the persona of women is the central act of violence carried out in victimisation of women branded as witches. Some die due to it and others are scarred for life.

2. Belief in Magic and Religion: Science and Technology dominate present times. Life has been made so much easier by the gifts of science. It won't be an exaggeration to say that modern life owes a great deal to science. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, the modes of transportation, the social interactions….. everything owes contribution to science. Yet scientific temper eludes us… The richness of human life is achieved through knowledge. Despite the scientific accomplishments, the human mind seeks explanation which are beyond rationality. To know the unknown is the constant urge of every being. Science has revealed a number of cosmic secrets, yet innumerable happenings are still a mystery. Disease, tragedies, natural disasters…. not everything is knowable through science. Religion fills in the space where science falters. EB Tylor, James Frazer, Malinowski have reflected on magic, religion and science.

The rituals of magic still seem to have relevance and acceptance amongst certain social groups, especially as sources of alternate healing system. For certain kinds of diseases people still prefer to validate the bhopas and their occult rituals rather than crediting the rigours of science. When such streams of belief are operative in any social system, there are high chances that the findings and inferences of such practitioners, influence the public opinion of the believers. In this background its easy to visualise the fate of a person who earns the wrath of believers in systems guided by pseudo-science. On digging deep, the reasons for hounding people as witches and inflicting violence on them, the following reasons are common:

- Family feuds.
- Destitute women
- Rejection of Religious prescriptions

Women who enjoy a status, which is less than equal when compared to men, become more vulnerable in such systems. Branding a woman as a witch, somebody who has power to inflict harm would not require much effort. Women are often tortured, beaten up or even killed after being branded as witches, Moreover, almost all women labelled as witches are Dalits, poor and widows. The occult practices involve pulling women's hair, beating them with a broom, iron rod and pliers and dancing in front of them with the chanting of unintelligible phrases to "liberate" them."

3. Patriarchy: Violence, of any kind, has cultural connotations. Societies of the Orient tend to be traditional and conservative. The social system is guided by hierarchy of gender relationships. Patriarchy dictates man-woman relationship. The protective cover extended by patriarchy determines the status of the women. If the father of the unmarried girl is sensitive, she would get better chances of acquiring life skills beyond the prescribed roles of domesticity and if the husband is benevolent, the married girl would enjoy support in participation in public life and enjoy high es-

teem. Families can be "make or break" for women and girls when it comes to achieving their rights. They can be places of love, care, and fulfillment but, too often, they are also spaces where women's and girls' rights are violated, their voices are stifled, and where gender inequality prevails.

If the patriarchal relations are challenged or the protective link is lost, then the woman becomes vulnerable and is ostracized and the chances of her being victimised are high. Victimization of women living alone is committed not only by strangers seeking to steal her assets but also by her own family desirous of inheriting her property. Across Africa and Asia, widows are coerced into harmful, degrading traditional practices—ranging from shaving of the head, imprisonment in the home, and forced marriage to a relative to the burning of widows. But even in developed societies, widows can be denied proper medical care, have difficulties accessing credit, be liable for the debts of a deceased spouse, or be driven to suicide by the hostility of in-laws or the greed of their own children.

Conclusion

Incidence of witch craft in spite of there being legal provisions is a pointer to the mindset of the people in society. Certain crimes are specific to women because of their weak social position. Education and acquiring skills which make them competent to participate in the mainstream would be the only instrument to counter it. As is clear from the analysis above, the heinous crime of branding women as witches is mostly carried out either in rural or in tribal societies. Rural societies are primarily guided by patriarchy where the roles of men and women are clearly defined and women are given little opportunity to defend themselves. Tribal societies, though favour equality of sexes but are not advanced in scientific explanation of happenings around and hence rely greatly on pseudo-science. Single, childless or women in vulnerable positions fall prey to their ignorance. To check the menace of witch branding access to education is the only way forward.

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