



# Witch hunting in Jharkhand: does mental health has any business on it?

## Abstract

Witchcraft or witchery is practiced since long across the globe which is often present within societies and groups whose cultural framework includes a magical worldview. Witch hunting is a matter of great concern in which the victim who is labelled as a witch is subjected to torments. This editorial attempted to depict this issue with special reference to the Jharkhand state of India. Some of the areas covered are the regional terminology, historical evidences of practices, current efforts to deal with it, and finally, possibility of mental health aspect of it.

**Keywords:** Witchcraft. Societies. Culture.

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**Received:** 11 November 2017

**Revised:** 3 March 2018

**Accepted:** 3 March 2018

**Epub:** 19 March 2018

Very often we are seeing headline in newspaper about 'witch hunting' which reports numerous forms of torture, beatings, burns, paraded naked through the village, forced to eat human excrement, and sometimes even raped. In some cases, their hair is cut off and the victim and their children are socially ostracised and even put to death; even sometimes their family also has to suffer from the same forms of torture. Generally, the labelling of a victim ('dayans', 'bishahi', 'bishaha' in case of men), especially women are easy targets or scapegoats as witches, either after an observation made by an 'ojha' or 'bej' or 'bhagat', a traditional healer or witch doctor. The victim who is labelled as a witch is subjected to these torments.

As per the National Crime Records Bureau report, 2,097 were murdered with witch hunting motive between 2000 and 2012. Among these, Jharkhand state has national records of 363 murders and this figure does not include the murders in 2000 when Jharkhand was a part of Bihar. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Jharkhand office has a total number of 414 such murders from 2001 to October 2013 and cases registered for witchcraft is 2,854.[1] Roy[2] reported, "Victimizing women as witches are prevalent in the tribal regions of South Bihar (present Jharkhand). As a result, from 1991 to 1994, over 60 women are known to have been killed in West Singhbhum district alone". Shiva[3] reported, "The branding and subsequent killing of more than 500 helpless women as "dayans" (witches) in the past seven years", i.e. the 1990s. There were mass witch hunts in 50s among tribal communities in the Singhbhum and Santhal Parganas regions. Sinha[4] reported, in the late 19th century and early 20th, women branded as witches were banished from their communities, fined, and in extreme cases, killed. "From 1933 to the 1970s, there was a decline in the number of such murders. It was a time when Adivasi movements

were coming up and attempts were made to tone down any internal tensions since the 1980s there has been a resurgence in the practice". Jharkhand is not the only state, other states - Bihar, Assam, West Bengal, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra have also reported cases of witch hunting. In fact, the practice of witch hunts has been seen in a wide distribution of geographically and culturally separated societies across the globe. Witch hunting has been practised for decades in early modern Europe and colonial North America from about 1450 to 1750. Ben-Yehuda[5] reported, from the early decades of the 14th century until 1650, continental Europeans executed between 200,000 and 500,000 witches; 85% or more of whom were women. Levack[6] reported that the number of known European witch trials by the average rate of conviction and execution was around 60,000 deaths. Barstow[7] estimated 100,000 deaths, many other scholars reported even more deaths, i.e. 200,000 or more so-called 'witches' who were tortured, burnt, or hanged in the Western world. Which was not limited to the Western world, in other regions of the world also witch hunts have been reported, like Asia and Africa - from Sub-Saharan Africa and Papua New Guinea. Conventionally, witch hunting was practised only by tribal communities, is now becoming common among Dalits and other minority communities. Sometimes, it can be viewed in forward class as well. Perhaps, cohabitation and cultural assimilation is the answer to this. Belief in spirits and witches has long dominated an innermost place in tribal culture. It derived social legitimacy from religion, folklore, and patriarchal customs as well as are significantly embedded and reflected of gender tensions. Sinha[4] reported, "In fact, the Santhal theory of the origin of witchcraft attributes gender tensions as the reason for witch hunting. Kharia women

were excluded from religious festivities and rituals because the tribals feared that menstrual blood attracted evil spirits. Women in tribal communities were left out of Adivasi rituals and religion because of a fear and suspicion of their sexuality”.

Witchcraft or witchery (*'dayan pratha'*) broadly means the practice of and belief in magical skills and abilities exercised by solitary practitioners and groups known as 'covens' referring to a gathering of witches. There is the idea or beliefs in the community that witch are thought to possess an evil eye or mouth, they eat humans, kill cattle, destroy crops, and cause illness. Sometimes they are accused of changing the mind of individuals who are not going either along with family or community. For example, if a girl was not ready to marry to an alliance who is fixed by her family; instead, she wanted to marry a boy of her own choice so any witch can be blamed for this. For all kind of unpleasant happenings, they are blamed and that is the reason behind the witch hunting, e.g. less milk given by a cow, less or no fruit from a tree or plant, small health issue like cold to severe one like asthma, less or over rainfall, etc. Even if reasons are quite obvious then also some time witch can be blamed for. Many a time appropriate interventions particularly for mental health conditions are delayed; people already has inadequate knowledge about such illness. Some mental health conditions like acute psychosis, dissociation which has at time very peculiar behaviour (symptoms) manifestation are very often blamed for witchcraft because of superstitious or magico-religious attributions by the community.[8]

In various investigation and research, various reasons have been reported. Roy[2] reported, “The main reasons behind this persecution are to maintain women in economic and social subjugation, to exploit them sexually, and to wrest property from their families”. Family disputes over property, land rights of women, village-level conflicts, and gender conflicts are some of the other reasons for witch hunts. There are certain attributes of witches believed or reported by the community members. Shiva[3] reported, “Usually poor old, widowed, unprotected, infertile, ugly looking, low-caste or are socially ostracized women are blamed, attributes given by local people have - red eyes, feet aligned backwards, are jealous/envious and do not socially mix up with people”. Many times, some mental health condition of an individual mentioned above are attributed as a witch because of the presentation of symptomatology, especially less interaction, over religiosity, trans and possession, and dissociation, etc.

Russell[9] says witchcraft often presents within societies and groups whose cultural framework includes a magical worldview. Jharkhand certainly fits in easily. India's 29th state with different culture and civilizations, and one of the most populated countries in the world. On 15 November 2000, Jharkhand (“Bushland” or the land of the forest), a new state of eastern India was emerged by partition from southern part of Bihar state.[10] Jharkhand accounts for 40% of the mineral resources of India,[11] but it suffers widespread poverty as 39.1 percent of the population is below the poverty line and 19.6 percent of the children under five years of age are malnourished.[12] The state is primarily a rural state as only 24 percent of the population resides in cities.[13] Jharkhand has its own unique cultural diversity. It has thirty-two

tribal groups, 26% of total population of the state;[14] the majority of them has their own language and cultural practices. Agarwal[15] reported, “Low literacy rate, prevalent superstitions, economic instability or insecurity, poor health and communication facilities, diseases are widespread, often taking form of epidemic, ethno healing system revolves around supernatural beliefs and practices where witchcraft sought as cause of the disease/epidemic/personal tragedy & natural disasters”. Since the tribal communities are known for its unique magico-religious practices or way of life, Jharkhand inherently has those which could be an explanation of amplified practices of witchcraft over there. Culture can be viewed as the values the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow, and the material goods they create and consume. It is a dynamic multi-layered entity and may be influenced by diverse aspects including national, regional, religious, gender, class, and various other issues which has major implications in all aspect of our life including health or mental health. Gopalkrishnan[16] further explained that culture influences our understanding of health and illness, modes of treatment as well as health-seeking behaviour, such as attitudes to preventative and curative care, attitudes to providers, and expectations of the healthcare system. Tribe[17] enlightens, “Culture is the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society”.

To fight with this evil, Jharkhand government included this topic in school textbook and passed Witchcraft Prevention Act, 2001 alike Bihar's Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act (1999) and Chhattisgarh's Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act of 2005. There is no national law or legislation against witch hunting but a bill, The Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill, 2016 is on the way. Various other states like Karnataka, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Odisha are on the same way of making legislation. However, physical violence appears to be a precondition for any case filing in the criminal justice system but “the issue of mental or psychological violence isn't even talked about”[1] which need to take care. Victims and their family have to undergo tremendous forms of torture which obviously affect negatively their mental health apart from physical health and socioeconomic loss.

Centre for Alternative Dalit Media (CADAM), New Delhi[18] reported in their empirical study in four states that belief in witchcraft still prevailing among the socially and educationally backwards and excluded communities of rural India. A vast majority (70%) of the households has a strong belief in the existence of witch and witch practices - the people of Bihar (75.5%), followed by Jharkhand (75%) and Odisha (55.3%). Moreover, it is apparent that the people of Giridih (98.2%) and Hazaribagh (100%) district of Jharkhand have firm believers of the existence of witch and witch practices. So, the community is guided by such strong belief in the existence of witch and witch practices which is blamed for all kind of unpleasant happenings including ill health and poor mental health and that is the reason behind the witch hunting. This need to be deal with caution since mass belief system and behaviour is attached to it which is a big question to our so-called modern and scientific society. There are some research related to magico-religious belief and various aspects of mental health but do we really have an answer to this question? Moreover, does mental health has any business on witch hunt?

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Sahu KK. Witch hunting in Jharkhand: does mental health has any business on it? *Open J Psychiatry Allied Sci*. 2018 Mar 19. [Epub ahead of print].

**Source of support:** Nil. **Declaration of interest:** None.