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Witch hunting a gendercide tool to subordinate women

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Abstract

Violence against women is a cultural practice. Witch hunting is a gendercide tool, used by the members of the patriarchal society to impair and subjugate women. It is constructed as primarily originating in evil practices, irrationality and superstition. Witch hunting is a gender attributed violence as majority of witch killing, women are the victims. It is largely associated with vigilantism, personal disputes, land grabbing, sexual advances, jealousy etc. it is a systematic violence against women whereby the whole community sanctioned punishment against a person being accused of practicing witch craft.

It is a disturbing phenomenon prevalent in various parts of India. It is a brutal practice of alleging an individual particularly women of practicing witchcraft. Witch Craft is often associated with the infliction of harm on people or property through exercise of supernatural powers reinforced by the presence of superstition and belief.

In the contemporary societies, the problem of witch hunting remains to be most perplexing problem, which has raised a great fervour in the media. Witch hunting is an orthodox characterizing rural societies and serious human right violation, which calls for an urgency to work out a strategy to provide protection and justice to victims and their family as well.

Keeping in view the hazardous impact of witch hunting and concern regarding the subordinate status of women, the study discussed on why women are mostly targeted as 'witch' and also reflects as how women, in the patriarchal society are subjugated to subordinate role in relation to men.

The present paper further attempt to analyses the phenomenon of witch hunting in the context of violence against women originating at different stratum such as structural, cultural and individual.

The paper also discussed at length as how through witch hunting- a gendered attribute violence against women have played a major role in the present day treatment of women and how it has helped in establishing women's subordination and served to continue to keep women subjugate in India.

And in the conclusion part, the paper discussed about the laws and act with regard to witch hunting in brief

Keywords: Witch hunting, gendered attribute violence, patriarchy, women subordination, societal stratum, laws, act

Introduction

Conviction in witchcraft is considered to be around, since the beginning of human social existence and it has been very much delineated, reported and believed that witch hunting is a gender attributed violence as majority of witch killing, women are the victims. By and large, magic allegations occurred for various reasons relying upon the social and political atmosphere of the region. Gender, religious and political distress, socio-economic situations, and widespread illness represent just a few of the numerous potential purposes behind an accusation.

Witch hunting refers to the practice of alleging an individual of practicing witchcraft. Witch Craft is often associated with the infliction of harm on people or property through exercise of supernatural powers reinforced by the presence of superstition and belief. The alleged victims may be called in different names such as Churail, Dayan, Daini, Tohni etc. who are believed to possess malignant powers which they use to harm others^[1].

It is largely associated with personal disputes, land grabbing, sexual advances, jealousy etc. The procedure of witch hunting involves labeling of victims, particularly women as witches, either after a perception made by an 'Ojha' or 'bej' or a witch specialist. The victim who is labeled as a witch is subjected to various types of torment, beatings, and burns, paraded bare through the town, compelled to eat human excreta and even sexually assaulted. There are

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also cases where the victim and their family are socially shunned out from the community and even killed [2].

Witch hunting is indictment of particular group of individuals, which generally comprises of widowed women, childless women, elderly couples, women belonging to lower caste. Besides this, many are targeted because of local politics.

Thus in the contemporary societies, the problem of witch hunting remains to be most perplexing problem, which has raised a great fervour in the media. It is a social hazard which is mostly generated due to absence of information and awareness and fuelled by superstitious belief. It is a systematic violence against women whereby the whole community sanctioned punishment against a person particularly women being accused of practicing witch craft [3].

Why women mostly targeted as 'witch'?

Many people in the society are worried over social aberrance, which included women asserting an increasingly independent role in the society. Most women are been targeted for witchcraft emerged as "others" in the society, regardless of whether as economically independent, socially independent, or in a dominant role. Additionally, women who emerged from the societal norms of the community were suspected to be associated with malicious act or a covenant with the demon. Women who held substantial amount of money or were in line to inherit from a relative confronted a higher probability of witchcraft allegations. Over monetary inspirations, community additionally focused on women whom they saw as social exceptions [4].

According to Nathan, Kelkar, and Xiaogang witchcraft allegations are a result of pressure that the male heirs of the husband's family apply on the widow to give up her claim on land in return for maintenance [5] and Mishra viewed family and village or community politics plays a vital role in denying the so called witch of her economic resources [6].

Furthermore a number of women who are known as the louder members of the community were mostly blamed for witchcraft. A women's place in a clichéd society depended upon her compliance and quiet and polite manner. Women who emerged as louder, powerful obstinate, opinionated or independent found themselves suspected, particularly when bizarre or unusual things occurred within the community. With this societal model, men had a progressively predominant role in everyday life while women had a subjugated position to men.

Kelkar and Nathan list two noteworthy elements of witch hunts. In the first place, witch hunts give a chance to the men of dominant lineage to dispose of any women who oppose the men politically, and second, witch hunts evade social outrages and dispose of "undesirable females, for example, widows and women who are childless or mentally disturbed [7].

Thus most women who are blamed for witchcraft in these societies were social exceptions in an established patriarchal society, destabilizing the order in which society functioned. Both men and women found these exceptions/outliers uncomfortable and sought to get rid of them from the community.

Thusly in order to completely comprehend the dynamics of substantial witch-hunts and tries, one should initially understand the role gender played in witchcraft the played in witchcraft allegations and how it influenced and affected the

amount of men and women of people blamed and indicted for witchcraft. Much of witchcraft historiography centers on women and the masculinisation of women as witches.

Patriarchy and Women Subordination

Patriarchy may be viewed as a social standard, which consigns women to subordinate and oppressive position as opposed to men. Patriarchy typically indicates male domination; to the power relationships by which men overpower women and to portray a framework whereby women are kept subordinate in various ways [8]. The idea indicates a systematic subordination of women and this way, subordination can take diverse forms such as discrimination, indifference ignore, affront, control, abuse, persecution, brutality inside family, at the work environment, in the society as well. Domination also can take distinctive structures; for example, direct control by male counterparts and indirect control through social organizations and so forth.

According Walby, "Patriarchy is a form of social structures and practices, in which men command, subjugate and exploit women". The term 'social structure' is imperative since it plainly suggests dismissal both of the biological determinism and the idea that each man is in an overwhelming position and each women in a subordinate one [9].

Women thus in the traditional patriarchal system have always been regarded as the weaker, vulnerable and inferior section of the society. Patriarchy is both a social structure and a philosophy or a belief system which indicates dominant position of every man and every woman in subordinate position.

Naming and persecuting women as "witches" paved the way to the confinement of women. It legitimated their subordination to men in and beyond the family. In this way, the witch-hunts constructed a specifically capitalist, patriarchal order that has continued into the present, though it has been constantly adjusted in response to women's resistance and the changing needs [10].

Women subordination at Structural, Cultural and Individual level

The **structural level** refers to the chief elements of society i.e. family, political, education and economic institutions, which are accountable of forming and retaining the structures and belief systems that subjugate women [11]. Along these lines, it would be stated that violence against women is connected to unequal access to assets, unfair laws, lacks educational opportunities, health and employment.

Distinctive institutions are run by biased gender ideologies and belief systems. For example, legal system and law enforcement agencies such as police, lawyer and the judiciary have a discriminatory and oppressive state of mind towards women. Social states of mind and absence of trust towards the justice system have lead to discourage women from approaching for addressing their grievances. The law-authorizing agencies such as legislature, court and police are largely staffed by men and work along male centered norms while principles and values are indifferent to women realities [12].

Thus lack of education, lack of availability of resources and access to healthcare facilities and lack of faith and believe in the justice system sets the context that enable the practice of witch hunting and provides impunity to the confidence of

perpetrators of the ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies. The structural aspect is important in understanding how witch hunting practice justify tragedies and resolve conflicts and why superstitions can take the form of witch hunting in various regions and communities.

Cultural institutions

Infers those parts of culture, for example, religion, ideology, language, art, belief system, empirical science and formal science that can be utilized to legitimize structural or direct violence and make it appear or feel right or if nothing else not wrong^[13]. Thus extensive range of cultural and religious beliefs and practices leads to justification for several kind of violence against women.

The individual level is essential since particular examples of violence correlate with positions and activities of women. From one viewpoint, women who are vulnerable, lack sense of liberty and self-confidence and feel caught both emotionally and financially; are observed to be generally victims of violence. Powerlessness is a common feature of violence against women^[14]. In a few societies, widowhood is believed to be a curse and is often held responsible for any hardship or misfortune that comes upon a family. Women belongs to any of these categories such as widowed, single, childless, crippled and low caste are simply targeted for discrimination and exploitation^[15].

Thus the social structure discussed above indicated the sense of low esteem among women, making them vulnerable to victims of violence. From the other point of view, women who are confident and hold a position in the society are viewed as a threat to the conventional gender order. Similarly, violence is directed towards single woman who challenges social structures directly. Therefore Individual level is important in indicating why particular women are targeted as witches. Thus the interrelation of structural, cultural and individual factors contributes to violence against women^[16].

However, the accusation of women was not merely a reflection of an age-old stereotype, nor merely the by-product of a patriarchal society; the witch hunts were a part of, and one example of, the ongoing mechanisms for social control of women within a general context of social change and the reconstruction of a patriarchal society. The practiced of witch hunts experienced a variety of major changes in terms of demography, ideology, economy, religions and political systems.

Women subordination in the name of witch hunting practice in India

Women in India experience the ill effects of and are exploited in different ways, such as abusive behavior at home, wife battering, rape (including conjugal assault), dowry related violence, female infanticide, and human trade for prostitution and also witch hunting. Witch hunting is a standout amongst the most hazardous superstitious beliefs which is prevailing all over India and it is increasingly common in states of India like Jharkhand, Bihar, Haryana, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Rajasthan and U.P^[17].

Concerning women, in June 2013, National Commission for Women (NCW) revealed that as per National Crime Records Bureau, 768 women had been killed for supposedly practicing witchcraft since 2008^[18] and According to the Free Legal Advice Centers (FLAC), more than 2,500

women have been executed in India over witchcraft allegations from 1990 to 2006; be that as it may, it is an issue that is muted and has not been managed properly. In 2004 and 2005, more than 670 were killed for being witches^[19] and the number still continues.

Witch hunting thereby has turned into a serious issue of gender violence with silent approval of patriarchal structure of society. It is basically an inheritance of gender attributed violence in light of the fact that, constantly, it is particularly women who are victims of witch killings. Patriarchy in such scenario intends to send a reasonable message to the vulnerable women that their safety and dependent rely upon their staying subordinate or subservient to the male individuals of their village, community and even their own family.

It has been observed that whenever a women sets out to stand up or oppose their oppression, question male domination, discrimination or derived of wages, livestock and even her parental property, she is apprehend by influential men helped by 'ojha' who formally declares her a 'dayan' or witch. Submissiveness is acclaimed and rebel is punished. The purportedly declared or branded witches are subjugated to barbaric cruelty inflicting injuries and tortured both physically and mentally^[20].

In most of the villages and communities in India, law and order is fundamentally monitored by a patriarchal Panchayat framework. Men exploit and take advantage of poverty and ignorance of women, and resort to crime against them with immunity in the grasp of vigilante justice. Majority of the victim who do survive the outrages of witch hunting do not report to the nearby police because of fear of getting killed. Therefore, they suffer the pain and torture quietly^[21].

The so called 'witch' is sometime thrown out of her home, stripped naked, her head tonsured and hair burnt, face is rubbed with cow dung or painted black, paraded naked in the village etc. The witch also whipped with *chappals*, and sticks so that she can never again curse. To the utmost cruelty, the victim is sometimes compelled to eat human excreta before she is thrown out of the village or community and forced to escape to the nearby forest or lynched to death or buried alive. Shockingly, such awful brutalities happen in daylight and in middle of a cheering crowd. And those women, who are left to live, are viewed as inauspicious and malicious, socially excluded and compelled to forego their livelihood^[21].

In this way, the phenomenon of witch hunting is a form of gender attribute violence, violence mostly against women. It has been both instrumental in the changing gender relations, just as constitutive of gender relations. This viciousness against women through witch hunting in India appears to have had assumed a noteworthy role in the present day treatment of women that has helped in establishing women' subordination and furthermore serves to continue on keeping women vulnerable and subjugated.

Conclusion

Accusing women for the acts of violence committed against them is not new to social orders that are bound by patriarchy. Talking about the worst form, we have witch hunting accusing women for everything that occurs in the society, even if it a natural occurrence. In India, there have increase in the number of incident of death for witchcraft, most of the victim being women.

But there is no specific and particular national level legislation that prevents witch hunting. The perpetrators are often punished under different sections of the Indian Penal Code such as Sec 302 (punishment for murder), Sec 320 (grievous hurt), Sec 323 (punishment for voluntarily causing hurt and prescribed one year imprisonment with Rs 1000 fine), Sec 351 (assault), Sec 354 (assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty), Sec 364a (kidnapping for ransom), Sec 376 (punishment for rape), Sec 503 (criminal intimidation) ^[22]. Some enactments have also amended in various states such as:

- The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999, Bihar and The Prevention of Witch- Hunting (Dayan Pratha) Act, 2001, Jharkhand
- The Chattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act, 2005
- The Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013
- Rajasthan Prevention Witch Hunting Act, 2015
- The Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013
- The Assam Witch-Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015 ^[23]

However, the basic point is that women, who are blamed for witchcraft in India, often not look for any legal or police assistance. Disgrace, seclusion and poverty encourage the wheel of no security, no rights and no dignity for women who are usually positioned at the bottom layer of the Indian society with proper legal support. There are no provisions for any relief, rehabilitation or any form of remuneration to women after they have been branded as witches. Subsequently women are left to suffer the brunt of her wounds, or the social shame even if FIR is lodged and arrest is made.

Witch hunting therefore to a great degree a brutal practice and a reasonable infringement of the rights not only enshrined in the Constitution of India but also a basic human rights which every individual is entitled to. Allegation or labeling as witch leads social exclusion, violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' protection against "arbitrary or unlawful interference with an individual's privacy, family, home or correspondence, and against unlawful attacks on an individual's honor and reputation." ^[24] The physical and mental trauma that undergoes by the victims of witchcraft also lead to violation of the provision provided under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which recognizes the right of every person to have "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

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