

Deepshikha Agarwal

UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS BEHIND WITCH-HUNTING

General Introduction

Witch hunting may be referred to as the search for witches or evidence of witchcraft. It may involve some kind of 'moral panic', 'mass hysteria' and lynching. Wide distribution of the practice of witch hunting in geographically and culturally separated societies has triggered an interest into the anthropological background of this behaviour.

Going to the etymology of the term, witch hunting may be used when a hunt for wrongdoers becomes abused, and a defendant can be convicted merely on an accusation. Use of the term was popularized in the United States in the context of the McCarthyism¹ search for communists during the Cold War, which was discredited partly through being compared to the Salem witch trials². From the 1960s, the term was in wide use and could also be applied to isolated incidents or scandals, specifically public smear-campaigns against individuals.

Previously it was believed that some people possess supernatural abilities, which could be used in beneficial terms to cure people or to seek remedies for natural calamities. However, it was also allegedly used by some persons with evil intentions to cast magic and spread ill effects on the society. Here, it was seen as some kind of pact between people with supernatural abilities and the devil. In modern day terminology, witch hunting has acquired usage referring to an act of seeking and persecuting any perceived enemy, particularly when the search is conducted using extreme measures and with little regard to the actual guilt or innocence of the suspect. It is being used, in one form or the other, whether or not it is sanctioned by the state, or it merely occurs within the court of public opinion.

The issue of witch hunting has many misnomers associated with it, which need to be clarified. Studying the problem in its natural context, without any kind of presumptions and value loaded judgements, is crucial. A proper analysis of witch hunting can yield information on the causes and facts

associated with it, which can further help us in finding a probable solution to the problem.

Geographic Spread of Belief in the Practice of Witch Hunting

Reports on the indigenous practices in America, Asia and Africa collected during early modern age of explorations have suggested that not just the belief in witchcraft and the act of witch hunting, the periodic outbreak of the witch hunting also has a cultural universal. Presently, witch hunting in contemporary societies is mainly reported from Sub-Saharan Africa, India and Papua New Guinea. Earlier it was assumed that practicing witchcraft to harm others is a crime against state and was legally punishable. The status has changed in most of the countries and practice of witchcraft and sorcery is rendered to a backseat, where it is only seen as a baseless superstition rather the current status is that state now views the practice of witch hunting and the entailing act of killing the suspects or causing physical harm to them is legally punishable.

However, one can still find official legislation against witchcraft in countries like Saudi Arabia and Cameroon. In Saudi Arabia, witch hunting continues to be legally punishable by death. Here, scores of doctors, fortune tellers and black magicians are dragged through the Saudi courts. The witch hunt in the Saudi states and sudden rise in acts of witchcraft and sorcery are causing concern among the human rights activists.³ According to one of the activists, Saudi courts are using their religious police to sanction a witch hunt. The crime of witchcraft is being used against all kinds of behaviour, with the cruel threat of state-sanctioned executions.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, fear of witches derives from periodic witch hunts, during which specialist witch hunters identify the suspects. This many times ends in death of the suspect by the mob. Witch hunts are often led by relatives seeking property of the accused victim. In South Africa the persecution of witches is also connected to local quarrels about influence and political power.⁴ But here it is not a privileged elite, in alliance with the state and traditional healers, who controls the persecution of witches. Since the mid-eighties, the initiative has rather been taken by younger people, who include activists of the anti-apartheid movement, members of the ANC Youth League, pupils — and students — councils. From their point of view the elimination of witches was a part of the black emancipation movement.

In a manner reminiscent of the witch hunts in early modern Europe, Papua New Guinea has experienced an increase in “witch” persecutions⁵. This is in spite of the fact that here 96% population of Papua New Guinea is Christian. Here, like elsewhere, the so-called witches are blamed for deaths or diseases in the community, or held responsible for social ills. Sometimes they are considered witches simply because their behaviour is unruly or socially unacceptable.

The mass media keep coming up with stories/accounts of witch hunting among the intelligentsia and the political class, where certain individuals may be targeted and false allegations may be levelled and spread, with the intent of maligning the person. Thus, there is 'politics' involved in the process of witch-hunting.

Witch-hunting in the traditional societies may have a different perspective and the anthropological studies of these acts have involved the accusations of black magic. The episodes of witch hunting often involve spreading the myth about the targeted person and the related act and culminate in punishing them. Even though the act of witch hunting may appear to be bizarre and unjustified from our perspective, it has some functions in primitive societies. By targeting certain people as witch, the purpose of the society is often to check the deviants and reinforce the customs and morals. The act also tends to create group solidarity in certain manner when the accused person belongs to the out-group. Or, the allegations may simply reflect a fight between the rival fractions in the society.

Witch Hunting in India

In India, witch hunting is not merely a dark part of history, it is still happening in present times. It is very difficult to arrive at a clear estimate on this phenomena since the cases are not usually reported officially, hence there are no reliable government records. However, various studies conducted by scholars of different backgrounds suggest that witch hunts are most common among poor rural communities with little access to education and health services, and longstanding beliefs in witchcraft⁶.

In India, the sporadic cases of witch hunting reported by the media inform us about the extent to which this social malady is present in Indian society. Apart from the instances that are highlighted by the media, many go unreported. All states of India show evidences of the event, though cases of witch hunting in some of the states may outnumber the others. The lynching is particularly common in the poor northern states of Jharkhand, Bihar and the central state of Chattisgarh. It is also evidenced to be on rise in recent years in tribal dominated villages in the states of Assam, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The episodes of witch-hunting in India (as elsewhere in the world) present an endless saga of human rights violation, existing both in contemporary modern and simple societies. And while we explore the instances of witchcraft and witch hunting, it is to be primarily understood that even though witchcraft is a supernatural belief system, it is rooted in the popular mentality of people. Though the problem ails all societies, it is the indigenous communities that are more commonly inflicted with this problem because they tend to be less educated and more superstitious.

More pronounced presence of witch and the entailing practice of witch hunting and further reactions by the society, after the case of witchcraft is established against a person, is woven around the supernatural belief system prevalent in all indigenous societies. These communities may have several accounts of origin of witch hunting in their religious belief system.⁷ The general belief is that certain people possess a mystical power which they can use to harm the others whom they may be jealous of, or whom they may want to avenge. This supernatural power can be used for good purposes also, but mostly it is used for harming the others.

The process of witch hunting begins with the accusations against individuals who are already disliked by one or more persons. Such accusations are floated experimentally if the audience seems receptive, and circulate as gossip, flowing through social fissures until enough allies in the projected persecution join together. At the same time, in a bid of self-protection, the family, friends, and allies of the target keep silent or even denounce the target, because they may be threatened by their own guilt, or they may be forced to dissociate. If the person is disliked by enough powerful people in the village, and the charge against the target is perceived as serious enough, it gets enforced as reality on all. The currency of such claims has far more to do with their usefulness in mobilizing opinion against the clique's enemies and in favour of the accusers than their basis in fact.

It is one of the biggest curses on women. Across the tribal belts in India, women are assaulted, beaten up, heads tonsured, murdered, dragged into public places, faces painted black, forcefully paraded naked in public meetings and raped in the name of they being witches. Sometimes these witch hunts deliberately target widows or women with property in an attempt to take advantage of them, but other times they're rooted in religious beliefs. The peculiar thing about the violence is women who are widows, poor, belong to low-caste, are old, unprotected, infertile, possess ugly features or are socially ostracized are branded as witches because they are in a vulnerable condition.

However, it would not be correct to 'genderize' the issue of witch hunting. Often men are also named as witches. Targeting men as witch has been quite common in Assam. And this has not been unknown in the society the men were also accused of using witchcraft in ancient times, where it is alleged that about 25% of the suspects were men. In some of the African communities, even children may be made the targets. In fact the victimization of children as witches is a common malady. Sometimes entire family may be made the target.

The witch accusations may be levelled against the targets either by men or women. Men who make charges of using witchcraft against women are the ones who are usually threatened by the socio-economic position of the accused. Since it has been evidenced that it is the women who are targets of

accusations and subsequent witch hunting, it may be concluded that witch hunting is essentially an act that rests upon gender-based control, where men assert and reassert their control over women's independence, sexuality and individuality. Women can also level charges against other women and such women may be seen to be working from within a patriarchal society that supports accuser's economic, social, and psychological needs.

Reasons Associated with Witch Hunting

The practice of witch hunting is like a disease that spreads and effects the entire society if not treated well in time. It is so deeply intertwined with the supernatural belief system of the people that it often becomes very difficult to look for a remedy for the aforesaid malice. Whenever there is a mishap in a community, witchcraft is sought as the reason behind it, and the culprit alleged to use witchcraft is spotted and punished.

As mentioned above, witch-hunting seems to be associated with women, hence it becomes pertinent to understand why mostly women are targeted. The root cause is the patriarchal system which has been assigned as the main factor behind the downtrodden status of women in society. For ages men have tried to establish their authority over women, and in the bid they have suppressed all those women who resist the system. Men use various weapons to get rid of women they fear, witchcraft allegations being just one of them. As women gain power the charges of using witchcraft is one of the most commonly invoked practices to keep women in subservient roles. Women may also be the victim of witchcraft accusations after refusing sexual advances from men. But on many occasions, these women/individuals are simply made the scapegoat without any apparent reason.

Competition for scarce resources has also been associated with witch accusations. Lust for property, livestock or any other kind of property is an important reason for allegations of witchcraft. Women become ostensibly vulnerable in communities where they are generally entitled to property rights or have traditional inheritance rights after they become widows. The targets may come from wealthier sections of the society, where the accusers may try to usurp the property under the garb of witchcraft. Or the wealthy people may target the poor, knowing fully well that the latter won't be able to react easily because of their weak socio-economic status. This further renders them more vulnerable and weak.⁸ K. S. Singh also observes that greed for property was one of the main reasons for witch-killing. According to him, in Bihar, the struggle for gender equality had also led to various forms of insecurities in village communities. When family members intervened, they were most often killed along with the branded women. Singh said that tribal cosmology was explicit in its reference to women being trained as witches.⁹

Witchcraft allegations may also be triggered when an individual falls sick or some harm befalls on a community. At other occasions, belief in the supernatural beings as causative agents of disease and other maladies is responsible for the sporadic cases of witch hunting, where witches are believed to have extraordinary power to cast black magic on people they envy. The problem gets further exacerbated in the absence of proper health facilities. It has been commonly noted that health centers are few or are not approachable in tribal areas. As a result the villagers are forced to approach the traditional village physicians, the spirit healers, for medical treatment, who invariably assign witchcraft/ sorcery as the cause behind the malady.

Illiteracy, poor educational levels and superstitious beliefs further prove to be the icing on the cake. Chaudhari¹⁰ observes among the Santhals that when the tribals are faced with desolation and extreme poverty, they turn to the *mahan*¹¹. Here, people feel that it's not a sin to kill a witch (locally called *fuskin*). Usually it is the weak and aged women who are identified as witch. Further, denying the responsibility of casting witchcraft only leads to tragedy, which could be witch killing or the punishment of banishing her from the village.

Sometimes personal reasons can be associated with witch hunting, like personal rivalry or jealousy or settling scores. Malabika Das Gupta¹² observes that development is also responsible for causing spread of witch hunting practice. According to the author, as development is spreading in tribal areas in Tripura, the indigenous communities tend to emulate the cultural and socio-economic patterns of the Hindus, and are losing their own cultural norms. Thus, communal ownership of land is getting replaced by individual ownership. This has led to witch hunting as an extra-legal way to deprive women of their control over land¹³.

To further aggravate the problem, there are no specific laws for prohibition of witch hunting and to probe cases where it is rampant. Bihar and Jharkhand are the only two states which have the Witchcraft Prohibition Ordinance, but even these ordinances come with multiple drawbacks. The punishment entailing witch killing is nominal – a person who indulges in witch hunting and killing gets punished merely with imprisonment for six months and or a fine of up to Rs. 2000.

A Case study of Muria Tribe

The witches among Murias are really dreaded and feared. As per the villagers' description, they are believed to move about in the village nude and possess soothing charms of love, whereby they attract their victims, put them to sleep and later drink their blood. They eat the brain of their victims, and feed on vomit and excrement. By virtue of the charm they possess, they often cause stomach ache or pain in the lower back, mostly of women, by putting

paper strips, hair and *bidis* inside the victim's body. In the area under study in Bastar, umpteen number of such instances were cited by the villagers, where the women suffered from severe pain and were cured when the shaman took out these objects from their body. The witches usually feel jealous of their counterparts, who, unlike them, are happy souls with good family life. They devour their own family members also, so that they can live peacefully. This has two-pronged purpose — one to locate the cause of a disease/malady and secondly get personal scores settled.

Nobody, however, points out directly to these witches and sorcerers because of the fear of being avenged. In some cases the villagers confront the sorcerers/witches and force them to take back their magic. This however happens only rarely.

Apart from this, belief in black magic (witchcraft, sorcery) has other latent functions. The constant fear of being charged of witchcraft or sorcery keeps the conduct of people norm-oriented. Often accusations of sorcery and witchcraft uncover personal grievances and interpersonal conflicts. By locating the areas of disruption and tension in society, such accusations help to expose the sources of social division and redress social balance in society.

In this sense, the process of witch hunting may be said to be a peace maintaining process. As the areas of conflict and competition are brought into open, it becomes possible to solve these problems through traditional and institutionalised procedures. Process of witch hunting imposes socially approved behaviour on the members of society through religious sanctions and helps in building and retaining cultural values. Since it has religious backing, its impact on people is also very strong.

Often the individuals accused of sorcery or witchcraft are law breakers or people who do not mix much with others. They may also be jealous and unhappy by nature, and as such are unpopular. If such an ill-reputed person makes an open public remark about someone, and he falls sick following this incident, the former (making the remark) may be charged for casting malignant magic. Thus, a person is branded as witch or sorcerer if general gossips and circumstances go against a person, backed by his bad reputation.

The person accused of sorcery/witchcraft may be brought out in public and made to forcefully accept the charges. In case the name of accused is taken openly, he may either refuse to accept the charge, and later may abscond, or he may finally yield to the accusations and accept the charges in dismay. In either case his guilt is proved and the accused individual is forced by the people to take back his magic or is given punishment.

Charges of sorcery/witchcraft thus bring out the confrontation between people of unequal status, who often hold each other in enmity and competition. It follows that the fear of being accused for sorcery/witchcraft, or the fear of

falling a prey to the malignant art guards people against making negative remarks publicly. People also remain cautious in expressing negative feelings of jealousy or anger. This reduces chances of conflict between people. Thus, like religious sanctions, the fear of sorcery/witchcraft also helps in maintaining law and order in society, and acts as social control by discouraging antisocial actions or behaviour¹⁴.

Among Murias the culprits suspected of sorcery/witchcraft are usually not named publicly as they fear that the accusation might culminate into a fight. Often such individuals are feared of possessing supernatural power, which they can use, once angry with the charges. Sometimes the accused person is also confronted openly and forced to take back his/her magic. The charged culprit may also be punished by the people by ostracising him from the society or he may be killed. No such case was brought to my notice by Murias of my village, though Elwin¹⁵ holds accusations of magic as a common cause of murders among Murias.

The village under study showed fractions in terms of the ethnic origin and the groups nursing rivalry or jealousy against each other, thus pointing out the area of tension and conflict in the village. Various groups residing in the village are rivals in day-to-day life and nurse grudges against each other. They do not exhibit the negative feelings openly but from inside they are always cautious.

Any witch hunter names only such person who is notorious in the village. Usually the shaman knows them through gossip and deliberately points towards them only, as he knows that his verdict will be fully backed by others. His labelling somebody as a witch or sorcerer is merely an attesting stamp on a widely acceptable belief. Thus, diagnosis of a cause and finding a culprit appears to be a pre-empted process which takes into account all the factors beforehand. The witch hunter usually belongs to the same village. As a result, it is not difficult for him to cite a cause or a culprit, knowing fully well about the case history and family background of the patient. He makes only such diagnosis that will be accepted by the people. Thus he faces no controversies.

Conclusion

Witch hunting involves some kind of 'systematic persecution' of an individual or a group of people who may be believed to be associated with a malignant act or intent against the society in general or against certain sections of the society. The entire process of witch-hunting is backed by certain 'myth making' or floating certain gossips about the witches, their characteristics and their nefarious activities. Mostly witches are the members of the society where a malignant affect is believed to have occurred. They are viewed as dangerous for the society as a whole and the people become united in terms of alleging and persecuting the targeted witches.

Witch hunting may culminate in a 'moral panic' in the society where an intensified collective reaction is created against the target and the associated acts. A negative propaganda plays a crucial role stirring up the 'moral panic' amongst the people, in which certain influential people of the society may be associated. The targeted person/persons may be forced to take back their magic, may be imposed with certain fine, may be ostracized from society, may be physically assaulted or in extreme cases killed. Assaults are widespread in rural areas, where dozens of women die every year after being accused of witchcraft. Hundreds of others are tortured. Neighbours everywhere have disputes, but it is in small villages like these that such disputes are ending in women being branded as witches. It becomes difficult for the target of witch hunting to deny the allegations being made against them. Neither are they able to mobilize support in their favour. They are ultimately forced to either abandon home and family or driven to commit suicide. Most cases are not documented because it's difficult for poor and illiterate women to travel from isolated regions to file police reports.

Currently, in absence of any proper legislation in place to tackle this issue, at the most the offenders are booked under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 for Simple or Grievous Hurt or outraging modesty of a woman. Laws need to be framed for the protection of these women who are victims of such beliefs. No doubt the entry of law into the realm of custom and tradition is limited. But it is definitely high time the government takes the matter seriously as this issue cannot be solved locally without the intervention of government. Interference at least at the stage of formation of laws or by creating awareness is sought. The age old practice of Sati was abolished and the practice was declared illegal and punishable. The same has to be done with respect to witch hunting.

The politics of witch hunting will continue till the time economic inequalities and neglect in the health care facilities continue. Various studies ultimately conclude the fact that there is collusion of many elements in keeping the women oppressed and downtrodden. Regarding it just as a tribal practice would be to wash our hands of our responsibility in finding solutions. It is most likely that cases of witch-killing and persecution of women will continue as long as economic inequities and neglect of the health care infrastructure continue. Even the law-enforcers fail to see witch-killing as blatant murder in a patriarchal society.

NOTES

1. McCarthyism was the practice of making accusations of pro-Communist, anti-American disloyalty, subversion, or treason, which defenders of those accused consider to be without proper regard for evidence.
2. The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings before county court trials to prosecute people accused of witchcraft in the counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Middlesex in colonial Massachusetts, between February 1692 and May 1693.

3. SAUDI ARABIA: Kingdom steps up hunt for 'witches' and 'black magicians', by Alexandra Sandels in *Babylon & Beyond: Observations from Iraq, Iran, Isreal, The Arab World and Beyond*; Los Angeles Times World <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/11/saudi-arabia-kingdom-steps-up-hunt-for-witches-and-black-magicians-.htm>; visited in March, 2012.
4. Witch Hunts in Modern South Africa: An Under-Represented Facet of Gender-Based Violence; by Yaseen Ally; <http://www.mrc.ac.za/crime/witchhunts.pdf>; visited in March 2012
5. Witch hunts in Papua New Guinea and Nigeria; By Jo Hedesan; <http://www.theinternational.org/articles/167-witch-hunts-in-papua-new-guinea-and-niger>; Uploaded on October 01, 2011; visited in March 2012.
6. Anthropologists like to distinguish witchcraft from sorcery. They regard "witchcraft" as the supposed power of a person to harm others by occult or supernatural means, without necessarily being aware of it. The witch does not choose to be a witch, and the supposed harm does not necessarily arise from malice or intent. Sorcery on the other hand may be learned, whereas witchcraft is intrinsic. A sorcerer may use incantations, ritual, and various substances in order to do harm, while a witch does not (Hunter & Whitten 1976:405-406; Kiernan 1987:8).
7. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan 1991.
8. Das Gupta, Malabika, *Status of Tribal Women in Tripura* (Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993.
9. T. R. Rajlakshmi, 2004.
10. Chaudhuri, 1984.
11. Mahan according to Chaudhuri is one who knows and is viewed as a leader.
12. Malabika Das Gupta, 1993.
13. In Tripura, women can rightfully demand a share in property.
14. Wolff 1967; Whiting 1950; Leiban 1960 and 1962.
15. Verrier Elwin (1947).

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