

Greed for property and power behind Jharkhand witch hunts

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Jharkhand is among the few states in the country to have a specific law against witch hunts. But the mild Prevention of Witch Practices Act, 2001 has not done much to stop the victimisation of women branded as *daayan*, or witches.

On September 11, five people, including two women, of a family were stabbed by relatives accusing them of practising witchcraft at Dohra village in Latehar district.

They were held responsible for the death of a woman in a road accident and a buffalo. Police found that a piece of land was the reason for the attack.

On August 7 night, an entire village went hysterical and lynched five women branding them as witches at Mandar, 40 km from Ranchi. The death of a sick youngster was the trigger.

According to Ranchi deputy commissioner Manoj Kumar, the incident was a result of superstition. Poverty, illiteracy and lack of basic healthcare are assumed to be the breeding ground for superstitious beliefs.

“In such circumstances, human misery in the form of death and disease is often attributed to witchcraft,” said Anuja Agrawal, an associate professor in the sociology department of the Delhi University.

People are made to believe that their misery can be mitigated by hunting for an evil witch and punishing her. Behind the facade of superstition, land-grab and attempts to hold sway over local power structure are the driving factors for witch hunt, according to studies.

Superstition is mixed with material desire to disinherit women from family property and silence Dalit and tribal women challenging caste hegemony.

“While belief systems seem to help trigger violence, material factors are almost omnipresent in witch-hunt cases,” said Madhu Mehra, the executive director of Partners for Law in Development, who has studied witch-hunt cases in Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh.

“Often there are long-term animosities between the perpetrators and victims which translate into witch-hunt,” said Agrawal. “Witch-hunt is a convenient mechanism to get rid of not only women but also entire families.”

Perpetrators often use the services of ‘ojhas’ or witch doctors who wield influence in areas with limited or no access to healthcare.

According to the state social welfare department records, around 1,046 women were killed after being branded witches between 1995 and 2014.

Jharkhand police records show a gradual increase in the number of witch hunt related killings - 36 in 2012, 54 in 2013 and 56 until November 2014.

“There is underreporting in Jharkhand compared to Bihar as many witch-hunt cases are not reflected in police records,” said Mehra who has studied cases in Gumla and Ranchi districts.

Though the Jharkhand law of 2001 makes witch-hunt cases cognizable and non-bailable, it does not provide for stringent punishment, she said.

The act prescribes a mild punishment ranging from three to six months' jail term. “I think by criminalising (the act of) labeling someone as a witch and harassing her, the law aims to push the police to take preventive action. The police are not doing that,” she said.

“The law is almost never used alone. It is used when serious offences under the Indian Penal Code occur such as mob violence, disrobing a woman or forcing her to eat excreta or killing her. Here police cannot avoid an FIR.”

Legislation alone is not the deterrent. Since witch-hunt cases are linked to issues of governance and development, pro-active police role and strong political will, apart from sustained civil society action, will help end the menace.

LINK : <http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/property-and-power-fuel-witch-hunt-under-garb-of-superstition/article1-1391473.aspx>