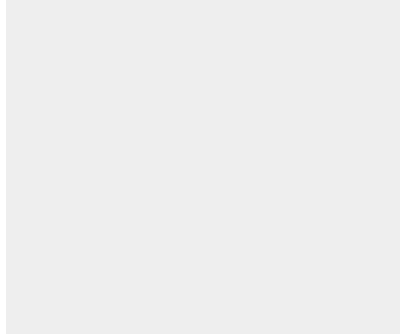


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## Law fails to prevent centuries-old witch hunting



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Beautiful sexy sorceress in red cloak holding antique clock watch standing in the forest photo.

Gulabi Kumawat was an elderly widow living in a modest home in Rajasthan, until the day she was branded a witch by fellow villagers and her life went catastrophically wrong. Beaten. Buried. She was set alight and left for dead.

Somehow Kumawat escaped the pit and lived to tell the tale, first fleeing her Borda village for the safety of a relative's home and then onto Bhilwara city, where she now lives. Fourteen years later and she remains landless.

Her plot--little more than an acre--and her home of almost 50 years are both gone. "They tried to grab my land and sell it without my consent. When I confronted them, they called me a "dayan" (witch), blamed me for many bad things in the village and nearly killed me," said Kumawat, 95, her voice rising barely above a whisper.

"They have known me all their life. How did I suddenly become a dayan?" she said, her gaunt face etched with sadness.

Kumawat's story is not unusual in Rajasthan, a state better known for stately forts and grand palaces than witch hunting. Scores of women have been brutally attacked after being branded a witch over the last few decades; several have died.

The Mewar region, a former princely state that includes Bhilwara and the popular lake city of Udaipur, is particularly notorious, accounting for most cases in Rajasthan.

In most cases, the victims were poor, lower-caste, single woman who either had no sons or lived alone. Most had land or property coveted by a relative or higher-caste person.

The practice of blaming “witches” for everything from inadequate monsoon rains and failed businesses to infertility, illness or a sudden death, is widely prevalent across several states, and dates back centuries.

In such cases, villagers consult with a shaman or godman, who often blames a witch for some misfortune. Family members are also complicit, and often use this as a way to settle scores, often over land, or to throw a female relative out of the house.

“The feudal system, a rigid caste hierarchy and patriarchy encourage the practice, with illiteracy and superstition also to blame,” said activist Tara Ahluwalia, who has recorded 88 cases of witch hunting in Bhilwara since 1982.

“We file reports, but no action is taken,” said Ahluwalia, who keeps meticulous records of each case in a folder with photographs, hospital statements and related police reports.

The practice of witch hunting is not unique to India. Instances have been recorded elsewhere in Asia and in Africa. Thousands of elderly Tanzanian women have been strangled, knifed to death and burned alive over the last two decades after being denounced as witches, usually for their land.

In India, nearly 2,500 murders related to witchcraft have been recorded since 2000, according to official data.

Victims are often expelled from their homes and villages. Those who stay are isolated and live in constant fear.

Despite a 2015 state law banning the practice, there have been no convictions in Rajasthan, such is the reluctance of local officials and police to check the custom, activists say.

“We fought for a law for 25 years, but the law is not being implemented. What is the point of the law if it cannot protect these women?” Ahluwalia asked.

“The case is forgotten, and only the victim continues to suffer. Once you are branded a witch, the stigma is for life, and it slowly kills her; she is like a living corpse,” she said.

At least half a dozen states have introduced special laws against witchcraft and witch hunting in recent years. But many cases are not reported for fear of reprisal. Cases that are filed are often dismissed, or are not registered as related to witchcraft, activists say.

They are often difficult to investigate and prosecute as they are sometimes in remote areas and people are not willing to give evidence, a senior police official in Bhilwara said. “Any case that is brought to our notice is fully investigated,” said a senior police official. “Several arrests have been made related to witch hunting; they may get bail, but we follow the procedure. Many of the cases are also false,” he said.

The Rajasthan Prevention of Witch Hunting Act went further than similar state laws, with a prison sentence of up to seven years, a collective fine and rehabilitation and resettlement for victims. If a woman is killed, it can lead to life imprisonment.

Recognising trauma and funding rehabilitation are crucial, said Madhu Mehra, of advocacy Partners for Law in Development. “We cannot depend on our legal system to bring many convictions or a big drop in cases,” she said.

“More than special laws with lax implementation, what is needed is a robust system of compensation and victim care.”

The Rajasthan government is now training officials and police - but it is too little and far too late for Kumawat. “My only wish is to die in my home,” she said.

“But I no longer have a home, and I am too scared to go back to my village.”

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