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Many cases of women branded as witches still go unreported: Report

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NEW DELHI: The attack was well-organised. A band of 20 stormed into Kamla Meena's house and dragged her out by the hair to the marketplace of Manpura village in Rajasthan's Tonk district. She was stripped, beaten with wooden clubs and axes, and had sticks and red chilli powder pushed up her vagina. Unable to bear the force of the beatings, she collapsed and fainted, and was left for dead by the villagers. What had she done to antagonise them so? The villagers claimed she was a witch and had brought ill fortune on the family and others.

This isn't an incident from the 19th century. Kamla went through the torture as recently as 2002. Over a decade has passed since the dastardly attack but she still awaits justice. The accused, booked under 10 different sections of the IPC, including 147 and 148 (rioting), were released on bail days after the arrest. The case continues to drag in the courts. Worse, a report released on Monday by the legal resource group, Partners for Law in Development, shows that many such cases of crime against women

(<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/women>) in the guise of witch hunting go unreported.

NCRB (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/nocrb>) records show that [the practice](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/the-practice) (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/the-practice>) of women being targeted as witches is prevalent in 17 states of India. A vulnerable woman, often a widow, is often deprived of her property by branding her a witch. In Rajasthan, two women were lynched between 2003 and 2008 under the suspicion of being a witch. [Andhra Pradesh](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/andhra-pradesh) (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/andhra-pradesh>) leads the pack with 218 such murders in the same time period. [Jharkhand](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jharkhand) (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jharkhand>), a state with its own special law to combat witch hunting passed in 2001, comes a close second with 202 murders in 2003-8.

The cases that do make it to the courts usually have the accused booked under offences of unlawful assembly causing disturbance of peace (section 151), voluntarily causing hurt (section 323) or "outraging the modesty of a woman" (section 354). Most other cases, says the report, end up in "samjhauta" or compromise. Such a compromise is often brought about by community elders or panchayat leaders and ends in the victim paying a fine to "settle" a dispute, says the report. With the exception of one district in Odisha, the practice only targets women.

Madhu Mehra, executive director, PLD emphasises the need to recognize the violence meted out under the guise of witch hunting as a sexual crime under the larger umbrella of crime against women. "Wherever the social equilibrium changes with women taking greater control or doing well, they are branded as witches to regain the lost equilibrium. States where this is not prevalent will have other ways to punish what they see as social and sexual transgressions of women," says Mehra.

While patriarchy was a strong factor in the perpetuation of the practice, lack of quality healthcare is also seen as a deterrent to advancement. Diagnoses for illnesses are often sought from ojhas or tantriks (witch doctors) who find the root cause of ill health in a "dayan" or witch in the area. A description of the said "witch" is offered, following which, she is recognised, beaten up and ostracised, or even lynched. In a [Chhattisgarh](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chhattisgarh) (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chhattisgarh>) village, for example, one Jambai Verma was blamed for the death of a child in the village. The child had actually died of jaundice. But Verma was stripped and beaten as "punishment".

The report suggests that the evil practice is not limited to rural areas and among illiterates. Vinayak Sarle of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti experienced this first hand at a meeting of senior bureaucrats in



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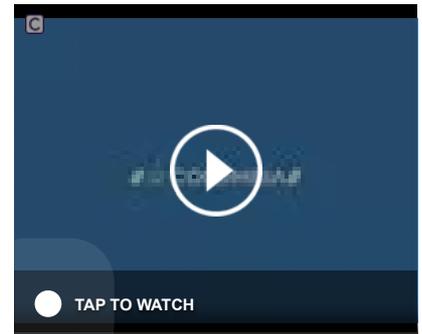


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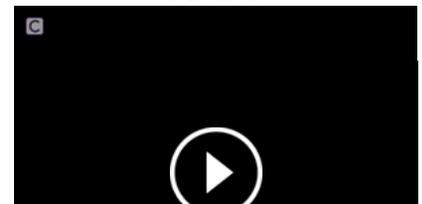


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Nandurbar district of Maharashtra. The meeting was called to familiarise and sensitise the officials to the extent of the practice in their region. "At a meeting five years ago, the deputy collector stood up and started telling us that 'dayans' indeed exist. He even went on to give an elaborate description of the rituals they perform to acquire magical powers," Sarle told TOI over phone.

While some legal eagles recommend a special law like the Jharkhand Dayan Pratha (Witchcraft) Act for the whole country to counter the menace, others feel the atrocities can be easily covered under the existing provisions of the IPC if implemented properly. "It has become a fashion to propose new laws whenever a new issue arises. We have enough strong laws to combat this, but no interest implementing them," says Annie Raja, general secretary, National Federation of Indian Women.

Besides legal reforms and strengthening of laws, the report also recommends increasing access to public healthcare as a measure to contain the practice. The 165 participants involved in the consultations also called for a stronger rehabilitation program for the victims of witch hunts, as they are often turned out of the village or community and suffer social and economic boycott.

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