

Reportage

The witches of Dahod

Women always get the worst deal, but in Adivasi society their life is in mortal peril if they are branded as witches.

Society • by Monica Jha • Dec 11, 2019



Ratniben Gopalbhai Bhabhor navigates her way with practised precision around a steel trunk, a set of grinding stones, and a pooja place. Things, both valuable and junk, are strewn everywhere. Keys dangle from her neck, catching the light coming in between the wall and the roof. It's dark inside even though the sun is up. Ratniben points at the photo of her late husband, placed on a mud platform, raised a few inches above the floor. Grabbing a cloth bag, she takes out a badge and reads out the slogan on women empowerment inscribed in Gujarati. She pins it to her blouse and breaks into a giggle.

Her house is a single room with mud walls and a thatched roof. The roof is held up by the trunk of a tree which forks into three branches as it goes up, like a trident. She steps out of her house, stooping low.

“My husband’s face was bleeding. My pregnant daughter was lying on the floor, holding her stomach and crying. My son looked very scared.”

Once out in the courtyard, her mannerisms change. The smile vanishes. She pulls the end of her *pallu* over her head and throws a quick glance at the house on the left. The house belongs to people who have caused her much grief, she whispers.

In October 2016, Bhorva village wore a festive look as Ratniben walked home on Navaratri. It was eight in the night, and she was returning home after participating in a ritual in a neighbouring village. As she got closer to her house, she sensed something was different in the dark.

“The roof had fallen down,” she recounts. “All I could see was stones and blood.” She ran in.

“My husband’s face was bleeding profusely. My pregnant daughter was lying on the floor, holding her stomach and crying. My son looked very scared.”

Some of Ratniben’s family has branded her a *dakan*—a witch. The attack on her house was part of the witch-hunt carried out by her husband’s family.

That night, her husband’s nephew came with five others from his extended family to pelt her house with stones. Some of them hit her husband. When they saw him bleeding profusely, they ran away assuming the wound was

fatal, she says. She believes they had come to kill her, unaware of her absence.

“The next day when I washed my husband’s clothes on the river, it looked like a stream of blood,” she says.

Labelling a woman a witch is not uncommon in Ratniben’s Bhil Adivasi community, in the Adivasi-majority district of Dahod in Gujarat. The offensive against Ratniben started many years ago, when she and her husband decided to settle down in their village. For years, they had worked as manual labourers in cities across Gujarat. She ignored the “*khoti baat*” (badmouthing), propagated by her husband’s cousin.



Madhu and Naina, Ratniben’s granddaughters, live with her. Photo: Monica Jha

Her husband’s brother joined in when her father-in-law died in June 2016. They called her a witch and accused her of “eating him up”. A month later, a brother-in-law passed away. They blamed her again.

The harassment continued, and the accusations intensified. Over the years, she has been blamed for illnesses in the extended family, hitches in

marriages, problems during religious ceremonies or family functions, poor crop yields, dying goats and chickens, and even bad rain.

“They killed my husband. And blamed me for it.” This wasn’t a solitary incident of violence or threat.

But she distinctly remembers what hurt her the most. Once she went to attend a wedding at the house of a close relative. As she approached, all her family members hid inside. She was stunned. It slowly dawned on her—she was ostracised for being “inauspicious” and a “bad omen”. Despite having been asked to stay away from rituals and functions, she thought this family, close to her, would make an exception. She turned around and ran back home.

“I have never gone to a wedding in my community since then,” she says.

In the Navaratri attack, her husband suffered a broken jaw. He couldn’t chew and had to survive on milk for several months. Lack of food left him very weak but what weakened him further was the stress of constant abuse.

While he recovered from his physical injuries, the abuse left him scarred. In June 2017, he died. “He had no disease. He was a quiet and non-confrontational person. He died of stress.”

Even as she was mourning his death, the family held her responsible for it.

“They killed my husband. And blamed me for it.”

This wasn’t a solitary incident of violence or threat.

“This is my lifelong grief. There is so much sorrow inside. What to remember and what to forget...,” she says as her eyes well up.

She approached the panch, the local community court. “They never supported me because I’m a woman. Also, the men (relatives) bribe them with alcohol and money.”

Since her husband’s death, her tormentors’ jibes have forced her to keep her head covered—a sign of a widow’s modesty and submission.

“It pierces my heart. It causes both pain and anger,” says Ratniben.

Witchcraft and witch hunting have a long history around the world. While scores of western anthropologists rushed to study witchcraft in Africa, few studies were conducted in India despite its prevalence. The earliest evidence of witch hunts in India can be found in the Santal (a tribe in eastern India) witch trials in 1792.

There is no genuine Santal who does not believe in witches, wrote Paul Olaf Bodding, a Norwegian missionary, linguist and folklorist, in his book *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* (1925-40).

British colonialists and missionaries made several references to various forms of witchcraft and related violence in their records, a lot of which were later studied in detail by Indian historians and anthropologists.

Police figures from Malda district (West Bengal) report 46 persons killed as witches between 1950 -1980. Surrounding regions, of Bastar, Chhattisgarh, also had widespread phenomena of tonhi etc, mentions a 2013 review of literature on witch hunting.

Researcher Shashank Sinha, in a 2007 paper in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW), says the 1857 war in present-day Jharkhand saw “perhaps the first mass witch-hunts among tribal communities of Singhbhum and

Santhal Parganas”. He said that the witch hunt was, in fact, a symbolic and localised retaliation against the British, who had banned it.

This view has been contested by some researchers.

Also, witch hunting continued to prevail post independence. “(P)olice figures from Malda district [West Bengal] report 46 persons killed as witches between 1950 to 1980. Surrounding regions, of Bastar, Chhattisgarh, also had widespread phenomena of ‘*tonhi*’ etc,” mentions a 2013 review of literature on witch hunting by Partners for Law in Development (PLD), a legal resource group working on social justice and women’s rights in India.

Ajay Skaria of the department of history at the University of Minnesota, in a 1997 essay, analysed witch killings in two Adivasi regions of colonial western India—the Dangs and Mewar. The Dangs in present-day Gujarat was inhabited primarily by the Bhil and Kokni tribes. He used archival material—texts and narratives of missionaries, colonial administrators and evidence from villagers or relatives of those accused.

The earliest mention of witch hunting among Adivasis in Gujarat was in the 1820s, Skaria wrote in an email. “This would seem to indicate that witch killings were prevalent in pre-colonial India”. But he did not have enough data to determine if there was an increase in witch killings in Gujarat during the colonial era.

From cases that he studied, he found the hunt was random and unpredictable. But certain patterns existed—most cases are preceded by rumour; kinship systems play a role in who is accused by whom; testing if someone is a witch is done in spite of a lack of consensus; and even if the accused clears the test, they are sometimes murdered by individuals contesting the acquittal. The tests to prove innocence—dipping hands in boiling oil, staying underwater without floating, and being suspended from a tree upside down and burned in a slow fire lit underneath for three days—are torturous and often end with the death of the accused.

Most victims are women. “The “supernatural” powers of men had a more legitimate space—they could be *bhagats*, for example,” he writes in his email. “In contrast, while Adivasi women were far more powerful in their societies than women in the plains, this power was nevertheless also regarded with considerable ambiguity. The very existence of *dakans* is indicative in some ways of the power that women had in broader society.”

“And yet, while *dakans* were respected, and often had a quasi-legitimate space, they occupied a liminal position which led to their also being feared,” he adds.

Recently, academia and activist circles have linked witch hunting to gender, development, depletion of forests, and women’s rights to property. Several studies also point out the undue emphasis on the tribal connections of witchcraft, establishing the existence of such practices in caste societies.

Women branded as witches are subject to extreme violence. According to NCRB, 2,290 persons, mostly women, have been killed between 2001-2014 in circumstances that imply witch hunting was the motive.

Skaria sees reasons other than faith behind witch hunting. “I do not think ‘faith’ by itself is ever a good way of describing any ‘religious’ phenomenon—no more with witch hunting than with Hindutva lynchings taking place now. ‘Faith’ is always activated in concrete social contexts. There are thus clear structural factors which influence who is likely to be considered a witch, and even more who is likely to be killed as a witch.”

Over time, witch hunting has taken new forms and complexities. There have been reports from regions like Harayana, with no prior history of witch hunting. On the other hand, Manipur didn’t report widespread witch

hunts until recently, despite a long history of cultural belief in spirits and ancestors, points out a 2012 PLD study. This suggests that witch hunting today is driven by forces other than faith. Pressures of globalisation and the resultant stress on resources are often linked to the new wave of witch hunting.

Women branded as witches are often subject to extreme violence. Many are murdered. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2,290 persons, mostly women, have been killed between 2001 and 2014 in circumstances that imply witch hunting was the motive. In 2015 and 2016 there were 135 and 134 such murders respectively. In 2017, the number dropped to 73, with Gujarat accounting for six. Jharkhand (19), Madhya Pradesh (13) and Odisha (9) had the most murders in 2017.

NCRB data doesn't count cases like Ratniben's since no murder is involved. There is no government estimate on witch branding cases and related violence not amounting to murder.

In October, 2019, a woman was garlanded with shoes and her face blackened in Himachal Pradesh. The same month a man in Jharkhand hacked his grandmother to pieces. In February, a woman was beaten and forced to parade naked. Last year, two women were forced to eat human excreta and tonsured. In Gujarat last year, a woman was set on fire. In 2017 in Gujarat, a woman was killed and four others suffered burns after they were branded with hot iron rods and made to walk on burning charcoal. In 2015 in Madhya Pradesh, six men gang-raped and tortured a woman, while nobody from the village helped her.

While Gujarat doesn't have a specific law to deal with witch hunting, many other states do. Bihar was the first with The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999, adopted by Jharkhand in 2001. Chhattisgarh enacted a law in 2005. In 2013, on the direction from the High Court, Odisha enacted

a law while in 2015, Rajasthan and Assam passed laws that prevent witch hunting.

ANANDI, a Gujarat-based nonprofit, identified 494 witch branding cases in Dahod, Mahisagar and Panchmahals districts between January 2011 and July 2013.

Maharashtra has passed a broader Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act in 2013 while Karnataka is debating a similar law. Meanwhile, the National Commission for Women has proposed a national law against witch hunting.

Yet the spate of laws against witch hunting has not made a dent, according to a PLD study in Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. The study conducted between 2011 and 2013 mentioned: “(t)he socio-legal evidence from the states which already have such special laws on witch-hunting shows their inefficacy in dealing with witch-hunting and related forms of violence.”



Taviyad Lataben, a social worker, says women have low status among Bhils. Photo: Monica Jha

“Criminalisation of witch-hunting through special laws is an inadequate response to the problem which has much in common with other forms of violence, the authors argued. “There is a need to focus on accountability and reform of the agencies that activate the criminal justice system and to plug the vacuum in relation to reparative justice,” it adds.

In the absence of a specific law dealing with witch branding, Gujarat handles these cases using generic laws related to physical or sexual violence and crime against women.

Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI), a Gujarat-based nonprofit, identified 494 witch branding cases in Dahod, Mahisagar and Panchmahals districts between January 2011 and July 2013. Out of this, 473 (95 per cent) cases were listed at police stations but a First Information Report (FIR) was registered only in 21 (4 per cent) cases.

In 2018-19, ANANDI dealt with 17 witch hunting and related violence cases. The conviction rate for witch hunting in Gujarat is very low, says Sejal Dand, Director, ANANDI. “It’s as poor as other cases involving

violence against women. In several instances, the accused file a counter case against the victim.”

“**E** *k ben ne dakan evi reete bole chhe ki... Maaro adhikar chheenwi le chhe, samaj ma maaru je kai pann hoi to todwi de chhe* (They label a woman a witch to snatch away her rights and also to break any social relations and support she has),” says Tijliben Nanjeebhai Damor of Mota Sarnaya village in Mahisagar district.

Tijliben, like Ratniben, was branded a witch by members of her family, after she moved back to her natal village. A few years ago, her husband deserted her and she came to live closer to her four brothers.

Over the years, members of her own family have brandished axes to her face threatening to kill her, cut off her access to water, and built a stone boundary around her house to confine her. The same people have now branded her sister-in-law, Kamlaben, a witch, after her husband passed away.

Dakan cases are invariably linked to land and used to oust a woman from her land, says Pargi Ramanbhai Maganbhai, a police constable at Gothib outpost of Santrampur police station. Pargi himself is a Bhil and has seen several witch hunting cases in his community.

Taviyad Lataben, an Adivasi social worker of Utthan, a Gujarat-based non-profit working on women’s land rights issue, agrees with Pargi. She says most cases are efforts to silence women from claiming their rights over property.

It’s always the extended family — people who stand to lose out — that carries out these campaigns. It doesn’t reflect well on the family to mistreat a woman. But, once she is labelled a *dakan*, society wouldn’t care even if she’s killed,” she says.

“It’s the easiest way to break her.”

Pargi's outpost station gets a couple of *dakan* cases every year but he says the actual number is much higher. The community doesn't let these incidents reach the police and even more rarely a court. A few cases that come in are in the form of complaints and rarely turned into an FIR. "They handle them in the community panchayat, where women don't get a fair hearing." He says only a few victims recognise these cases as punishable under law. But even those who do don't register formal complaints out of social pressure and fear.

Lataben is not impressed with sarkari numbers either. "If you visit 50 houses here, be sure to find 20 *dakan* cases. It's just that nobody talks about them openly."

Ramsingh Raojeebhai Rathoda, a Bhil man of about 55 from Mahisagar district, is initially offended, and then embarrassed, when asked about witch hunting. He looks down and says: "It (witch hunting) happens mostly to single women—widows, women who are abandoned by their husbands, chhutta chheda (divorced under Adivasi custom) or unmarried."

The act of claiming land rights often triggers witch labelling. "The violence varies based on the amount of land being claimed and the support system that the widow/single woman has in her village."

He says women have a low status in his community and the situation of single women is much worse. "The family sees them as a burden and often denies them any rights."

His cousin Rakeshbhai, who has been listening to the conversation, joins in: "We have known of some *dakan* cases. Now, I see the connection... It is about not wanting to share land." The cousins exchange glances and nod at each other.

On whether he would add his wife's name to land records, Ramsingh stares at the ground. "I have never considered it," he says. "But, I don't want anybody mistreating her..."

Several community workers have confirmed the link between witch-labelling and land rights. Sushila Prajapati, programme officer of ActionAid in Gujarat, says there have been increasing incidents of violence against single women related to land ownership. "It is due to increasing pressure on land as a resource. And also because single women are vulnerable."

However, Dand warns against demonising the Adivasis. "The state is the biggest culprit—there have been no land reforms or proper distribution of revenue or forest land to Adivasis," she says. "The state has been lax in tackling non-Adivasi encroachment, in updating of land records. The Adivasi land sizes are very small and land prices very high. This creates pressure on families and they sometimes use witch hunting as a tactic to oust the most vulnerable— single women— from the land."

The act of claiming land rights or being vocal often triggers this process of (witch) labelling, says a report "Adivasi Women's Rights Over Land" by the Working Group for Women and Land Ownership (WGWLO), a network of grassroots organisations in Gujarat working on women's land rights. "The violence that accompanies this practice varies based on the amount of land being claimed and the support system that the widow/single woman has in her village."

This practice (witch labeling) easily changes the identity of the widow and brings with it threats to her land and hence acts as a strong social deterrent for women, especially widows, to claim their rights over land, the report mentions.

In ANANDI's 2014 study on branding, 10 out of 14 victims said they were displaced from their land or were left unable to undertake agricultural

work due to violence. The other four chose not to discuss the violence and its impact on their livelihood.



Tijliben has not claimed land rights for fear that her brothers may turn against her. She has been branded a witch. Photo: Monica Jha

Ratniben stresses that her family branded her a witch “only to take away my land”. All the perpetrators are co-heirs of her family land. The label of witch began to be used when she came back to live in her village. She says her family saw it as her claiming her right over the land. Her husband’s brother joined when she started to plant a fruit orchard on her share of land.

The harassment worsened after her father-in-law died and she got her husband’s name added to the land records. The attacks intensified when she brought up the issue of adding her name in the *varsai* (revenue entries recording the succession of land) after her husband’s death. People from other castes (outside her close knit community) don’t call her a *dakan*, she says.

Most of Gujarat's Adivasi population of 89 lakh is located in Dahod, Panchmahals, and Dangs districts. The Bhils alone comprise nearly half of the state's indigenous population. Dahod has the most Adivasis in a single district—nearly 75 per cent of the population is Adivasi.

Land ownership among Adivasis is low. According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2011, four of five rural landless families are indigenous. Despite being 15 per cent of population, Adivasis own less than 10 per cent—around 10 lakh hectares (ha) out of a total 99 lakh ha in Gujarat.

The average land holding size is, Adivasis 1.5 ha, Dalits with 1.91 ha and general castes with 2.05 ha, writes Itishree Pattnaik, an assistant professor at the Gujarat Institute of Development Research, in a 2017 paper.

Among individual women as landholders in Gujarat, only 7 per cent are Adivasi. Of total land individually held in Gujarat, what Adivasi women own is a meagre 0.5 per cent. There is a stark contrast in their labour and landholding—in Adivasi-dominated Dahod, 57 per cent of cultivators are women while the state average is 31 per cent.

When it comes to land rights, Bhil women in Gujarat face double marginalisation—as Adivasis and as women. Most tribes don't recognise women's customary right to inherit land from either parent or husband.

Low land ownership translates to greater poverty. In rural Gujarat, at least one in three Adivasis was below the poverty line in 2011-12. According to a 2016 study of the districts of Dahod and Panchmahals by ANANDI, 73 per cent of households were food insecure for more than six months a year.

These districts also score poorly on health indicators. According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) in Gujarat's tribal districts is 86 per 1,000 live births. This is more than twice

the state IMR of 34, and 40 per cent higher than other tribal districts across India (62.1)

The gap between overall literacy rate and Adivasi literacy rate in the state is 15.5 percent. The gap between literacy rates of all women and Adivasi women is even wider at 16.5 per cent.

When it comes to land rights, Bhil women in Gujarat face double marginalisation—as Adivasis and as women. Most tribes in Gujarat don't recognise women's customary right to inherit land from either parent or husband. Skaria's essay points out that although Adivasi women were relatively powerful in comparison with other women, they were still marginal and subordinate in Adivasi society.



Ratniben with her land rights documents. Photo: Monica Jha

“Their control over the most important of subsistence resources—land for cultivation—was limited. According to oral traditions, women were unlikely to be allocated land for cultivation by the village headmen.”

In the Adivasi-majority districts of Dahod, Mahisagar, and Panchmahals, where Bhils are predominant, women don’t get a share in the land. They own it only in a few social contexts—lack of a brother, responsibility for aging parents, etc. Even in these cases, they often don’t exercise any real rights, like possession or cultivating it. Some widows also get to use the land that belonged to their husbands. But they don’t get their names added to the record. Only her son gets a share once he becomes an adult.

States and courts across the country have varied interpretations of inheritance laws, and as a result, legal rights for Adivasi women have been ambiguous. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 (HSA) was a landmark in that it recognised that a daughter has equal status to that of a son in succession. The HSA recognises women's rights to agricultural land, natal dwelling rights and widowed women's right to property.

But HSA doesn't apply to Adivasis, says Krishnakant Vakharia, senior advocate, Gujarat High Court. "The HSA makes an exception for the members of the Scheduled Tribe. Tribals are governed by their own customs."

The Constitution protects tribal communities and their customs (through Articles 244, 244-A, 371-A). Under this, the inheritance rights of Adivasi communities are governed by the tribe's customary laws. The laws, including matters of succession, differ from tribe to tribe.

Vakharia points to the case of the second marriage of former Gujarat chief minister Amarsinh Chaudhary. Bigamy is prohibited in Indian law for Hindus. But Chaudhary belonged to a Scheduled Tribe whose customs permitted bigamy. The court, in view of his tribe's customs, upheld his second marriage, even though his first wife was alive. It also recognised his second wife's share in his property.

In 1996, the Supreme Court ruled against the succession rights of Ho and Oraon Adivasi women in Bihar. It ruled that land may be used for occupation and livelihood purposes by the women, but upon their death it would revert to the male successor. Recently, however, the courts seem to have taken a more gender-just view rather than going by patriarchal customs.

In a February 2019 judgment, the High Court of Chhattisgarh, Bilaspur, allowed that in Sawara and Gond Adivasi communities, women have an equal share in their fathers' properties. It recognised that HSA didn't apply to them, but that women get equal succession rights unless it can be

proved that custom excludes them. Similarly, a January 2019 judgment of the Nagpur bench of the Bombay High Court allowed a Gond woman an equal share in her father's property. Instead of asking the woman to prove that custom allows her inheritance, the court said it was up to the contesting party to present definite evidence that excluding women from inheritance was the tribal custom.

A 2015 judgment of the Himachal Pradesh High Court went a step further and made HSA applicable to all Adivasi women in the state, irrespective of custom, "in order to prevent the women from social injustice and prevention of all forms of exploitation". Laws must evolve with the times if societies are to progress, held Justice Rajiv Sharma in his 60-page order. This order has been challenged and the matter is pending with the Supreme Court.

Dr Anjani Singh Tomar, Associate Professor of Law, Gujarat National Law University says: "There is no specific law for Adivasis for Gujarat. The government has made laws for the transfer of lands belonging to Adivasis, but none for the succession. How it works is when a person wants to be governed by a specific law, she has to ask for it with a solid reason behind it. For example, I am governed by 'A' school of law by birth but now I want to be governed by 'B' school of law because I am married into that. Then, I need to prove it in a court of law. But I'm not aware of any case where an Adivasi woman in Gujarat has asked for her succession rights."

Gujarat, in practice, applies HSA to Adivasi women in inheritance matters. M.J. Dave, resident additional collector of Dahod, says there is no issue in the law over adding names of women, including Adivasis, to land records. "Adding women's names in land records is a standard practice we follow. It is normal to add woman's name as co-sharer of land. It is no different in case of Adivasis."

While making no reference to the HSA, the government follows the same procedure for Adivasis and non-Adivasis. “We follow the same process of checking the varsai, family tree, death certificates, etc, to verify a claim whether by an Adivasi or non-Adivasi woman,” Dave says.

Bharatbhai, a paralegal who works with Utthan, confirms this practice. He works on claims by both Adivasi and non Adivasi women. A report by WGWLO and another by ANANDI confirm this practice.

In one case in Dahod, when a non-Adivasi claimed land held by an Adivasi, his daughter Tetiben Ratnabhai Bhil, contested this in a revenue court. The district court ruled in her favour and ordered her name added as a legal heir. On the practice of applying HSA to Adivasis in Gujarat, Vakharia says there wouldn't be a problem as long as no affected party objected to it.

A bigger obstacle to inheritance for Adivasi women is the Bombay Prevention of Fragmentation and Consolidation of Holdings Act (1947). It doesn't allow legal partition of fragments of land below a prescribed limit —2 acres for non-irrigated land and half an acre for irrigated land in Dahod.

If a claimant cannot be given her or his share without creating a fragment, they should be compensated in money. All states other than Maharashtra and Gujarat have amended such laws.

At least 40 per cent of Adivasi holdings in Gujarat are less than 1 hectare (2.47 acre). So partitioning land would create holdings of smaller than 2 acres, prohibited under the law. In this case, the co-sharers just add their names to the land record as joint holders. In practice, these lands are partitioned for individual cultivation, says Dand, who has been working in Dahod for 30 years. The last two agricultural censuses show an increase in fragmentation of farmland among Adivasis in the state.

Another major issue that several Adivasi women mentioned is that varsai is not updated for two-three generations. When a woman initiates the process of adding her name as a legal heir, she needs to establish her claim

—get the family tree showing how she is related to the original owner whose name the record is in, death certificates of her husband or father.

Other problems are social and practical. In Adivasi areas, women's entitlement to land or other assets is often decided by the community panch, comprising only men. Most decisions favour men, says Lataben. "The village heads don't help women. There were also instances of them accepting bribes from men to not allow women's claims."

Most inheritance cases of Adivasi women don't end up in court unless they involve the state or a non-Adivasi. Several women's claims are aimed at securing title to land already in their possession or being cultivated by them.

Dave says that most claims are settled at revenue offices at panchayat and block levels by adding women's names to land records. Only a few reach the collector's office. There is rarely a case that has to go beyond this point.

Bharatbhai says most claims take about four months to settle. Some take longer because of administrative delays and families' resistance. The rare court cases take even longer. It took Tetiben 10 years to win her case and have her name added in the land record. Another five years have passed and she does not yet have possession of the land.

Most Adivasi women in Gujarat are not aware of their land rights. Or, as in Tijliben's case, the extent of their rights. She knows her name is in her father's land records since her extended family comes to her occasionally for a No Objection Certification (NOC). But she has no clue how much land her family owns or what her share is. She doesn't even get a share of the yield. And she isn't going to demand it.

"I know my own brothers and nephews would turn against me and throw me out the moment I demand my share of land. The little support and nicety I get is based on the fact that I don't ask for it." Having been

branded a witch by the extended family, she is in dire need of whatever support she can gather.

A slow change is on the horizon, though. Rural Gujarat is witnessing more Adivasi women demanding their share in family land, legally. Many community-based organisations are working to help women navigate the complex process of land transfer. Some have set up offices at panchayat and mamlatdar (Magistrate) offices at the block and district levels. Several have hired and trained paralegals to support their claims.

Dave says the revenue department deals with a lot of cases of women wanting to add their names to land records as co-heirs. “It is hard to estimate a number since these cases are handled by different levels of revenue offices.”

It is single women who are leading the way, says Dand. ANANDI dealt with 221 women’s land ownership cases in 2018-19. In the same year, they succeeded in getting land transferred in the name of women in 69 cases.

The lack of gender-disaggregated data on land ownership, as well as state wise data on single women, makes it difficult to estimate how much land single Adivasi women might presumptively hold. Across India, about 6 per cent of the population—73 million—are single women. This includes widows, divorcees and unmarried women, and those deserted by husbands.

The WGWLO had secured inheritance rights for 1,631 women across Gujarat by the end of August. Of this number, 1,251 involve Adivasi women—581 widows, 647 daughters and 45 wives (individual or joint ownership). Several of these cases come from Dahod and Mahisagar districts.

Most women end up cultivating less than an acre since land sizes here are small to begin with, says Lataben. “But that tiny parcel a woman claims is crucial for her sustenance. She is left with no other livelihood options otherwise.”

Landesa, an international nonprofit that works extensively in India on land rights, argues that strong land rights for women reduce poverty and increase economic empowerment and personal agency.

This finds resonance in the work of Bina Agarwal, a development economist who has written extensively about land and property rights for women, and launched a campaign that culminated in making Hindu inheritance law gender equal in 2005.

In a 2005 paper co-authored by Pradeep Panda, Agarwal demonstrated that owning a house or land significantly reduces a woman's risk of marital violence. "Among the property-less (owning neither land nor house) 49 per cent experienced physical violence and 84 per cent psychological violence. In contrast, those who owned both land and house reported dramatically less physical as well as psychological violence (7per cent and 16per cent respectively)," the paper titled "Marital violence, human development and women's status in India" mentioned.

A WGWLO report says if more Adivasi women claim land rights it will deter witch hunting. "(E)ven if the claim for rights acts as a trigger for such (witch) labelling, it also acts as a strong foundation to challenge this practice."

Ratniben's husband died in June 2017. Within two weeks, she started the varsai process. She was clueless about it—which office to visit, which forms to ask for, and how to fill them (she can't write).

At the time, Utthan was helping her cultivate fruits and keep bees. She reached out to them. The paralegals at the NGO helped her navigate the process—finding out how much land the family owned and their survey numbers online, establishing the family tree, obtaining death certificates from panchayat talati (local governance office), filling out application forms, getting a panchnama (documents signed by witnesses), submitting

the application at the revenue talati (local revenue office) and registering with the malmatdar's (revenue officer at the block level) office.

Bharatbhai says women were given to understand that they needed an approval or endorsement from the sarpanch or one of the community heads to go ahead with their claims. These men often tried to change their minds or make a deal of some sort. "Now, women don't go to them. We explain that any three people from village with proper identification can sign their documents as witnesses. We handhold them through the process," Bharatbhai adds.

Government officials often ignore rural women's applications and make them run round the offices, says Hemaben Patel, a paralegal with Utthan who lives in Ratniben's village and worked on her case. "But we approached them with all the documents in order and let them know we were aware of the administrative procedure, so they took notice."

Then, there was a battle Ratniben had to fight all by herself. She had to get NOC from her extended family—she required 80 of them. It took over 45 days of running around in the rain. She pleaded. When she invited all of them for a meeting at her house, only a couple turned up. Some refused to sign the NOC outright. She threatened she wouldn't sign when it was their turn to get land documents in their names.

There were fights every day. Her son asked her to drop the matter.

Finally, in September last year, Ratniben got her name added in the *varsai*. Now she cultivates 4.5 bigha (1.8 acre) of land—2.5 bigha (an acre) more than she used to before. The 2 bigha of mango, lemon and guava orchard has been particularly profitable. Her savings, keeping aside input cost and family expenses, added up to ₹60,000 this year.

She shows the orchard with a quiet pride. She is particularly pleased with the size of the mangoes this year. She checks the apiary though the bees

have disappeared because of the heat. She catches the wandering ox, gives it a firm but light pat and ties it to a tree, as if to discipline it.

With her name in the records, she has been able to claim ₹4,000 of the annual ₹6,000 the central government offers to farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme. She got her daughter's name included in her varsai. She is also aiding four single women in neighbouring villages to add their names to the land documents. All this, however, hasn't freed her of the dakan label. "It's a lifelong harassment," she says.

A couple of days after Holi this year, her brother-in-law's buffalo entered her orchard and started to rummage around. She was trying to chase it out when he barged in with his wife and son, showering her with abuse. His wife called for them to "thrash her so badly that she picks up her *ghaghra* (skirt) and runs away forever". Then his son slapped Ratniben, dragged her across the orchard, and beat her.

"They're still trying to scare me away and grab my land," Ratniben says.

Ratniben called 181—the state government's helpline for women. Now that the police have come twice to the village and enquired about violence against Ratniben, people in the village are careful not to support the perpetrators.

"*Hamaro toh waak nathi. Aapde su kaam darwanu?* (There is no fault of mine. Why should I be afraid?)"

"I'm not going anywhere."

(This story has been reported with the assistance of the Impact Journalism Grant 2019.)