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Thousands of women tortured and executed in Indian witch hunts

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If it began like the others, the first sign that Saraswati Devi would be murdered was an accusation delivered to a shaman. Perhaps she had offended someone. Perhaps someone had fallen sick and had wondered why. Perhaps a community well had suddenly dried and someone needed blaming. Perhaps they chose her because Devi was lower caste, because she was a woman, and because they'd probably get away with it.

The killers came for her on Saturday. Two of her sons tried to save her, but couldn't and were beaten. Their punishment wouldn't match Devi's. Before the 14 villagers inflicted injuries so severe that would claim her life, they "forced her to consume human excreta", police [told the Hindustan Times](#).



Pusanidevi Manjhi, pictured with husband Gooda and their children, was accused of being a witch by a landowner in Palani, India. THE WASHINGTON POST/RAMA LAKSHMI

Though shocking by nearly any standard, the murder was not unique. It was not even uncommon in pockets of rural India.

In places where superstition and vigilantism overlap and small rumours can turn deadly, nearly 2100 people accused of witchcraft have been killed between 2000 and 2012, [according to crime records](#) gathered by Indian newspaper *Mint*. Others placed the number at 2500; others higher still.

"Like the proverbial tip of a very deep iceberg, available data hides much of the reality of a problem that is deeply ingrained in society," said New Delhi-based Partners for Law in Development. "It is only the most gruesome cases that are reported – most cases of witch-hunting go unreported and unrecorded."

It's an issue that despite its prevalence is rarely covered outside of India, where it's almost weekly newspaper fodder. Last week in Chandrapur, one man was lynched and his "woman accomplice thrashed by a mob for practising black magic," [reported the *Times of India*](#), which said the man "was caught red-handed by the mob of over 500 villagers". Another woman accused of witchcraft was grabbed by relatives carrying "traditional weapons" and beaten to death, the same newspaper reported. Late last year, in Jharkhand, a 50-year-old woman and her daughter were [hacked to death](#) after they were accused of practising witchcraft.

The forces driving the killings, which occur predominantly in Indian states with large tribal populations, are as much cultural as they are economic and caste-based, experts said. While the easiest explanation is that angered mobs confuse a sudden illness or crop failure with witchcraft and exact their revenge, it's rarely that simple. Much more often, it isn't superstition but gender and class discrimination. Those accused of sorcery often come from similar backgrounds: female, poor and of a low caste.

"Witch-hunting is essentially a legacy of violence against women in our society," [wrote](#) Rakesh Singh of the Indian Social Institute. "For almost invariably, it is [low caste] women, who are branded as witches. By punishing those who are seen as vile and wild, oppressors perhaps want to send a not-so-subtle message to women: docility and domesticity get rewarded; anything else gets punished."

The veil of superstition, others said, only hides the true motive behind the killings.

"Superstition is only an excuse," Pooja Singhal Purwar, a social welfare official, [told *The Washington Post*](#) in 2005. "Often a woman is branded a witch so that you can throw her out of the village and grab her land, or to settle scores, family rivalry, or because powerful men want to punish her for spurning their sexual advances. Sometimes, it is used to punish women who question social norms."

If there is a state most susceptible to witchcraft killings, it's the eastern state of Jharkhand, a land pervaded by dense forest and tribes. In 2013, 54 witchcraft-accused women were killed there, [reported *The News Minute*](#), the highest rate in the country. Despite local legislation to try and clamp down on the murders – no national law exists that addresses witchcraft killings – they have continued if not increased. And patterns there are worth examining to understand how the horror unfolds.

[According to *Mint*](#), a witch is identified through various methods. The person who suspects witchcraft will often consult a witch doctor called an "ojha". The witch doctor, who uses medicinal herbs, in part learnt their skills to counter the darker powers of the witches, called "daayan".

The ojha then goes about the business of sussing out the witch. This involves incantations, *Mint* reports, and possibly the branches of a sal tree. The ojha writes the names of all those suspected of witchcraft onto the branches of the tree, and the name that's on the branch that withers is condemned as a witch. Other times, rice is wrapped in cloth emblazoned with names. Then the rice is placed inside a nest of white ants. Whichever bag the ants eat out identifies the witch.

After a witch is chosen, they are either forced to do unspeakable things or tortured.

"In many reported cases recently, women who are branded as witches were made to walk naked through the village, were gang-raped, had their breasts cut off, teeth broken or heads tonsured, apart from being ostracised from their village," reported the newspaper. They "were forced to swallow urine and human faeces, to eat human flesh, or drink the blood of a chicken". This, too, was the fate of Saraswati Devi, the latest woman, though likely not the last, to be accused of witchcraft, tortured and murdered.

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