

India Struggles to Eradicate an Old Scourge: Witch Hunting

Once driven largely by superstition, the brutal practice is now often simply a tool to oppress women, in many cases violently.



Durga Mahato in the temple near where she was dumped, unconscious, after being beaten and accused of being a witch, in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand. Credit...Samyukta Lakshmi for The New York Times

By Suhasini Raj

Reporting from Tiruldih and Raidih in the state of Jharkhand in India

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They ushered the young woman into their home and closed the door behind her. Then the beating began.

“You are a witch,” shouted one of the attackers, as she, her parents and her uncle rained punches, kicks and slaps on the 26-year-old woman’s stomach, chest and face.

When the pummeling finally ended, after nearly two hours, the young woman was pulled outside by her hair, dragged through her village and dumped, unconscious, next to a temple, her clothing barely clinging to her battered body.

The attack, in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand in 2021, was evidence that India is still struggling to eradicate the age-old scourge of witch hunting, despite a raft of laws and other initiatives.

For centuries, the branding of witches was driven largely by superstition. A crop would fail, a well would run dry or a family member would fall ill, and villagers would find someone — almost always a woman — to blame for a misfortune whose cause they did not understand.

Superstition hasn't gone away. But witchcraft accusations are now often simply a tool to oppress women, victims' advocates say. The motives can be to grab land, to ostracize a woman to settle a score, or to justify violence.

In the Jharkhand case, the young woman who was attacked, Durga Mahato, said the trouble started when she refused the sexual advances of a prominent man in the village. He, his brother, his wife and their daughter then declared Ms. Mahato a witch before luring her to their home and attacking her.

Image

Ms. Mahato was barred from drawing water from her community's tap after the attack in 2021 and now has to use a different tap, farther from her home. Credit...Samyukta Lakshmi for The New York Times

Ms. Mahato, her husband, Nirmal, and a local police officer described the assault, during which the prominent man threatened to rape her, she said. All four attackers have been charged under anti-witch-hunt laws; the man and his brother are on bail after spending a few months in jail.

For Ms. Mahato, the consequences of being labeled a witch did not end with the savage beating. She was barred from bathing in the village pond and drawing water from the community tap. A wooden fence was built around her house to prevent her from wandering into the village. Villagers blame her for problems like the death of a cow. Only some people talk to her now. She still has pain in her waist and back.

"What wrong have I done, that God gave me such a huge punishment?" she said one recent evening, seated on a bright yellow charpoy, a woven bed, outside her brick house. "Call me a witch as much as you want to," she added, breaking into tears.

Ms. Mahato was also barred from bathing in the village pond, which has since run dry. She said she was accused of being a witch after she refused the sexual advances of a prominent man in her village. Credit...Samyukta Lakshmi for The New York Times

“I have three young children. I dare not contemplate suicide,” she said.

Witch hunting still exists in varying measures across nearly a dozen Indian states, mostly in Indigenous tribal areas in central and eastern parts of the country, experts say. Many states have passed laws against the practice. Some, like Assam, have made penalties more stringent, with provisions of life imprisonment. Others, like Odisha, have supplemented legal efforts by setting up memorials to victims at police stations in a bid to sensitize people.

Women branded witches have had their nails pulled out, been forced to eat feces, been paraded naked or been beaten black and blue. They have been burned or lynched. From 2010 to 2021, more than 1,500 people were killed in India after accusations of witchcraft, according to the National Crime Records Bureau.

Witch hunts are particularly common in Jharkhand, a mineral-rich yet poverty-riddled state where Indigenous tribes make up about a quarter of the population. The assault on Ms. Mahato was one of 854 witchcraft-related cases recorded in the state in 2021, 32 of which resulted in deaths.

Jharkhand has taken a hands-on approach in trying to tackle the practice. A state-run program called Project Garima has deployed about 25 “witch-hunting prevention campaign teams,” which conduct street plays to raise awareness. Village-level protection committees aid survivors of violence. Centers have been set up to provide legal aid and short-stay arrangements for victims. Workers staffing a help desk call survivors directly to get an update on their psychological and economic status.

Image

But law enforcement can be weak. Madhu Mehra, the founder of a legal resource group for women, said that her organization, in a study on witch hunting across three states, including Jharkhand, found that the police usually intervened only in cases of murder or attempted murder. That, and the difficulty of changing entrenched beliefs, has helped allow the practice to persist, activists say.

While state officials had set 2023 as the target year for eradicating witch hunting, officials said they were now pushing back the goal by at least three years.

In Ms. Mahato’s case, the most helpful assistance came not from the government, but from another witch-hunt victim, Chhutni Mahato, who has been recognized by the Indian government for her work in trying to eliminate the practice.

Durga Mahato’s aunt had heard about the work of Chhutni Mahato (the two women are not related). Durga found refuge for weeks in Chhutni’s mud-and-tile-roofed home after spending two weeks in the hospital.

Chhutni Mahato, right, has helped more than 150 women in the state. She often barges into police stations demanding action on witch-hunt cases. Credit...Samyukta Lakshmi for The New York Times

Chhutni Mahato's broken teeth are testimony to the torture she once bore at the hands of villagers who blamed her for a girl's illness. She ran away and years later began working with a nongovernmental organization.

She often barges into police stations demanding action on witch-hunt cases and scolds village heads over the phone. Victims now reach her via word of mouth. She has helped more than 150 women in the state.

One of them is Dukhu Majhi, who lives in a picturesque village a couple of hundred miles from Durga Mahato's.

Dukhu Majhi cleaning the home she had to flee after being accused of being a witch. Villagers wondered how a "normal woman" could live by herself with her young children while her husband was away for work. Credit...Samyukta Lakshmi for The New York Times

In Ms. Majhi's case, suspicion fell on her simply because she did not conform to neighbors' expectations. Villagers wondered how a "normal woman" could live by herself with her young children, deep in the forest, while her husband was away for work.

Then they labeled her a witch.

"If someone's stomach aches, I am blamed. If a headache happens, I am blamed. They would stand outside my house and shout, 'She is the witch causing us grief,'" Ms. Majhi said. "I would retort: Do I become a witch just because you are saying so?"

Last July, villagers chased her with axes and sticks. She ran home; they banged on the door and tried to break it down.

"I clung hard to my children. We were all shaking," Ms. Majhi said.

She and her husband went to the police to complain. Pintu Mahato, a local police official, tried to play down the case.

Mr. Mahato, seated one recent day on a plastic chair outside the police station, said that the case had been settled by village elders and that everyone was living happily together again.

He had clearly not been following up on the case.

Image

Ms. Majhi picking mangoes with her husband and children. A local police official had tried to play down her case, saying everyone was living happily together again, even though she had to flee to a new home.

Ms. Majhi had in fact moved out of her house soon after the attack. She and her family took refuge with Chhutni Mahato for a few days before finding a room near a larger city. Her husband found a new job.

They visit their house in the middle of the forest once in a while, to check on their meager belongings and their kitchen garden, and to give their children a chance to sprawl out on the charpoy beds.

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