

Labelled for Life? A Study on Witches and Witchcraft in Rajasthan, India

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Context

■ India

Rajasthan : Largest Indian state

-Feudal, patriarchal

- From all indicators of development the status of women is low

- Various form of violence exist ranging from *sati*, dowry, *nata*, early/child marriage, mismatched marriages

Objectives

- **To provide an in-depth understanding of the local custom of branding women as witches (Dakans/Dayans)**
- **To analyse the debilitating effect of these customs and practices on women's well being and psyche**
- **To estimate the quantum of the problem**

Objectives contd...

- **To analyse the role of the family/community caste *panchayat* and enforcement machinery in preventing/abetting these practices**
- **To draw local as well as state level action plans/ intervention strategies**
- **Policy level initiatives**

Methodology

- **Review of Literature**
- **Networking with the NGOs/CBOs working in field area**
- **In-depth interviews with the ‘sufferers’ as well as the accusers**

Methodology Contd...

- **Interviews with police, lawyers, media persons**
- **Focus group discussions with the family members, community members including health service providers, PRI members, caste *panchayat* representatives and the members of village community**
- **Documentation of in-depth case studies**

Review of Literature

- **Witchcraft** is the supposed power of a person to harm the other by occult or supernatural means

Witch is a female supposed to be holding such powers. The male counterpart is named Wizard

- **Witch hunt** is the process of prosecution/execution of a witch

Nature of the Problem

- **Belief in maleficium is the starting point of all witch prosecutions**
- **Mostly women who are widowed, infertile, possess ugly features or are old, unprotected, poor, socially ostracized etc are easy targets**
- **They bear the blame mostly in times of natural disasters (drought or floods) for unforeseen happenings**
- **Subjected to extreme torture both physical and mental**

Geographical extent of the Problem

- **The problem was wide spread in European countries and England between the 13th and 18th centuries. Witch trials declined in these countries by the end of the 18th century**
- **Salem witch trials of America are seen as the darkest period of witch craft history**
- **The problem also persists in other parts of the world -Africa, South America, Asia (India, Nepal)**

India

- **The highest incidence of witch hunting related crimes occur in AP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Gujarat, Assam, WB and Rajasthan (UN report 2004)**
- **Anti witchcraft Act has been formulated in three Indian States- Bihar (1999), Jharkhand (2001) and Chattisgarh (2005)**

Rajasthan

- In Rajasthan the local name for a witch is *dayan* and she is always a living woman
- It is believed that a *dakan* has the capacity to harm others by her evil eye, evil word or sometimes she can bring bad luck simply by praising the other
- Issue not recognised as a serious form of violence by police/ judiciary in the absence of a Bill/Act

Primary data:

- **Sixty three cases were documented using both participatory/qualitative methods i.e. in-depth interviews, FGDs with women sufferers and their family members**
- **Also used survey method**

Analysis of data :

Age

Caste

Marital status

Who labels/brands

Duration of violence

Residential status (before and after labeling)

Occupation and economic status

Reasons

Forms of violence

Role of caste *panchayat*, police, media, NGOs, PRIs

Causes for labeling

- **Superstition**
- **Land/ property disputes**
- **Personal rivalry**
- **Death of a child/woman due to lack of medical care,**
- **Infertility and childlessness,**
- **Physical deformities or challenges**
- **Assertive nature of women**
- **Fear of exposure of illicit relationships**
- **Low social and economic status (caste/class)**

Data Analysis Contd...

- **Poor, low caste women are easy targets for naming/ branding**
- **50 percent women belonged to the Schedule tribes, Scheduled castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBC's)**

Analysis Contd...

- **A large majority of the women interviewed (55.6 percent) were dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry, which is the main source of livelihood for the rural population**
- **Contrary to our assumption that single women i.e. widows or separated women alone are more likely to be labeled as *dayans*, a larger majority (44.4 percent) of the women were found to be married currently.**
- **The percentage of separated women (5 percent) and widowed women was 38.1 percent**

Analysis Contd...

- **It is significant that no unmarried woman was labeled as a witch**
- **The duration of violence faced by the women in our sample ranges from 2 years to more than 20 years**
- **The process of labeling/branding women as *dayans* in 23.8 percent of the cases was initiated by the husband's family**
- **Subjected to extreme torture/ violence. In fact, labeling itself is a violent act against women's dignity and respect**

Forms of Violence

- **Forms of violence range from verbal abuse to battery and even brutal murder. Their hair are cut off, heads shaved, stoned, beaten mercilessly, stripped and paraded naked, branded with hot iron rods, raped, made to eat excreta or even burnt and brutally murdered.**
- **They face social ostracization :are often locked in their homes and not permitted to interact with other people on account of being labeled**

Forms of Violence Contd...

- **The violence and its various heinous forms impact women's psyche and well being, loss of mental balance, creating feelings of helplessness, fear and powerlessness**

Constraints

- **Identification of cases**
- **Eliciting community support**
- **People's belief in the existence of dakan/dayan**
- **Ascertaining number of cases (quantum)**

Recommendations: Action Plans/ Intervention Strategies

- **NGO's to include the issue of violence against women labeled as *dayans/dakans* as part of development agenda.**
- **Should undertake responsibility for conducting sensitization trainings amongst village community, grass root government functionaries, PRI members, representatives of caste panchayats, police, judiciary and media**

Recommendations Contd...

- **The Department of Women and Child Development should take a lead role in identifying women survivors through various programs**
- **Department of Social Welfare should take an initiative to rehabilitate women sufferers of violence especially those who have no family/ community support**
- **Department of Education should initiate a public education program. As a first step this could be included as part of primary education**

Recommendations

- **State Commission for Women should involve women's groups/activists to lobby for getting the Draft Anti – Witchcraft Bill passed and enacted in the State**



Thank You