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ActionAid Association (India)

Witch Branding in India

**A Study of Indigenous
and Rural Societies**

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A Study Across Assam, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya and Odisha

This study was undertaken by ActionAid Association in collaboration with the Global Partnership Network (GPN). GPN is one of the Centres of Excellence for Exchange and Development funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the Higher Education Excellence in Development Cooperation (exceed) program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).



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FOREWORD

In the year 2020, as an outcome of the untiring efforts of several individuals and social organizations to bring this malaise to public discourse, the 10th of August was declared the World Day Against Witch Hunts. This marks an international recognition of a sad reality, that witch branding and witch hunting continue to be part of our contemporary world. This is a practice, that can be traced across histories and geographies, where women and children, and in some cases even men, are branded, castigated or even killed.

A preliminary data compilation by an independent UN expert speaks of 20,000 victims of accusation of witchcraft and ritual attacks in the decade between 2009 and 2019, across 60 countries. A compilation from the annual data shared by India's National Crime Records Bureau, shows that for the period between 2009 and 2020, 1,623 murders were committed with an accusation of witchcraft. And it is not only a question of death for those condemned; it is also a condemnation of futures of several thousand more who are suspected, accused, but not killed. For those once suspected and accused of witchcraft live in perpetual fear and lifelong anxiety, and they and their families are often subject to several human rights violations. These numbers can never be known by our record keeping systems.

There can be little doubt that the gendered dimension of witchcraft is the strongest, given the fact that a large majority of those killed in this patriarchal assertion are women and within them older and single women and those who dare to assert.

A combination of superstitious beliefs, religious practices and patriarchal norms unleash lifelong suffering on women accused of witchcraft, in many cases resulting in their murder and lynching. The roots of this violence are not only in the specific religious or cultural beliefs and superstitions, but also in the cold calculations of patriarchal mindsets, in the connivance to deprive women of land and property, to take revenge where women refuse sexual advances and to punish women for petty disputes. Additionally, poor health care facilities in rural areas and lack of sustained awareness programmes, implementation of laws and informed government intervention exacerbate the problem.

The complexity of this issue and its punitive dimensions can be found in the blurring of boundaries between protector and perpetrator. Like other incidences

of mob lynching, it is difficult to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice. For the survivors of this violence, the scars run deep as the perpetrators are often members of their own family, neighbourhood and community.

Apart from this, single women are more vulnerable to being branded and landed/propertied women are further at risk. In the struggle of a women for survival, dignity, respect, safety and economic security, land rights play an important role. However, social norms, customary practices and the legislations do not allow women to have easy access and control over land and other productive resources. In many cases, there have been attempts to grab the resources of women through branding them as witches. Moreover, it is evident that when women's sexuality is not under control in a patriarchal world, efforts are made to desex her through branding her as a widow, witch or one with a "burri nazar" or an "evil eye".

"Witch Branding in India: A Study of Indigenous and Rural Societies Across Five States" is a product of research into how this form of violence has been experienced by indigenous and rural women in India. This study represents a systematic attempt to understand the issue and find out the structures and practices that either prevent from or aid women in attaining sexual autonomy as well as control of economic resources. The study also seeks to explore the intricate links and intersections of patriarchy and capitalism. It has covered five states with a significant indigenous populace and has involved multifarious stakeholders.

We hope that this study would create an impact in the policy regime towards drafting a national law which is more feminist, and with provisions to empower all women at risk of witch-hunting and witch-branding. Making witch-branding history is the ask of our times.

We also hope that this document generates a good amount of public discourse over deeper structural causes of women's impoverishment and the intricate linkage with violence.

I welcome any comments and suggestions that readers may have.

Sandeep Chachra
Executive Director
ActionAid Association

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To this project, Prof Govind Kelkar lent her immense intellectual weight and social engagement with women's issues, especially rural women. She led the research and wrote the first half of the report, which presents an understanding of the structural violence that constitutes the practice of witch-branding. We are indebted to Prof Kelkar for her role in this research and its publication.

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ActionAid Association undertook this study in collaboration with the Global Partnership Network (GPN). GPN is one of the centres of Excellence for Exchange and Development funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the Higher Education Excellence in Development Cooperation (excellence) program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). We are very grateful to the whole GPN team at the University of Kassel for coordinating this research and the publication.

At ActionAid Association, Sarika Sinha anchored this project. Sarika was then Director – Campaign and Policy. In Odisha, Debabrat Patra, National Humanitarian Lead and Associate Director, and BN Durga, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, coordinated the survey, the translation and write-ups. Soumya Saxena and Samadhan Patil of the programme team in the state, anchored the research efforts in Madhya Pradesh, with Tanveer Kazi, Associate Director. Soumya translated the case studies collected in the state. In Jharkhand, Saurabh Kumar, Regional Director

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Assam and Meghalaya, Rehana Rehman of the programme team coordinated efforts, with Mrinal Gohain, National Senior Lead and Regional Manager, North East India Region.

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UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN WITCH-BRANDING OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Introduction

This study aims to provide an evidence-based analysis of the persecution and hunting of women as witches in indigenous and rural societies in India. It uses a feminist perspective to examine gender systems, factors in witches being persecuted and hunted, and the existing policies against witch practice in eight districts in five states in India. The research objectives include:

- » Taking stock of the persecution and hunting of witches in select states infamous for violence against witches.
- » Exploring how to maximize our efforts to end witch-persecution and hunting.
- » Contributing substantive inputs for the enactment of a national law and making amendments to existing state laws which are reportedly weak in enforceable measures.

The study also suggests some policy measures for strengthening state and civil society efforts at ending the practice of witch-persecution and hunting. Based on the objectives, the research framework includes:

- » Studying women's vulnerabilities due to being branded as witches.
- » Analysing the features of witch-accusations and their impact using a feminist lens.
- » Capturing people's views, cultural practices, and social norms and beliefs systems related to witch-persecution and hunting.
- » Assessing the implementation of laws against witch-persecution and hunting and assessing the effectiveness of these laws.

- » Reviewing the existing schemes and programmes for accused persons and suggesting possible strategies for ensuring dignified lives for the victims and survivors.

Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted during October-December 2020 in eight districts in five states in India: Goalpara district in Assam; East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya; Ranchi and Khunti in Jharkhand; Alirajpur in Madhya Pradesh; and Ganjam, Keonjhar, and Mayurbhanj in Odisha. The study team included both women and men who have been engaged in research and praxis opposing the persecution of women as witches in their communities.

An orientation session was held to discuss and finalize the research tools that would be used in the fieldwork: focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture the views, perspectives, and vulnerabilities of women related to witch-branding and killing were held; case studies on violation of rights and forms of violence against women branded as witches in different cultural practices were studied; media reports; local police records of witch hunts; interviews with state government officials, the women's commissions at the state level, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and key informants and other stakeholders, including *ojhas* (witch finders), village heads, women's groups, police officers, district magistrates, revenue officers, lawyers who are known to take witch related cases, school teachers, local health workers, women or men known for progressive ideas, and informal discussions with local leaders were also held. As part of the research study, an analysis of secondary sources was also done by collecting information from various published materials, materials in the public domain, and websites of government agencies, academic institutions, research centres, and individual researchers.

The research teams placed the following questions before the key informants:

- » What is the situation with regard to witch-branding and persecution in the area?
- » When is a woman or man likely to be branded a witch?
- » Is there any legal or community action to support a person who has been branded a witch?
- » Who are the *ojhas*? What is the basis of their powers?
- » As reports indicate, witch-branding increased during the coronavirus period. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?
- » How can this practice of witch-branding and persecution and killing of women be stopped?
- » What ideas do you have on how this practice can be ended legally and socially?
- » Are current legal provisions sufficient to deal with witch-hunting?
- » What is required for providing legal aid and protection to the survivors of witch hunts and their proper rehabilitation?
- » How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and reduce such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health service providers, and government agencies?
- » How have you influenced governments and other key actors regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting which has been prevalent over the years?

Prior to the fieldwork, a one-day orientation training for field researchers on research perspectives and research tools was organized. Questioning the dominant notion of strong objectivity in the conventional research practice, the orientation training infused the idea of using an analysis from a feminist standpoint based on lived experiences of those who had survived witch-violence in their unjust social order. Such research findings can be

more relevant for producing knowledge that can be used for building a human rights' centred social system (Harding, 2004).

We also discussed a situational analysis, inspired by Donna Haraway's *Concept of Situated Knowledges* (1991) foregrounding the mode of analysis which makes witch- violence more visible and making the silence of the alleged witches speak through the situation of the enquiry. Further, we discussed how *ojhas* use human and non-human ritualistic practices to identify and torture women and men who come out in support of women pre-identified as witches.

With regard to research ethics, our fieldwork was conducted with care and respect for the interviewees, keeping the information provided by the survivors of witch-violence confidential. Oral and written consent was taken prior to conducting the interviews and group discussions. In drafting the report or putting sensitive information in the public domain we have maintained anonymity.

The research team conducted 115 case studies and noted the persecution and killings of 84 women and 31 men. In three case studies, five women were attacked and killed as a group in Jharkhand (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Witch persecution/killing in eight selected districts in India
(based on cases between 2015 and 2020)

State	District	Number of Case Studies	Women	Men
Madhya Pradesh	Alirajpur	5	5	0
Odisha	Ganjam, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj	34	21	13
Assam	Goalpara	33	30	3
Meghalaya	East Khasi Hills	13	2	11
Jharkhand	Ranchi, Khunti	30	26	4
5 states	8 Districts	115	84	31

Theoretical underpinnings

We noted three streams of thought on witch-persecution and hunting. The first can be seen in anthropological studies on misfortune and the community role in witch-accusations within the cultural context of indigenous and rural societies (see for example, E. E. Evans-Prichard, 1934/1976 and Mary Douglas, 1970). They account for the development of the notion of witchcraft as a prominent occult praxis that occurs as a part of conflict resolution systems in human existence. These notions are part of indigenous people's faith in supernatural powers, which were supposedly considered to be superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women, living at the margins of the community, would be blamed for causing bad weather conditions, natural disasters, diseases, and deaths. Accused of being responsible for these detrimental events, violence against the accused such as flogging, rape, burning alive, and even murdering the accused, was seen as socially acceptable for weeding out anti-social elements (witches) from society.

The second stream of thought as seen in post-modernist studies, is in the context of contact between indigenous societies and capitalist modernism, as John and Jean Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches show modernity's malcontent, and Peter Geschiere's work on Africa's capitalist modernism (2013). Silvia Federici's book *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women* (2018) explains that capitalism and patriarchy together produced witches who were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children. Capitalist society made women's bodies a fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women as midwives, abortionists, and herbalists with their knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal powers and create generations of subjugated women with their domestic labour class, a condition for capitalism. Older women were attacked because they could no longer provide children or sexual services and were therefore considered a drain on the creation of wealth in the social system. In many of the research sites, we noted that older women who could no longer provide children and sexual services to men were denounced as witches.

They were seen as engaged in a demonic conspiracy, and therefore were thought to deserve a brutalized physical elimination.

The third stream combines a political economy approach with an analysis of culture and patriarchy (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020), and this is what the present study agrees with. We relate cultural aspects of witch-persecution and witch-hunting to economic, social, and political processes of change as well as to the creation or strengthening of patriarchy within indigenous and rural societies. This is an attempt to explain what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the paradox of doxa,' the historical structures of masculine order with its associated social relations of privileges and injustice. The most intolerable conditions of existence can often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu, 2001:1-4). However, at the same time, in the processes of dismantling the power structures and bringing in transformation in the social economic order we often misrecognize the androcentric principle as necessary for an objective analysis of social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we saw a crucial role played by men's monopolization of productive resources like land and housing and of ritual knowledge which is a socially higher valued knowledge. We tried to understand the pathways through which witch- persecution and witch-hunting "either support or oppose the structural transformation from subsistence to accumulative economies" (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020:3). As explained in the preceding pages, we follow the standpoint of women persecuted or hunted as witches in indigenous and rural societies in India.

The definition of a witch is, "one who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Needham, 1978:26) which was modified to "a person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to other humans" in 2004 (Hutton, 2004: 421). These definitions imply that there are people who use mystical or supernatural means to cause harm to others. Therefore, they suggest a justified belief in witchcraft that there are people

who exist who harm others through supernatural or mystical means. What is important to note is that such social beliefs result in a discourse that creates a reality that is manifested in practices of witch-persecution or witch-hunting. Based on a recent study, we would like to define a witch as “a person who is perceived to cause harm by supernatural means” (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020:4). In reality, people may not actually possess such occult powers to cause harm to others.

Social patterns in violence against witches

Research has shown that women and girls in the Scheduled Tribes (an official term used for indigenous people in India) face a higher prevalence of violence, labour exploitation, and harmful practices such as harassment and persecution as witches as compared to other women and girls in the country (DHS, 2005-06).

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that 2,468 murders were committed between 2001 and 2016, in which witch-persecution was recorded as the motive. In 2016, 134 persons were killed for supposedly practising witchcraft and were accused of causing illness or death of an individual or harming a family or a community. Table 2 shows incidents of killing of persons accused as witches during 2001-16; from 2017 onwards NCRB does not have specific data on killings due to witch-persecution or killing of alleged witches.

It is to be noted that NCRB data is likely to be an underestimate of the real figures on witches’ persecution and killing. Some cases of such killings may be recorded due to land disputes or other conflicts thus reducing the number of killings due to witches’ persecution. Further, the cases of witch-killings do not show other forms of persecution of supposed witches, whether the branding of women as witches or their torture through various

brutal forms, and the threats that women face in their communities. It is only after a woman who is branded a witch is killed, that she finds a place in police records. This view was reported to us by ASHA, a Ranchi based NGO active in opposing persecution of supposed witches. ASHA estimates that about 100,000 women have been branded as witches in Jharkhand, giving an average of three witch-accusations per village in Jharkhand's 32,000 villages (ASHA's report as quoted in Kelkar/Nathan, 2020:46).

In several cases we also noted that intra-caste and inter-caste feuds were settled by branding weaker households as "witch keepers". In such cases, the *ojhas* were generally compensated for their services by the dominant caste household or individual. The survivors of the poor households lacked required funds for court procedures and seeking justice. Moreover, the poor survivors did not receive much support from the police and local administration. The dominant households generally coming from a particular caste group continued with the practice of witch-branding showing legal disinterest in Dalits or Scheduled Caste people. The persecution and hunting of witches in associational living is not confined only to one caste vis-a-vis another caste, but rather the caste system as a state of mind poisons Dalits' relations with the state functionaries in the police and judiciary.

Three of the five states in our study, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Assam, have prevention of witch-practices acts to punish and deter the persecution of so-called witches. But it is not clear if there has been a decline in witch-persecutions and how effective these laws have been. Reportedly these laws are rather 'lame' or ineffective in implementation (PLD, 2014). However, Jharkhand is one of the states where the Police Records Bureau has been recording incidents of witch-killings month-wise since 2011 (*Table 3*). In Odisha, the State Commission for Women organized a National Convention on Emerging Challenges of Violence Against Women in February 2018. The convention noted three things: 1) cases of witch-violence directed against women were a gross violation of human rights

Table 2. Incidence of killing (murder and culpable homicide) of persons accused as witches

States	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
Andhra Pradesh/ Telengana	20	23	38	25	72	26	33	23	27	26	29	24	15	10	19* (8+11)
Arunachal Pradesh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Assam	3	1	1	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	5	1	-	0	1
Bihar	1	1	4	0	1	11	0	0	2	2	0	13	-	6	0
Chhattisgarh	16	4	14	11	9	10	8	15	6	8	17	8	7	16	17
Goa	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Gujarat	2	4	1	1	6	3	1	0	4	5	0	3	-	10	14
Haryana	2	0	0	0	28	34	30	26	32	58	5	0	0	0	2
Himachal Pradesh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Jammu & Kashmir	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
Jharkhand	22	28	19	28	26	30	50	52	37	15	36	26	54	47	27
Karnataka	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	77	0	-	0	0

(...contd)

through gruesome practices including thrashing, naked parading, balding, flogging, eating excreta, insertion of sharp objects in the anus or vagina, burning, chopping of body parts, and rape; 2) these brutal attacks on women are embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of the indigenous rural communities where *ojhas* and *bhagats* (faith healers) possess special powers which are supposed to counter the witches' 'evil' activities. The *ojhas* could also encourage the local affected people to act to free the community from witches and their ill-effects; and 3) the legal instrument the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013 has been ineffective and has concentrated only on irrationality or superstition. In most cases, the police have acted to seek a compromise between the victim (alleged witch) and the perpetrators who could be some local men, the *ojha* or *bhagat* (Odisha State Commission for Women, 2018).

It has been argued that "the witch is not solely or simply the creation of patriarchy" and that women are themselves engaged in fantasies which enable them to speak or otherwise manage fears and desires. It is likely that women, like men from these states, share a belief that the existence of witches makes a society weak from within. Therefore, the persecution of witches is supposed to be justified. However, it is important to note that these treacherous attacks on women being witches come from the close surroundings of the village or home and family, with men as the heads of the families, and where women put their trust in the people they live and work with as observed by Geschiere (2013) in the case of African societies. In the forest-based societies in five states in this study, the villagers had personal knowledge about all members of a clan or ethnic group in the village. This personal knowledge was used to form both social institutions and institutions to control and punish villagers for any transgression of social and gender norms.

Stylized solutions for punishing the witches (who, in most cases, are women) are carried out by a dominant coalition of men, with full support from the local *ojhas* / *bhagats*. Such a coalition involves two sets of villagers: one, based on their physical strength and conviction of their right to control

(...contd)

Table 2. Incidence of killing (murder and culpable homicide) of persons accused as witches

States	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
Kerala	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Madhya Pradesh	13	24	29	14	13	13	14	17	25	18	15	11	11	24	19
Maharashtra	6	14	9	4	7	9	14	11	11	11	13	1	-	5	2
Manipur	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Meghalaya	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	1	2	3	0	-	1	2
Mizoram	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Nagaland	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Orissa	30	39	26	22	25	36	28	23	36	34	41	32	24	32	24
Punjab	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
Rajasthan	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	1
Sikkim	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
Tamil Nadu	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	-	0	0

(...contd)

village land and resources with a belief system corresponding to their social systems. The second set of villagers also includes women, driven by their belief system in the existence and power of witches to harm children and others. They, therefore, tend to support efforts to eliminate a woman (or man) accused of supposedly practicing witchcraft, or a woman who has dared to defy the social rules and gender norms out of fear. In numerous cases, the dominant coalition of attackers or its leader, captures a large economic return from seizing the land and other assets of the women who are attacked or killed as witches, or, in some cases, who run away to escape organized violence. Importantly, violence against supposed witches encompasses the use of both threats and torture and killing.

The institutional structures of indigenous societies in India have resulted in having an 'adherent' social organization, characterized by "self-enforcing, incentive-compatible agreements among its members" which do not rely on state agencies or any third party to intervene in their internal affairs (North et al., 2014: 16). The role of outside law-enforcing agencies such as the police and judiciary is neither fully understood nor accepted by indigenous societies with their 'adherent' social organization. In contrast, the role of legal institutions to constrain or punish the use of violence is generally acceptable in 'contractual organizations' which use both the state or third-party enforcement of contracts to maintain law and order as well as incentive-compatible agreements among members such as a large number of non-indigenous or caste-based societies in the country.

The *ojha/badwa*

The authority of the *ojha* or *badwa* (the witch finder and traditional healer) is embedded in the institutional structure of indigenous and rural societies. He interprets formal rules, unwritten social and economic rules, formal social conventions, gender norms and behaviour, shared beliefs about the cause and cure of diseases, as well as the means of enforcement to limit individual behaviour of the local people.

(...contd)

Table 2. Incidence of killing (murder and culpable homicide) of persons accused as witches

States	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
Tripura	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	1	-	0	0
Uttar Pradesh	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Uttarakhand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
West Bengal	13	14	9	8	5	1	0	4	0	0	0	1	-	1	3
Total States	129	153	151	114	197	188	179	176	186	182	242	121	160	156	134

Source: National Crime Records Bureau.

Note*: Data not available/accessible for year 2015.

Table 3. Jharkhand Witch Killing Data (2011-20)

Year Month	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Jan	NA	3	2	4	1	3	3	6	1	1
Feb	NA	0	4	2	3	0	5	2	2	5
Mar	NA	7	5	1	4	1	4	3	6	0
Apr	3	6	1	9	2	4	2	1	0	2
May	4	2	2	1	10	4	2	1	2	4
Jun	3	4	5	3	2	6	3	2	1	1
July	4	3	8	5	4	2	2	5	4	3
Aug	5	2	5	4	12	8	3	5	2	1
Sep	1	3	8	4	4	5	5	2	6	2
Oct	8	1	2	5	2	5	1	0	1	3
Nov	4	3	4	4	4	5	6	2	4	3
Dec	3	2	2	2	0	2	5	1	5	N.A.
Total	35	36	48	44	48	45	41	30	34	25

Source: Jharkhand Police Records Bureau

https://www.jhpolice.gov.in/crime-statement?field_crime_stats_month_year_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Bmonth%5D=12&field_crime_stats_month_year_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Byear%5D=2016

In a FGD in a village in Mayurbhanj in Odisha (18 October 2020) the *ojha* was defined as, “The *ojhas* are those individuals who are supposed to have some magical power or healing capacities. People believe that they can save others from witchcraft. The *ojhas* are sometimes responsible for branding an individual as a witch.”

The *ojha* or *badwa* plays a key role in identifying witches and in advising the people how to free themselves from supposed witch attacks. In an interview with our research team in Madhya Pradesh, a *badwa* of Sadwa block said, “Witches are shape shifters and can turn into a dog, buffalo or any other animal to harm people. Whoever the witch casts an evil eye on can get stomach ache, itchy eyes, body rashes, or fever.” Furthermore, some panchayat members believe that “both women and men can be

witches, but it is mostly women. When a witch passes by you, you can feel a chill in your body, they can also cause instant headache and illness. A *badwa* can find out who is the witch, if the witch has caused his/her death. Sometimes it is necessary to kill the witch, so she does not cause more deaths,” (research team’s interview in a village in Alirajpur district in Madhya Pradesh).

In most of the cases, the village *ojha* has a critical role in identifying a person as a witch. Prior to the state-level witch prevention law, the *ojha* would be consulted for identifying a witch, most likely an old and unsupported woman, who was supposed to have caused illness or some misfortune to the family or community.

In recent years two factors have decreased the influence of *ojhas*: the witch prevention acts in several states and an increase in healthcare facilities in rural areas. Nonetheless, given the poor healthcare in indigenous and rural areas and marginal implementation of the witch prevention laws, the *ojhas* still hold an influence in the villages, acting as healers and witch finders. An *ojha* takes due care for his own protection, and stealthily practices his work. He charges a fee for his services in finding a witch who is said to have caused illness or other misfortune in the village.

There are not many healthcare facilities in rural and indigenous areas and people also prefer to go to the *ojha* or *badwa* when they fall ill, even though they pay a hefty amount for his services. The *ojhas*’ usual way of treatment is to blame some woman for causing the illness through witchcraft or by casting an evil eye.

In women’s testimonies in our fieldwork, we noticed that accusations were not usually made till the accuser was sure that those in the social group and the *ojha*, were convinced that there were grounds (such as some serious illness or death in the community) for accusing someone of being a witch and a vulnerable, old, single woman, or a woman without social support for her activities, was available to be accused. Accusing such a person on

the ground of practicing witchcraft to harm others was, therefore, a socially legitimate step with the community sanctioning a direct attack against a supposed witch, whether that attack was torture or killing.

Violence against witches is not an entirely straightforward act of killing. It is preceded by public action to degrade, humiliate, and torture the alleged witch through cruel and gruesome acts like forced consumption of excreta, drinking urine, rape, and pulling out her teeth and nails. Such cruel acts are justified as a way of freeing the village community from a witch. "The killing is done in such a way as to imply sadistic pleasure... In this fashion most of the victims who are unlikely and do not have a strong aura (*ryngiew*) to ward off evil, are killed" (Nonglait and Syiemlieh, 2014:194).

Men as witches

Some men are also attacked as witches. They are usually branded as witches for three reasons: 1) when a man is seen to oppose accusations of being a witch against his partner or wife, in particular, at a time when she is tortured or likely to be killed; 2) when the household has accumulated wealth or resources and has refused to relate to the community members on equal terms in community gatherings, feasting, and dancing, or he is seen as considering himself above others; and 3) when a man is seen as engaging in accumulation through exploiting others. In the traditional Khasi society of Meghalaya, accumulation is directly associated with worship of U Thlen (the serpent), who feeds itself on human blood. Well-off persons are socially considered as 'others' in the community and 'strangers' visiting the community for their own greedy interests. They are believed to exploit villagers to feed the U Thlen for their wealth. They are often in a negative relationship between 'us,' the clan-based community, and 'others.' These well-off 'others' are unwelcome and unknown 'strangers' and are in a negative relationship with the community and have refused to share 'surplus food' and accumulated resources. For the community to remain a cohesive Khasi society, they are thought to deserve to be eliminated

like visiting strangers, who are usually looked upon with suspicion and are often pushed out of the village, while some are killed or tortured. Interestingly, in the matrilineal Khasi society of Meghalaya, a larger number of men (11 of 13 cases) were accused of practicing witchcraft and even more strangely, men were both accusers and accused. It is to be noted that in this matrilineal system, land and lineage are the women's domain, but decision-making is done in the *Darbor Shnong* (the village assembly of males) and in other such structures of governance which are a male domain.

Is there a justified belief in the existence of witches?

Is there a justified belief in the existence of witches? Our fieldwork showed that in most cases it was the *ojha* who identified a witch in the concerned community. Based on tensions related to land and property or jealousies, such a person would be an unsupported single old woman, or a male stranger visiting the village for some unknown reason in the case of Meghalaya. This was followed by ritual-based torture (pulling out the nails, teeth, forced consumption of excreta, burning, etc.) used for extracting a confession that she/he is a witch. This ritual-based torture for confession is the only evidence before she is killed or driven out of the village or community. There is no getting off for the accused other than to confess. Any denial is likely to increase the torture. Even in cases where some progressive villager or a family member has managed to save an alleged witch with police support, the accusation of being a witch sticks for her lifetime. She lives the rest of her life branded a witch who uses supernatural powers to harm others. She has an isolated life in the village, living under constant fear of punishment in case of any misfortune in the community.

Our case studies as well as literature on witchcraft show that accusations of witchcraft are rumour-based beliefs. There is no concrete evidence of using supernatural powers such as those of inserting poison or

causing illness from a distance or sucking blood to harm others. During our field discussions, we noted that those who argued in favour of the existence of witches and witch practices admitted that there can be no physical evidence of supernatural powers. The rumour-led basis of witch-accusations means having a system of knowing from neighbours about some strange rituals or prayers being offered to strange, unfamiliar gods and spirits. The result of such rituals is illnesses, deaths, and other harm to crops and cattle caused by these actions of the witches. As rightly noted by Kelkar/Nathan (2020:33), “the evidence we would need to establish supernatural powers are experiences such as that of blood being sucked or organs being removed from a distance, or that of living dead, zombies, being put to work.”

We, therefore, question the role of beliefs in witch-practice. The judicial demand for concrete evidence is likely to work in a substantial reduction or even ending violence against alleged witches. In two cases in Meghalaya, the Darbor Shnong of village Laitlyngkh asked the accuser party for concrete proof regarding the accusations in 2016. When they could not provide any solid proof, the accusers were reprimanded by the Darbor Shnong for their baseless accusations. In another case in village Laitkyrhong in March-April 2019, a formerly accused person was elevated and entrusted with some village administrative responsibilities as a show of support by the Darbor Shnong of the village. This was followed by a decision within a raid (a cluster of villages) to make a rule for all villages in the raid prohibiting accusing any person as practicing witchcraft. If any person were to do so and any violence were to occur because of such accusations, liability would fall on that individual alone. After such a regulation, no other instance of witch-branding has occurred (Field report on Meghalaya, Patricia Rika Dohtdong in her discussion with a village headman).

A review of European history indicates four changes, in particular, that had a bearing on the decline of witch persecution and prosecution: (1) introduction of legal safeguards including legal assistance in the treatment

of alleged witches, with resulting effects on ‘judicial scepticism,’ leading to a fundamental doubt whether witchcraft even existed; (2) change in thinking regarding witchcraft, as a result of the expansion of rational, scientific, and secular education that denied the reality of the witchcraft practice and the possibility of its crime; (3) improved standard of living and an increase in available and effective medicines; and (4) change from rural to urban environments, where communities came to be continuously in a state of flux, with a less intimate and collective community and shared group knowledge, providing a pathway for increasingly interrupted traditions and beliefs, thus weakening the grounds for accusations of misfortunes or maleficence (Davis, 2008; Levack, 2008).

Table 4. Factors in witch-persecutions in India

Factors	Number of Charges
Land	17
Jealousy	11
Causing illness	49
Unconventional religious practices	17
Strangers in the village	12
Women’s agency and assertion of rights	09
Total	115

Factors in witch-persecution and hunting

Our field investigation showed that the identity of a woman who is likely to be identified as a witch is generally known in the village. Hence, we thought it was necessary to understand the driving factors in the persecution and hunting of supposed witches. The accounts of persecution and hunting were narrated by the victims themselves or by their survivors.

Land

Land is the key factor of production in the studied indigenous and rural communities. Except Meghalaya, with its matrilineal system, all the other states practice a patrilineal descent; land is passed from father to son or sons. Women do not get any share of the land. As widows, women can have varying rights in land, from maintenance to managing rights. After the death of a widow, if there are no sons, the land passes on to her husband's nearest male relative like the brother-in-law or nephew. Seizing land from widows was noted as a major reason for women's persecution and witch-hunting of elderly and widowed women in our research sites.

In this system of land ownership, women are not part of the husband's lineage. Land remains with the patrilineage. The lineage is identified not only by land but also by clan or lineage spirits. The identity of these spirits is also passed on from father to son. Women are not supposed to know the identity of these clan spirits.

The connection between attempts to deny women land rights and witch-persecution was made in Kelkar and Nathan in 1991. It has since been brought up in many studies, including those conducted over the past several years by Partners in Law and Development (PLD, 2012,2014) and in various newspaper reports.

In the seizure of land and other properties, it is not women who are breaking the rules of the control and management of land. It is the male relatives who are breaking these rules in trying to quickly acquire control over the land and properties from single/widowed/unsupported women. This seems to be an attempt to establish a stronger form of patriarchy, one where women have no property rights and where even maintenance is at the will of men. Along with this, it is also an attempt to increase economic growth of the lineage or extended family. After the death of the

husband with no sons, the surviving widow is not a part of the lineage. In our case studies, we noted that cases of violence against witches largely had a background of struggles over land, particularly attempts by relatives on the male side to take over the land held by widows or unsupported women. There are also other factors such as jealousy, illness in poor health conditions, unconventional religious practices, and the presence of a stranger in the village that seem to be based on growing inequalities within the relatively equal indigenous societies.

Jealousy

Jealousy was stated as a factor in witch-accusations in the 1850s, well before some noticeable inroads of capitalist relations in indigenous societies (Mallick, 2017). Jealousy can be related to any kind of difference, such as of having more food, cattle, or fields, of children doing better in school, or migrant daughters working in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, and Gurugram who send some money home to buy consumables related to urban life. Earlier, such jealousies were kept under control by organizing periodic feasts for community members. But now these redistributions do not occur. Studies of Khasi society suggest that the idea of jealousy over riches and the greed for wealth is directly associated with the worship of U Thlen, who is fed on human blood. Furthermore, well-off persons are often looked at with suspicion as 'others' in the village, with the supposition that they have acquired wealth through unfair and suspicious means. The Khasi principle of righteousness '*kamai ia ka hok*' says that one needs to earn "as much as one needs, not as much as one wants" (Field notes in Meghalaya, December 2020)

In traditional indigenous and rural societies, the communities had reciprocal redistributive mechanisms of feasting which ensured that the surplus was not accumulated, leading to permanent distinctions within a village. In case any such accumulation did take place more deliberate action of forced feasting was undertaken to ensure that permanent class distinctions did not get set. We can see examples of such redistributive mechanisms among

the Mundas in Jharkhand and there are similar institutions of redistribution among other indigenous and rural communities too such as the Khasis of Meghalaya, which ensured that at the village level, only the families of the *lyngdoh* (the priest) were better off than the rest.

Causing Illness

In a subsistence economy of the indigenous people, there is little development of healthcare facilities. Any minor or major illness is seen as an act of misfortune, caused by supernatural powers, as an act of a witch. In the absence of an adequate healthcare system, the default social understanding of illness is caused by an evil intention or mischief of some witch. The affected family or individual consults the *ojha*, and he is likely to identify an elderly, unsupported woman who is said to have used her witchcraft to cause the illness or death. To prevent such a misfortune from developing further, the identified person is dragged out of her home into a public space and tortured to make a confession that she has used witchcraft to cause the illness or death. In a very inhuman, brutal way she is tortured or killed to free the community from further spread of disease or death. In our study of 102 cases, 41 women (and men) were accused of causing illnesses and deaths in the local areas.

Unconventional Religious Practices

Mitti (name changed) lives with her husband and children in a village in Alirajpur district, Madhya Pradesh. She was living next to her brother-in-law and his family in their ancestral home. The brother-in-law's daughter fell sick and did not show any sign of improving. The brother-in-law took his daughter to a local *ojha*, instead of taking her to a doctor. The girl's condition deteriorated further. Seeing this, the brother-in-law and his wife started blaming Mitti for the girl's illness, fighting with Mitti and her husband and forcing them to leave the house.

Mitti now lives in a separate house with her husband, and she is regularly heckled as a witch by her sister-in-law and others in the village. She was unable to take any legal action due to the absence of any legal mechanism to protect her from this harassment of being branded a witch in the community.

Source: Research team in Madhya Pradesh.

Among the Mundas, Santhals, and other indigenous societies in India women are not supposed to know the clan spirits. A woman who is observed openly praying can often be suspected of praying to the clan spirits for special powers. This is then used for securing a good fortune for herself or her family. However, it is seen that a woman's illicit communion with the spirits is a way of acquiring special powers for herself and doing

Patti Rabha (name changed) lived in a village in Goalpara district, Assam with her husband and four children. She had set up a small temple of Shiva and Parvati (Hindu gods) in her house. This was not a normal practice among the villagers and they saw her suspiciously. One day in July 2006 someone left a dead snake in front of her house, which her husband picked up and threw away. This was seen as Patti's engagement with witchcraft, a witch who worshipped the god Shiva with a snake encircling his neck. Next day, an old man died for which Patti was held responsible. People came thronging to her house and destroyed the temple and the house including plants and trees. Her hands were tied and she was badly beaten by the villagers. In a meeting organized on the same day, a decision was taken to bury Patti alive. Petrified Patti fled the village with the help of some friends as she had seen such an incident happening in the village earlier.

Source: Research team in Assam.

good for her family and harm to others. In this manner, she is expected to play a service role like cleaning the place of worship, and cooking on spirit worship occasions, but not to participate in praying to the spirits and keeping herself away when a man is praying to the clan spirits. Any attempt by a woman to chant to a Hindu god or, in some cases, converting to Christianity can result in her being declared a witch thus deserving punishment in terms of physical torture or being driven out of the community. In some cases, a hefty fine or a serious penalty has to be paid before she is allowed to live in her village or in her household.

The idea of difference: Strangers in the village

The recent market-based economic changes, reinforced by patriarchal socio-political systems have transformed the earlier village-based morality, leading to a breakdown of traditional norms and bringing forth reactions to

this breakdown of the norms. In Meghalaya, for example, we came across several cases where a person from outside the village if seen visiting the village, was attacked for his potential witchcraft activities. The village children or adults saw him as a '*man-ai-ksuid*' (witch) or a *menshonoh* (worshipper of the serpent, U Thlen), who had presumably come to collect human blood for U Thlen. In the process the person would be attacked by the villagers. During the fieldwork in East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya in October-November 2020 our research team noted persons or families who were well-off and were often looked at as 'others' in the village. Similarly, strangers were often looked at with suspicion since they did not belong to the community. Additionally, persons who did not have strong familial relations with those residing in the village were also targeted.

Agency/Assertion of Rights

In our case studies there were nine cases (of the 115 cases) in which women were persecuted for being independent and /or assertive. While women are expected to work hard for the well-being of their households or families, they are also expected to remain obedient, subordinate, and follow the decisions taken by the household head (mostly men). Except for matrilineal Meghalaya, marriage in other states is patrilocal. Women

A smart, bold, and a dynamic person, especially if it happens to be a female, is more likely to be accused of being a witch. Kamla Rabha (name changed), from a village in Assam is an expert weaver who earned well by selling clothes. This was envied by some neighbours. She was seen as a very bold person who would speak on the face if she saw any misdeeds in the village. Her husband was perceived as being relatively weak, with limited intelligent. Her smartness was not appreciated by her in-laws too. One day her sister-in-law had vomiting and diarrhoea. Kamla demanded that as a cure a black chicken should be sacrificed. This was regarded as evidence that she was a witch, more so because she was generally disliked for being very bold and strident. It was suggested that a ritual should be performed taking Kamla as the witch. But as the health condition of the patient did not improve, Kamla was accused and a group of persons led by her brother-in-law searched for evidence in Kamla's house. She was even stripped to see if she had hidden any evidence on her body. Fortunately for her, before more torture, the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) was informed, and her case was settled.

Source: Research team in Assam.

leave their natal village and lose all the social networks that they have in their parental home and go to a village where they neither have a social network nor independence nor authority to take decisions or have control over house and land. In a patriarchal social system, if a woman asserts her independence or rights over resources, she can be branded a witch. Such branding is followed by persecution and torture which is meant to prevent women from asserting their independence and securing their rights.

The 33 per cent reservation of seats in local government (panchayats) provides women with opportunities of political expression. This, however, is something that is not allowed in indigenous village governance structures. Even in matrilineal Meghalaya, women are not included as members of the village assembly, *Dorbor Shnong*. Economic growth is expected to provide women opportunities for new economic activities and control over productive assets that they could manage without relying on their husbands' land and property. However, this is not the case for rural women in most of the rural and indigenous areas in the country.

Women's assertion of their independence and rights can also be in the form of their expressive participation in prayers or worship rituals. As stated earlier, women are not supposed to know the identity of patriclan spirits. Carrying out ritual activities can be interpreted as an 'unconventional religious practice,' something aimed at acquiring evil powers to cause harm to others and, thus, invite persecution as supposed witches.

Role of the law: The police and administration

We deal with the police and administration together since it is their task to implement the laws and provide protection to those who are under threat of their human rights being violated. The police are the first officials of the state who the victims and their families approach, either on apprehending danger or after the event. In both Odisha and Assam there seems to be

a high number of victims or their relatives approaching the police. This is somewhat different from Jharkhand where approaching the police is somewhat less. There are many pressures from the community not to approach the police (PLD, 2012: 7). Such pressures are likely to be exerted in all areas, but they seem to be more effective in Jharkhand than in the other study states. Of course, it could also be that in Jharkhand, compared to Assam and Odisha, the alleged witches and their families are themselves less inclined to approach the police, believing that these are internal matters that should be settled within the community.

The police too seem to take a similar attitude. Where there is not a murder involved, they suggest a compromise. As pointed out in PLD (2012: 8) it is not in community forums that compromises are suggested or arrived at, but in police stations. Till there is a murder this seems to be the preferred option of the police.

Discussions with the police and other officials revealed that the police and administration considered witch-persecution a matter of indigenous people's belief. That is correct as far as it goes, but such an understanding should not militate against official action on receiving complaints of harassment, abuse, or torture. Many officials themselves harbour these beliefs. For instance, at a meeting in Nandurbar in Maharashtra, the Deputy Collector was reported to have made a 10-minute speech on who is a witch, her appearance, and what she does. With such beliefs being held by the officials whose job is protecting the victims whose rights have been violated, it should come as no surprise that police are found to "lack the will to implement the laws and undertake vigorous investigation" (PLD, 2012: 6).

In most of our case studies and studies conducted earlier (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020; PLD, 2012, 2014) show that the police usually intervene only when a murder takes place. Murder is a crime that the police cannot ignore, and the police is forced to file an FIR and follow up with investigations and a case. But the frequent failure of the police to intervene earlier, when warned

of someone being branded a witch, is a high threshold of legal neglect. Where there are actual violations of rights, as through calling a person a witch or assaulting the person, there is no intervention by the police and administration. Such branding violates Section 504 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) “intentional insult to provoke breach of peace;” and Section 506 “criminal intimidation.” Offenses under both these sections carry prison sentence of two to seven years. We also saw in cases in Assam and Odisha, that when the police intervened at an early stage of witch-accusations or persecution, it did help to forestall escalation into a murder.

In an earlier study (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020) we noted the complicity of the administration in a bizarre fashion in Bastar district in Chhattisgarh. In Bastar, the instrument for finding witches is called *anga*; it is a snake-headed cot, carried by four men who are inevitably in a state of inebriation when they set out to identify a witch. Sometime in the British colonial rule this instrument was placed under the custody of the District Collector. It can only be released on a community petition. In 1999-2000 the author of this study was a witness to this *anga* being released for finding a supposed witch in the Kondagaon area in the district. One wonders how the District Magistrate would have justified his complicity in the subsequent case of witch-hunting.

Court cases

When cases come up before the courts there are further problems. Influenced by social beliefs about witchcraft, in many cases witnesses do not come forward to testify. The alleged witch is scared of having to continue living in the community. The close kinship relationship between survivors and perpetrators makes it difficult for witnesses to come forward for a public testimony.

It is not just a matter of community involvement. It is also power relations within the community, with the *ojha* or other such persons belonging to the more powerful in the community. In addition, majority support for the

accuser also makes it difficult for progressive dissenters to come forward. The witnesses who do come forward are those who are closely related to the victims. And the testimonies of such family members as witnesses are frequently rejected by the courts (PLD, 2014) obviously suspecting bias among the witnesses. This, however, ignores the important point that only close family members are likely to go against community opinion in appearing as witnesses.

After all these hurdles in being found guilty, judges could end up being lenient in sentencing because of the strong indigenous beliefs involved. One judge found this to be a mitigating factor. "Superstitious belief that he was morally justified in committing the murder" was made a mitigating factor for a lenient sentence (Cornell, 2014: 12).

Laws against witch-persecution

There is no national level legislation that penalizes witch-hunting and the state level laws are too weak to act as potential deterrents. But the various provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 are used for registering offences and cases. The different sections invoked in such cases are Section 302, which deals with murder; Section 307, attempt to murder; Section 323, hurt; Section 376 on rape; and Section 354, which deals with the curiously termed "outraging the modesty of a woman." The gendered nature of the crime of witch-persecution is only brought out through charges in Section 376 for rape and Section 354 for sexual harassment of some kind.

Some states have come up with laws to specifically tackle the problem of witch-hunting. Bihar was the first to pass the Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act in 1999. Since this was the then-unified Bihar, it also applied to what is now Jharkhand. But when the state of Jharkhand was formed it passed its own Anti-Witchcraft Act in 2001. Sections 3, 4, 5, and 6 of this act deal with punishment for denouncing a person as a witch and causing any damage to her. Section 7 deals with the procedure for trial.

In Odisha and Assam, civil society and women activists took the initiative to press for anti-witch persecution laws, which were passed in 2013 and 2015 respectively.

All these acts prescribe various types of punishments, including prison terms and fines for labelling someone a witch, causing her harm, and so on. But the punishment in these acts is less than in corresponding sections of the IPC. For instance, the Jharkhand Act prescribes a maximum sentence of four months simple imprisonment for causing “physical and mental harm,” which is lower than the sentence provided under IPC.

The existence of a law against witch-persecution certainly serves to draw attention to the existence of the practice and the necessity of eradicating it. These laws, however weak, have resulted in creating a fear of legal punitive action among the *ojhas* or *badwas*. In many cases in India, the survivors of witch-violence have been forced to live as outcasts. During our fieldwork in Jharkhand in 2019, we met 13 women and one man who narrated tearful stories of their torture and brutalized persecution. However, there was also a case in Jharkhand where a woman who was being accused of practicing witchcraft went to the *ojha* and threatened to take him to court if he confirmed her a witch. “This threat of legal action worked and the *ojha* did not declare her a witch” (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020:214). This shows that in a situation where a law has been enacted, women who live in fear of being declared witches or driven out of the community can take action to save themselves.

The *ojhas* are no longer as powerful as they used to be in the years prior to the anti-witch laws. But, since the punishment provisions are quite meagre and are less than those under corresponding sections of the IPC, it is doubtful if they serve as deterrents. This is not an argument against stricter punishment but is meant to point out the inadequacy of dealing with witch-persecution only as a legal matter. The strong belief systems behind witch-accusations and the social beliefs surrounding witch-persecution need to be dealt with, along with a more effective legal and punitive system.

Legally dealing with witch-hunting is not only an obligation under state and national laws but also a Constitutional requirement as well as an obligation under various international covenants to which India is party. The Supreme Court of India has ruled that Article 51 of the Directive Principles of State Policy are “fundamental to the governance of the country” and that states must apply these Principles, including respect “for international law and treaty obligations” (Indian Constitution, Article 51). The Supreme Court has also ruled that the Indian Constitution must itself be interpreted in the light of India’s international treaties and in conformity with international law (*Gramophone Company of India v. Birendra Bahadur Pandey*, 1984, SCR (2) 664, quoted in Cornell, 2014). In yet another case (*Visakha v. State of Rajasthan*) the Supreme Court took the doctrine of international obligations even further. “[...]it] is now an accepted rule of judicial construction that regard must be had to international conventions and norms for constructing domestic law when there is no inconsistency between them and there is a void in the domestic law” (Cornell, 2014).

India is signatory to a number of international covenants with serious implications for action to deal with witch-hunting. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1970) are foundational international documents of basic civil rights for women and men. The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) makes it binding to eliminate all discrimination and cruelty against women. Section 5(a) of CEDAW requires states to take appropriate action to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, something which requires action against witch-hunting.

Witch hunting is a gender-based form of violence that constitutes a form of discrimination against women. The state’s responsibility is not only to eschew government action of this type but also to prevent private action that is discriminatory against women. The Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women had noted in General Comment No. 19

(Cornell, 2014: 14) that states must take measures to eliminate private discrimination and states may be held responsible for private acts “if they fail to act with due diligence to prevent violation of rights or to investigate and punish acts of violence, and for providing compensation.”

The UNHCR Committee in its General Comment No. 4 also held that the obligation required not only preventive measures, but also affirmative action to enable positive enjoyment of rights. Among the many measures proposed, the UNHCR Committee asked for compilation of statistics and effective measures to overcome customs, attitudes, and practices that support gender-based violence. In addition to the CEDAW Committee and UNHCR, the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women also called attention to the problem of violence against alleged witched as violence against women in India in 2002 (Cornell, 2014: 18).

Thus, the Indian State (including both central and state governments, administrations, and the judicial system) could be held accountable if due diligence is not observed in investigating and punishing acts of witch-hunting. Our discussions with officials revealed that they did not expect much effective action from the state in witch-cases. They pointed out that in most cases people did not approach the police to file complaints. In other cases, they mentioned that witnesses turned hostile and did not testify in court.

The Path Forward: How do we end the witch-hunts?

In recent years two positions have emerged to deal with witch-persecution and hunting. The first is the need for a central or national law with effective and enforceable mechanisms; and the second, there is belief in witchcraft through which harm is caused to others, but persecution and killing of women (and men) has to be stopped. The first position is needed but is likely to have limited results and the second can result in ambiguities, as we have seen in the case of several countries in Africa.

At a general level we have raised three actions for the decline and eventual end of witch- persecution and hunting: 1) effective state mechanisms against persecution and killing of witches; 2) change in patriarchal mindsets and attitudes towards witch-persecution and hunting; and 3) demand for concrete evidence of witchcraft and building community support to dismantle the authority and power of *ojhas*, *badwas*, and the like.

Socioeconomic structural transformations are gendered processes, embedding in them the malcontents of modernity of targeting women as witches. It is to be noted that women have played an important influential role in challenging masculine prerogatives. For example, the most diminished categories of social relationships is the status of 'head of the family' generally held by men, which has declined in the developing world and the power to provide can no longer be exercised (Mbembe, 2006:326). With women's greater involvement in agriculture and unorganized sectors in developing economies, there is greater economic emergence of women. Research on women's roles in agricultural production and in the unorganized sectors shows that men's position and power to provide for the family can no longer be held as a masculine prerogative.

The legal and norms-based inequalities in feminist economic analyses raise questions about men's role as decision-makers and owners of land and property within the family and outside in wider society. Some policy efforts to change these types of gender inequalities (for example, The Hindu Succession Amendment Act, 2005) are limited by social norms and cultural systems. These barriers need to be changed following a multi-pronged approach: 1) State-instituted measures for women's unmediated rights to productive assets -- land and property; 2) providing economic incentives for change in misogyny in social norms and individual attitudes, like zero-stamp duties in case of land and property transfers in women's names; and 3) along with these, the state and central governments need to institute universal forms of social security like provision of education (including higher and technical education), healthcare, and nutrition as well as freedom from gender-based violence within the domestic

sphere, workplaces, and in public spaces. What needs to be understood and advocated is that these universal forms of social security are not deductions from productive investments. The state provision for universal forms of social security measures and women's freedom from gendered mobility are productivity enhancing measures.

Kelkar/Nathan (2020) and our field research shows that the socioeconomic context of indigenous and rural societies in India has changed from a non-accumulative to an accumulative economy. In the current economic transformation, we notice a paradox of a rise in hegemonic masculinity and women's increased struggles against this hegemonic masculinity. Rather than carrying out witch-persecutions and hunting to oppose the system of accumulation, a better option would be state instituted enforceable measures for new forms of rights-based approaches to embrace women's dignity and equality.

We noted that witch prevention laws in several states have brought some change in the earlier fearless persecution and hunting of women as witches. Both the *ojhas* and the community or familial actors engaged in witch-hunting have a sense of fear about legal punitive action by the police. This sense of fear about being engaged in an illicit activity with some additional measures, can act as a deterrent to witches' persecution and hunting. There is a need for stringent laws, including a central national law against witches' persecution. Effective implementation of the national/central laws can change reportedly hesitant and timid action by the police and social scepticism, leading to a fundamental change in norms about the existence of witches and witchcraft practices.

Any legal change by itself may not work in ending violence against supposed witches. Two simultaneous policy measures are required to minimize and eventually end the practice of belief in witchcraft and the justification of violence related to such a belief. First, decentralized healthcare facilities in rural and indigenous areas. In 19th century in central India (now the state of Chhattisgarh) cholera was thought to be caused by witches (see

Macdonald, 2004: 22-23). Later, people came to understand that cholera was related to unclean water and it could be treated with oral rehydration. This ended the 'cholera witches' phenomenon, though belief in witches took other forms, including fever and general illness with its potential threat of death of children and adults.

Second, a policy change in beliefs about the existence of witches and witchcraft practices is also needed. Norms related to such beliefs can change. They can change with political measures to promote indigenous and rural women's engagement with elevated socio-political tasks and roles. It is important to recognize that a structure of gender norms has internal dynamics of change, undermining the present patterns in gender roles. Some mediating factors in this potential change can be access and use of technology such as mobile phones, television and forces of gender-specific democratization brought about by the women's movement that campaigns against the notion of persons acquiring evil powers and organizing discussions by local, gender-responsive, women's groups on good examples of resistance against beliefs in the existence of witches, of women who successfully fought against being branded/ persecuted as witches. There are examples, such as Chutni Devi in Jharkhand and Birubala Rabha in Assam, who were recently honoured with the 'Padmashri' award for their work with alleged witches as well as Haribai of Rajasthan who successfully fought against a caste-based group of grabbers of her land and now lives in her village with dignity and rights in her house and land (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020). A combination of all these examples is likely to diminish and eventually end the belief in witches and witchcraft.

In a High Court case in 2018 belief in witchcraft was considered a mitigating circumstance in case of witch hunts. Likewise, in South Africa too courts have reduced sentences on the ground of the perpetrators' beliefs in witchcraft (Comaroff, 2004). As we understand there is one legal system and varied cultural ideas of justice. Admittedly the cultural ideas of justice may not all be uniform. Survivors of witch hunts may have different

ideas of culture-based justice from the perpetrators of witch violence. However, we think that it is necessary to be careful with the use of beliefs or culture as mitigating circumstances. What about the case of 'sati' (widow burning) or more recent 'honour killing' of women, who got married against traditional norms of their families or communities? It would be difficult to argue that beliefs of a particular culture should be accepted as mitigating circumstances.

The existence of witchcraft is said to be a part of belief systems of many indigenous people. We have a limited understanding of beliefs that result directly from the nature of human consciousness and actions. As against the economists' claim that individuals are rational (that is, act in what they think to be their self-interest), we see them acting in "a complicated amalgam of their preferences over different outcomes, the alternatives they face, and their beliefs about their actions will affect the world around them" (North et al., 2009: 18). Their actions are intentional, with a purpose to achieve the best outcomes in the experience of social interactions, organizations, and networks. Individual jealousies over accumulation of resources or collective frenzy to free society from the adverse effects of witchcraft is likely to be embedded in a belief system that views women functioning in a subordinate yet manipulative position, with no agential rights to decision making and ritual practices. Any potential transgression of these gender norms is likely to cause harm through death or disaster for the social group or the family in which they live.

The role of the state in providing unmediated productive assets and resource-based equality and dignity to indigenous and rural women, social security, and freedom from fear of violence in domestic and public spaces are crucial in an attempt to overcome witch- persecution and witch hunts. More important, however, is removing beliefs in witchcraft through legal changes and by instituting policies and practices of changing misogyny in social norms and of dignity to women in individual and collective attitudes.

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CASE STUDIES OF WITCH-HUNTING IN FIVE STATES

Assam

Case Study 1

Suguni Rabha (38 years) is a married woman living with her husband and four children in Satabari village, Lakhipur, Goalpara. She is married to Silmohan Rabha who is a cultivator. By birth, Suguni is a Rajbongshi. Her natal home is in Baijan, Agia, Goalpara. They are eight brothers and sisters. After their father's death Suguni was adopted by a Rabha family of Medhipara which is 30 km from her natal home. She was then 5-years-old. This Rabha family did not have girl child but had five boys. So, they adopted Suguni. Unfortunately, after three years, her foster mother died and she returned to her natal home. When she became eligible for marriage she again came to live in her foster parents' house and from there she got married to a Rabha boy (Silmohan Rabha).

Suguni was happy with her husband and four children. She and her family had good relations with their nearest neighbours, Brajen Rabha's family. However, her coming from another community and her worship process, which was unusual for the people of the village, comprising a homogenous Rabha population, made the villagers a little suspicious about her. Therefore, when Brajen's daughter Banarita got sick in 2009, Brajen's family held Suguni responsible. In 2011 Banarita who was then a student of Class IX became sick again. She had high fever and she uttered Suguni's name for her disease. Banarita's brother Bidyut Rabha got angry and ran to Suguni's house with a dagger in hand to kill her. Suguni had already escaped from her home and was hiding in another place in the village. Her husband and two sons also were not there at that time. Suguni had sent her daughter to Guwahati for safety.

The next day, Suguni called a meeting at her home and the village people gathered there. But they could not provide any solution and Banarita's

family started mentally abusing her every day. Suguni approached the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and with its help she approached the police to complain against Brajen's family. The police came to her village along with AMSS workers and sat with the villagers. After a long discussion the community came to the conclusion that Suguni would stay in the village with dignity and she would not face any trouble from Brajen's family.

Now Suguni is staying in her home in the village but she is worried all the time thinking about her own as well as her family's safety.

Case Study 2

Sanabala Rabha, is a 45-year-old widow. She has four daughters. She was a resident of Uppor Khamari village, Tikrikilla, Meghalaya, the border area of Lakhipur block. The incident happened in 2005. After her husband's death (in 2003) Sanabala started a small tea shop for earning some money. Her daughters helped her in the shop. She was poor and somehow managed her family with the meagre income from the shop.

Rahinath Rabha is her neighbour. He is a pharmacist and is working in the government hospital nearby. One day his mother got sick. When asked by the villagers, Rahinath's mother took three to four names including Sanabala's. On that day, she was sitting in her shop as usual. Her youngest daughter rushed to her and informed her that a witch had been identified. Meanwhile a group of people came and asked her to come with them at once. She went with them and was offered a place to sit at Rahinath's house. At that time the sick woman was repeatedly shouting Sanabala's name as a witch and as soon as she reached, she ordered her to admit that she was a witch. The villagers then labelled her a witch.

The next day, Rahinath and the other villagers broke Sanabala's shop. They threw her household things outside and asked her to leave the place. Sanabala filed a case in the police station. The police took a bribe from Rahinath and ignored the case. After one week the people broke her house too. Sanabala's son-in-law (a distant relative) protested this. Rahinath cut

all the trees and plants in Sanabala's backyard. They called a meeting where Sanabala had to prove that she was not a witch. They forced her to wear iron balls of a fishing net to prove whether she was a witch or not. They took many tests and she proved them wrong. But she was still beaten up. They wanted to kill her, but some of them prevented this. Sanabala was offered a place near the crematorium to live, which she refused as it was not safe.

Sanabala was forcefully evicted from her house where she had lived for 27 years. Since she had no registration of her land, she could not demand it. Sanabala came to her mother's place keeping her household goods in Prazina T. Sangma's house, (a neighbour and the ANM). After a few days she went to her cousin's place in Goalpara, Assam and stayed there for two years. From there she came back to her sister's place in Bogadol village, Tikrikilla, Meghalaya and is living there now. There also she faces mental trouble from the community. They imposed a Rs 2000 fine on her sister's son for giving shelter to a witch. The villagers have occupied her land in Uppor Khamari village, Meghalaya and set up a ME school there. Interestingly, they occupied her land in 2005-06 but the signboard on the gate of the school showed the year as 2003.

A year after the event, she came to know about AMSS. She went to AMSS' Goalpara District Implementation Unit and requested its intervention in the matter. AMSS functionaries took help from the police and negotiated the matter with the villagers. They asked the villagers to give back Sanabala's land. The villagers showed them the alternate that they had offered to her near the cremation ground. But it was not justice for her. Now she is living with her sister. Due to a financial crisis, her two daughters were married at a very young age. Thus, she lost her land and property and is leading a pathetic life for no fault of hers.

Case Study 3

Raneswari Rabha, is a 45-year-old woman and a resident of No. 2 Nagowapara village in Tikrikilla police station in Meghalaya, the border area

of Lakhipur. She had a husband and two children. Her husband, Lameswar Rabha (58 years) passed away in 2012. He was a cultivator.

Raneswari was his second wife. His first wife Khoi died leaving her two children, Purnima (14 years) and Jibaneswar (12 years). Lameswar wanted his daughter to stay with him even after her marriage so that she could take care of him and her younger brother. But Purnima eloped with a boy and stayed in her in-law's house. Lameswar married Raneswari as he felt very lonely. Purnima got very angry at her father's second marriage and she came back home along with her husband to stay in her father's house. She did not like Raneswari and scolded her every day. Purnima was not happy as she thought that Raneswari would also get a share of her father's property. She sometimes threatened Raneswari.

After marriage Raneswari gave birth to five children. Three of them died very young. She became very upset and depressed. Once she heard about a guru who followed Chaint Chaitanya's doctrine. She went to the guru and started practising Vaishnavite rituals. Gradually, she became a very devoted worshiper. The villagers were not happy with her. They forced her to attend the traditional religious festivals in the village. As she had become a vegetarian after taking deeksha from Guru Ma, she was not interested in attending the rituals in the village, which involved consumption of liquor and meat. But the villagers imposed a fine of Rs 50 on her for not participating in community rituals. Meanwhile, her hair became matted due to some fungal infection. Some people spread the rumour that something evil was nesting in her body.

Raneswari's husband's nephew Tikaram was her neighbour. A long time back he had accused Raneswari of stealing paddy from his granary. He had called a meeting and after the meeting the villagers went to check her granary if she was storing the stolen paddy there. They did not find paddy there but saw some ripe paddy with straw in an earthen pot. They were astonished to see that unusual thing but Raneswari said that it was *Laxmi* and she worshipped the pot. It did not prove that Raneswari was a thief but the villagers suspected that there was something wrong with her

and she must be practising witchcraft. They broke the pot and freed her from Tikaram's complaint. Tikaram was disappointed with the decision. A rumour spread in the village about Raneswari being a witch.

When Raneswari's third child died, her stepson Jibanewar went to the graveyard with other people to bury it. While coming back he had a painful injury on his feet. Raneswari took him to her Guru Ma. He recovered after seven days of treatment there. Purnima captured the opportunity and spread the rumour that Raneswari was responsible for the wound, Raneswari's children and livestock also died one by one due to the same reason. Because of her evil power their father was getting sick frequently, Purnima said. On the other hand, Raneswari's practice of unfamiliar rituals made Purnima's points stronger in front of the community. Purnima called a meeting for Raneswari's trial.

People came for the meeting and started interrogating Raneswari. They asked her to confess that she was a witch. She refused but they forced her and at last compelled her to say that she was a witch. The villagers decided to expel her from their village. The villagers asked her husband to give her ₹12000 as compensation for her whole life. They also threatened her husband with punishment if he tried to protect his wife. Some young men forcefully took Raneswari's thumb print on a paper on which was written that she would never come back to the village.

Raneswari's brother took her to his house in Satabari village, Goalpara, Assam. He filed a case in Tikrikilla police station (Meghalaya) but nothing happened. When she was with her brother, a girl from that village was married in her husband's village. Coincidentally, she died after two days of her marriage. As per the traditional custom, the villagers put a net over the body of the sick girl and asked who was responsible for her illness. That girl said Purnima. Purnima manipulated it and convinced people that it was Raneswari who was responsible for her illness. Raneswari was pushed out from her natal village, Satabari.

Devastated, Raneswari went to her Guru Ma's temple. There she met Upananda Barman who was a disciple of Guru Ma. He was very supportive

of her but he took advantage of her helplessness and sexually abused her. He promised to marry her but cheated. She came back to her brother's house. But her brother's wife did not accept her in their family. Raneshwari met Birubala Rabha, the lady who was fighting for witch hunting victims. She stayed there for one week. From there she shifted to the AMSS Family Counselling Centre member Usha Rabha's house. With her help she met Dr Natyabir Das. Meanwhile, her husband expired. But she was not allowed to see her husband's body. She was not allowed to see her children either. She is now very upset and behaves like a mentally imbalanced person. Dr Das is taking care of her and giving her shelter in his house on humanitarian grounds. She has lost everything. But still, she is hoping that one day she will get her children back.

Case Study 4

Priyabala Rabha (55 years) was a resident of village Balasari Mogho, in Dodan GP, Lakhipur block, Goalpara district. She lived with her husband Debeshwar Rabha, four sons, and three daughters. Apart from helping her husband in cultivation, Priyabala and her daughters wove clothes on contract from the mahajan. The family had nine bighas of cultivable land, four mud houses in 2.5 bighas of homestead land, a few livestock, and a loom. She was a secretary in the village Mahila Samiti for three years and a member of the Rabha Mahila Parishad.

Priyabala was killed on suspicions of practising black magic in 2006. Though she is dead, the trauma being faced by her children is a matter of concern for society. The most striking factor here is that the victim was not declared a witch prior to the incident. Not a single person including her in the village had any clue of the conspiracy to kill her.

A woman from the village, Basanti (45 years) had been afflicted by a respiratory disease for a year and she complained of seeing Priyabala in her dream quite often. Basanti and her husband Taren Rabha (55 years) started secretly believing that Priyabala was a witch. People came to know about this only after Priyabala's death and the subsequent surrender of

Taren Rabha at Rongsai police outpost, where he stated the grounds for hiring three professional killers - Luther Marak and two others - on payment of Rs 8000 to slaughter Priyabala.

Taren Rabha's hired killers hacked Priyabala to death on the night of 4 August 2006. They disguised themselves as army men and asked Debeswar to show the way to river Jinjiram. Unwilling to send her husband alone with the army, Priyabala accompanied him. After walking past the bamboo bridge over the river on the outskirts of the village the strangers asked Debeswar to return leaving Priyabala with them. One of them said that she was a witch and they would do the needful to her. Unable to fight alone, Debeswar returned home. Priyabala's dead body was found in the morning on another bank of the river. The body bore deep cut marks made by a sharp weapon on the back of her neck. Debeswar filed an FIR at Rongsai police outpost. People suspected Debeswar as the killer because the couple had fights frequently on the ground that Priyabala was not interested in giving up non-vegetarian food even after converting to Vaishnavism.

The main instigator cum killer of the incident, Taren Rabha was a distant relative of the couple. Interestingly, he was also among the group of neighbours who showed sympathy to Debeswar's family on Priyabala's death. Taren was the *mondol* (head) of the *samaj* (society) at that time. After his confession at the police outpost Taren was jailed for three months only and after paying a penalty of ₹2500 he was allowed to live a normal life in the samaj. However, Taren has not yet been accepted by the *gauriyo math samaj* (a Vaishnavite sect), of which both he and the victim's family are disciples.

Case Study 5

The incident happened four years ago in June 2009. On the day of the incident, Lasmi went fishing with her sister-in-law Saneswari Rabha. Saneswari's son Biharilal Rabha, who was a teacher by profession, asked them not to go fishing. He told them that some guests would come home

and so, they should stay at home. But the truth was that he had called a meeting to accuse Lasmi of being a witch in front of the public.

Biharilal has a daughter (7 years) Devi Rabha, who often suffered from stomach ache. Biharilal wanted to blame Lasmi for being responsible for his daughter's illness. So, he called a meeting and planned to punish her. Nearly all the villagers gathered for the meeting. But Lasmi was completely unaware of the meeting. Lasmi's youngest daughter Anjana Rabha (22 years) who was an anganwadi worker came to know about the meeting. Immediately after getting the information, she came home and informed her mother and other family members about it. Lasmi along with her children came to Biharilal's house which was the meeting place. Community members blamed Lasmi for being a witch and imposed ₹5000 as fine. They also warned her that if she did not pay the fine, she would face more trouble from society. Due to fear of the society, Lasmi and her son agreed to give the money. But back home, her son decided not to give the money as his mother was being blamed for no fault of hers.

After a week, when people came to know that Lasmi was not going to pay the money, they again called a meeting in Juripar L.P. School field at 9 pm. The people who gathered there had drunk country liquor supplied by Biharilal before the meeting. The next day, people called Lasmi to that field again. It was about 8 pm on a moonless night. All the villagers gathered in the field. Only a hurricane lamp lit the place. Biharilal again claimed that his daughter was seriously suffering from stomach pain and Lasmi was responsible for that. Then the people asked Lasmi to admit her guilt and the fact that she was really a witch. When she refused to admit and pleaded her innocence, they continued to accuse her of practising witchcraft, causing harm and sickness to the people.

The villagers went to three fortune tellers cum faith healers known as *ojhas* or deodhonis, Saral Rabha (female), Dongmai Rabha (female), and Fana Rabha (male) to show whether she was a witch or not. All the three *ojhas* declared Lasmi a witch. After the declaration, the villagers got furious and were about to kill her. First, Merbaan Rabha (Lasmi's husband's elder

brother) beat Lasmi on her head with an iron stick. Then other villagers also beat and kicked her. Lasmi fainted. Her brother Primal and one cousin Sachin took her home.

Case Study 6

Lasmi's youngest daughter, Anjana Rabha is 22-years-old and has passed her HSLC exam. People in the village blamed Lasmi's daughter, Anjana Rabha of being a witch because they believed that if a mother was a witch her daughters would surely acquire knowledge of witchcraft and therefore both mother and daughter should be banished. They also attempted to kill Anjana. But she escaped and informed the police, who came and rescued her from being killed. After that, they admitted Lasmi in hospital and left her there. After three days she recovered a little bit and went to her daughter-in-law's natal house in Dhelapara. After a few days, she and her daughter were coming back to their own house when the villagers stopped them at the entrance to the village. The whole family stayed outside for 10 months in distance relatives' houses and finally at Dhelapara.

During the period of exile, Lasmi's elder daughter requested her cousin Biharilal, to end the matter and bring her mother back to the village. Bihar got furious and threatened her that she too would be declared a witch like her mother. Scared of such consequences, she committed suicide that night, leaving behind her two children. Lasmi's four brothers-in-law took advantage of Lasmi's misfortune and mortgaged her land for their own benefit and sold her livestock too. The villagers caught all the fish from her fishery. After a few days, Lasmi came to know about AMSS and requested it to intervene. With great difficulty, AMSS personnel brought them back to the village. Now they are staying in their own house. But nobody is allowed to go to their house. The villagers have excluded them from their society. A sum of ₹500 is taken as a fine if anybody visits their house. Facing this cruelty, they lost faith in their religion and converted to Christianity. Thus, they are living an isolated life. Lasmi committed suicide because of the stigma of being called a witch. She was very depressed because of the behaviour of the villagers.

Case Study 7

Dukhuli Daimary is 50-years-old. The incident happened in April 2012. It was the time of Rangali Bihu. People were celebrating bihu. On that day, a marriage ceremony was held in Girish Kachari's house. His son Deepak had eloped with a girl and the family threw a party. Deepak is Dukhuli's husband's nephew (cousin brother's son). The villagers enjoyed the party. In the evening, when the priest started uttering the marriage mantra (chant), the bride became senseless. All the people gathered commented that due to the evil potential of some witch, the bride had fainted. Some of them suggested that the family should call a soothsayer immediately. One of the villagers, Mangal Daimary decided to make a fortune. He told them that he had seen a picture of Dukhuli as the witch in his *thikina*. He sprinkled some water on the body of the bride. After a few minutes she recovered and could talk. The gathered people were surprised to see this. They started believing that Dukhuli was a witch. Dukhuli's family was unaware of this, as they were not present on the scene.

Three days after the marriage, the bride again fainted at around 7 am. In the meantime, Dukhuli went to their house to give a bamboo basket. As soon as she entered their house, her brother-in-law rebuked her calling her a witch and threw a chair at her. She escaped being injured. After that she came home and informed her husband about this. Her husband went to his cousin brother's house and asked him why he was doing this. But his brother and his son Deepak (nephew) replied that they did not do anything, she had made up this story. In the evening, her son Gopen came to know that Amal (a neighbour and distant relative) had gone to bring a soothsayer to find out which witch was responsible. They were also planning to call a public meeting at night. So Gopen advised his mother to go to her daughter's house immediately.

The next day, a lady soothsayer Tarani Nath came to Deepak's house on Amal's invitation. She claimed that as soon as she uttered the mantra, the face of the convicted person was visible on her thumbnail. Thus, she declared Dukhuli as the witch. The villagers started looking for Dukhuli to

make her confess the truth. But when they came to know that Dukhuli had already run away from the village, they got angry and their doubts were confirmed. Some of them wanted to burn her house. But the *hadringra* (village head) stopped them. After that, the villagers ordered the family not to allow Dukhuli to enter the village again. Otherwise, they said that they would kill the whole family.

After one week her son Gopen filed an FIR at the Dodhnoi PS. But the police did not take any steps to handle the problem. On the other hand, when the villagers came to know about the FIR, they started mentally abusing the family. They isolated them from their society. Dukhuli moved from one place to another. Gopen took a rented house for his mother. But Amal told the house owner about her stigma. The house owner refused to allow her to stay in his house. Facing great trouble, Gopen went to ABWWF (All Bodo Woman Welfare Federation) to seek help. ABWWF tried to negotiate in the matter. ABWWF members brought Dukhuli to her village. But the villagers blocked the entrance with a barricade with sticks and daggers in hand. She was taken back by ABWWF and was kept with one of the members for a month. After a few days, Gopen went to AMSS seeking its help. AMSS functionaries arranged a public meeting in the village. But the villagers were unchanged. Importantly in that meeting, Amal talked on behalf of the whole village while the others kept quiet.

Case Study 8

Tholjong Rabha, is a 49-year-old resident of Jekdoba village in Meghalaya near the Assam- Meghalaya border. Her husband was Fasindra. Both of them were very simple and loved each other. Their family consisting of four children was happy. Tholjong owned three *bighas* of land that she had inherited from her mother as she was the only daughter. In that village no other woman had land in her name.

Rajen Rabha (50 years) was Tholjong's neighbour. His financial condition was better than Tholjong's so she sometimes worked in his house. Rajen exchanged a plot of his land with Budhram Rabha (ex-village headman)

without any written deed. The land was next to Tholjong's. Since that plot remained unused by Budhiram, Tholjong's husband used it for growing vegetables without taking permission from Budhiram and Rajen. They got angry at this and destroyed all the vegetables. She put a condition that her husband would pay a fee for using that land only during the vegetable season. But Rajen did not agree and stabbed Tholjong on her forehead. Tholjong was injured badly and became unconscious. Her husband called a meeting where Rajen was asked by the village headman to give ₹3000 to Tholjong as compensation. The villagers came to her house to show empathy. All of them were served home-made rice beer by Tholjong's son. Rajen's wife also came along with the villagers. She too drank rice beer.

Three days after the incident, Rajen's wife went for a picnic with other women from the village. There they had pork and wine. After coming back, she had stomach pain and the next day she died. Rajen spread a rumour that when Rajen's wife went to Tholjong's house, Tholjong had mixed poison in her beer to take revenge. The villagers assumed that Tholjong possessed some evil powers.

Meanwhile, a soothsayer named Aloka Rabha came to the village after marriage. The villagers were very happy at her arrival as they would no longer need to go far to call on a soothsayer for someone's illness. Some rich people including Budhiram and Rajen, donated money to build a temple for Aloka. Six months after her arrival, the villagers organized the annual Gram Puja and invited Aloka as a soothsayer. There she went into a trance and declared Tholjong a witch (Budhiram and Rajen insisted that Aloka should declare Tholjong a witch). She held that Tholjong was responsible for the death of children and cattle in the village. The villagers believed her and conducted a public meeting immediately.

It was getting dark when Tholjong and her husband came to the meeting. The villagers decided to banish Tholjong from the village the same day. The villagers did not pay any heed to her constant denial of doing no evil work. A young man, Molen asked her to hold a lit lamp of Aloka's temple in her hand to prove her innocence. Tholjong was nervous and did not

come forward to give the test. The villagers took that chance and accused her of being a witch. They forcefully collected her signature and asked her to leave the village. Tholjong wanted to inform her elder son, who was working in Dangorbhita village. But the villagers did not allow her to inform him and chased her away.

As she crossed the border of the village, two young men - Pele Rabha and Delback Rabha -- hit her on the face. Later, all the young men who were in the mob started beating her. She was beaten so brutally that she lost a few teeth and became unconscious. Her husband was also beaten badly. He carried her to a relative's house in Barali village, Goalpara, Assam. Their youngest son was also with them. As soon as she came to her senses after some medical treatment, they fled from there to Nabang Bazar, Krishnai, Goalpara. For one week, they stayed in a distant relative's house. After one week, Tholjong's nephew Jayanta Rabha found a rented house for them. Since then, they have been staying there. Tholjong wished to settle on her land in Dangorbhita. But the villagers of Dangorbhita, her birthplace didn't allow her to stay in their village as she had been branded a witch. However, her children are using the land for cultivation.

This incident happened four years ago. But she has not got justice. Her three children are living alone in the village. There is nobody to support them. They have been managing the house with the produce from the land in Dangorbhita village and by working in others' houses.

Case Study 9

An inhabitant of Barjhara Dhaparbhita village under Dodan GP, PS and block Lakhipur, Jonali Rabha was passing her marital life happily with her husband Karna Rabha. Simple and innocent Jonali who also stood by the villagers during their good and bad days, all of a sudden came to be known as a 'witch.' The villagers branded her a witch after Dafai Rabha (55 years) of the same village did not recover from an illness after a long time. One evening in May 2001, Jonali was banished from her village by the villagers she considered her near and dear ones.

For Jonali this was not a new incident. In fact, she was branded a witch for the first time about four years back when Mohan Rabha of the same village fell ill. On that occasion she got the permission to continue living in her village after she had paid a fine of ₹3001.

This time, when the public drove her away Jonali took refuge in her mother's home in Hatigaon. In May 2001, Jonali narrated her woes to Dhirawati Mahila Sangha whereupon the Sangha resolved to take appropriate action after considering it in the forthcoming sitting of the panchayat.

In the well-attended panchayat meeting, the Sangha presented Jonali's case. In the detailed discussion, the speakers condemned such a threat to the dignity of a woman and it was opined that appropriate measures must be taken. As a first step it was decided to discuss the matter with the people of Barjhar, but the people refrained from responding. In the second step, the Sangha discussed the matter with necessary details with the DC and SP of the district along with the concerned PS. Based on the written reports of the Sangha some Rangasai villagers reached Dhaparbhita villagers for enquiry. After 12 hours, seven were detained by the police.

In June, a group of policemen once again went to Dhaparbhita village and held a meeting with the villagers where Jonali Rabha was sought to be rehabilitated in Dhaparbhita, with a warning to the perpetrators never to get involved in such inhuman activities. Accordingly, the policemen and ladies of the Sangha took Jonali with them to Dhaparbhita village. Sangha, apprehending future threats to Jonali, urged the villagers to apologize for their deeds to which the villagers succumbed and expressed their sorrow to Jonali. Jonali demanded:

- 1) Recalling her mother-in-law, who was banished from the village 20 years back after she was declared a witch,
- 2) Repayment of ₹3001 which the villagers had taken from Jonali as a fine four years back,
- 3) A written assurance that such incidents will not recur in the village, and
- 4) Jonali will be allowed to spend her days peacefully.

When the public conceded to her demands, Jonali withdrew the police case, after registration of the conditions.

Jonali experienced no trouble after that and the villagers realized their superstitions and unscientific beliefs.

The third time she was blamed for being a witch in May 2017.

Case Study 10

Bina Rabha, a soft-spoken woman in her 40s, recounted the attack two years ago on her simple home in Dariduri, Balijana, Goalpara. The people of the village came for her in the middle of the night. There were four men (Achinta Rabha, Jogodish Rabha, Saargit Rabha, and Man Boro) and one woman (Ambi Rabha) who were wielding machetes with their faces covered. The men left her for dead and killed her husband as he tried to protect her. "I didn't do anything wrong, but despite that we suffered," said Bina Rabha, pointing to the scars on her forehead and arms and showing her disfigured hands. Like hundreds of women in isolated tribal communities across India, Bina was branded a witch – blamed for the illness of two people in her village and targeted. She was lucky to survive the assault.

A recent spate of killings, including beheadings, of supposed witches has highlighted how superstitions collide with violence against women in forgotten corners of Asia's third-largest economy. More than 1,200 people have been murdered across India for allegedly practicing witchcraft since 2008 according to government figures. During the same period in the fertile, tea-growing state of Assam, the police registered 111 criminal cases linked to witch-hunting. In poor, far-flung villages such as Tilapara, where Bina Rabha and others live off the land, the absence of education and health services allows age-old beliefs to flourish. Revered traditional healers or ojhas are often instrumental in encouraging villagers to identify a witch in their midst, or they single out individuals themselves as the source of a curse.

Charges of witchcraft can also be a way of settling personal scores in the knowledge that the claim will motivate the community against the person accused. Women who become victims of violence have usually endured years of verbal abuse and ostracization in their villages, though there are cases that escalate rapidly. Some may never be attacked and instead live with the stigma of being branded a witch – *daini* - a label also tarnishing their family and associates. Bina Rabha says she worries for the safety of her six young children. In June they managed to barricade themselves inside the small hut. After recovering from the first ambush that killed her husband, Bina reported the crime to the police, but the case came to nothing – there were no witnesses and the suspects had fled the village. When she registered a complaint after the second attempt to storm her home, the police arrested two men, who are currently in jail awaiting trial. For Bina Rabha and her family, the damage has been done. No amount of education can change what happened or bring back her husband.

Case Study 11

Robison Marak was from Gorapara, Goalpara, Assam. The villagers had allegedly killed Robison Marak in the month of June, 2017. The village is on the Assam- Meghalaya border. Robison Marak was first branded a witch when an 18-year-old girl fell ill and saw a dream. In the dream, she reportedly saw that Robison Marak, his wife, and their fourth daughter approached her to kill and devour her. A meeting was called by the villagers and Robison Marak's family was fined ₹2.50 lakh which they paid by selling all their agricultural income sources including a pineapple garden.

However, Robison Marak was subsequently found dead in the village. After the incident, his daughter and the other family members escaped from the village and remained hidden in some other place. Trouble for Marak started when the villagers identified his family as that of witches. Robison's wife left the village with his son after the villagers allegedly lynched her husband and buried him in the village. "We have been in hiding all these days," she said. Superstitious villagers tend to target vulnerable families and blame them for all their ills.

Case Study 12

Joytsna Sangma, a 30-year-old widow, came to stay with her mother in Jurigaon in Goalpara district, with her four young girls after her husband's death. After sometime, an 8-year-old boy in the neighbour's house died of diarrhoea, for which she was blamed for practicing *dainibidya*. The villagers tried to chase her out of the village, but she was allowed to stay by some villagers, after forcibly getting her signature on a paper declaring herself as a *daini* and promising not to practice it in the future. One year later, in June 2012 a man from a nearby village died of snake bite. This time, not only Jyotsna, but her 80-year-old mother was also held responsible for the death, and they were thrown out of the village. Anybody found visiting their house or found talking to them would have to pay a penalty of ₹5000. The helpless duo left the village with the children and took shelter at the hostel of Don Bosco School with the help of Father Paul. Presently with the help of the Mahila Samata Society, they are resettled in their village, but the trauma and the stigma continues to haunt them making it much worse for the growing children.

Case Study 13

A smart, bold, and dynamic person, especially if it happens to be a female, is more likely to fall victim. Kakati Rabha from village Sutki who was an expert weaver and who earned a good amount by selling clothes, was always envied by some quarters. Not only that, she was a very bold person and would speak on the face if she saw any misdeeds in the village. Her husband was relatively weak and less intelligent. Her smartness was not appreciated by her in-laws. One day her sister-in-law suffered from vomiting and diarrhoea. She demanded that she be worshipped by sacrificing a black chicken. It was regarded as evidence that she was possessed by a *daini*. The immediate suspect was Kakati, who was disliked. Accordingly, puja was offered taking Kakati as the *daini*, but as the patient's health did not improve, Kakati was accused and a group of persons led by her brother-in-law searched for evidence (medicines) in Kakati's house. She was even stripped to see if she had hidden any medicine on her body.

Fortunately for her, before more torture, AMSS was informed and her case could be settled, before it was too late.

Case Study 14

Padumani Rabha of Choto Sigri village in Goalpara lived with her husband British Rabha and four children, till that fateful day in July 2006. Padumani prayed to Shiva and Parvati in a small temple in her house. This was not a normal practice among the villagers and the villagers were suspicious of her. One day someone left a dead snake in front of her house, which her husband picked up and threw away. Someone saw this and took this as a reason to explain that Padumani practiced black magic as a *daini* by worshipping Lord Siva, as people are accustomed to seeing picture of Shiva with a snake encircling his neck. Next day, an old man died, for which Padumani was held responsible. People came thronging to her house and destroyed the temple and the house including the plants and trees. Her hands were tied and she was beaten black and blue by the villagers. A meeting was organized on the same day and a decision was taken to bury Padumani alive. Petrified Padumani fled the village with the help of some friends as she had seen such an incident happening in the village earlier.

Case Study 15

Manomaya Rabha (55 years-old when accused) lived in Galsira Baishtampara village. In October 2004 a young woman of the village fell sick after consuming tapioca. She suspected and condemned Manomaya for her illness, since she had seen Manomaya bringing home tapioca in the morning. Instantly, the villagers drove her out of the village with bag and baggage. Being helpless she went to her mother's home in Phakirmara and approached the village head. The headman along with Sangha women and other people went to Galsira village. But the villagers threatened to kill him. Manomaya approached the district administration and AMSS. The villagers of Galsira were called by the police for negotiating the matter. They did not

respond to the call. Instead, in a meeting of both the parties in November 2004, they promised in writing that they would never torture the lady in future. At the same time, they paid ₹1000 to her as compensation for harassing her.

Case Study 16

Young Simptibala Rabha (28 years) was living with her husband Sibsaran Rabha and children. A 5-year-old child in the village became sick. Although she was treated with local herbal medicine, she did not get well. So in May 2006, she was taken to the Shiva mandir, where in the presence of the villagers a *deodhai* was called to perform her fits to identify who was actually making her sick. Some rituals followed and after some time the child pronounced the name of Simptibala as the one causing her sickness. This was enough. The villagers decided that allowing Simptibala to remain in the village might cause more harm to the villagers. So, she was ordered out of the village by a meeting where the *gaon burha* (village headman) was also present. However, after this matter came to MSSA's notice, she could be saved from impending danger.

Case Study 17

Sirani Rabha (25-years-old when accused) in Nihalibhita village fell seriously sick and three of the elderly persons of the village went to see her. Sirani's mother offered them homemade rice beer. One of those elderly persons, who had high blood pressure became unconscious and fell on the ground on his way to the market. The villagers suspected Sirani of doing this harm to him by using witchcraft. The person died after 17 days. On the day of his death ritual another person fell ill after consuming excessive liquor and started condemning Sirani. The villagers held a meeting in May and sent Sirani from her village. From her parental house in Baida, Sirani filed a case and with the help of the police and AMSS she was brought back to the village in October 2004 and she was reunited with her family and three children.

Case Study 18

Bhuleswari Rabha (35-years-old when accused) belongs to a very poor family in Dipkai Tilapara village, Baida. In her village one woman was sick for a long time. She could not walk and behaved like a neurotic person. Her condition started deteriorating after three years. A local *ojha* pointed Bhuleswari as a witch and the villagers drove her away from the village in July 1997. She stayed in her parents' house in Garo Hills, Meghalaya for six years. In August 2004, her husband took her back. The villagers imposed a penalty of ₹5000 on the couple. Then AMSS intervened in the matter and explained to the villagers that paying such a big amount was impossible for a daily wages couple who could hardly manage two meals every day for the family. Thus, she was saved from injustice.

Case Study 19

Khedaibala Rabha (50-years-old when accused) of Satabari village is living in constant fear of being attacked by the villagers, who accused her of misleading a young woman through magic. In her case, some individuals had planned to acquire the small piece of land and home left to her by her deceased husband, by driving her and her two sons away from the village. "In July 2001, some villagers called me to the village school. When I reached there, they beat me so badly that I became unconscious. My sons arrived at the scene and started pouring water on my head. But the atrocities did not end and I had to leave the village and take shelter at a relative's place for three months. Though we returned after the intervention of AMSS in August 2001, the villagers have snapped all relations with us and we are socially boycotted," she said.

Case study 20

Janata Sangma, from Nolonga Pahar, Garopara in West Goalpara, Assam. Janata's father was first branded a witch in June 2017 when an 18-year-old girl fell ill and saw a dream. In the dream, she said she saw that Janata and her parents approached her to kill and devour her. A meeting was

called by the villagers immediately and Janata Sangma's family was fined ₹2.50 lakh which they paid by selling all their agriculture income sources including a pineapple garden. However, her father was subsequently found dead in a mysterious condition in the village. After the incident, Janata Sangma and other family members escaped from the village and remained hidden in some other place.

Jharkhand

Case Study 1

Date of Incident - 24 September 2109

**Village - Sarwal Barudeeh; Panchayat - Hahap; Block - Namkum;
District - Ranchi**

**Who was Responsible for the Incident - Elder brother and his sons
Community/Caste - Munda**

The incident happened 45 km from Jharkhand's capital Ranchi in Aadarsh panchayat's revenue village in Sarwal hamlet named Barudeeh, known as Sarwal Barudeeh. Here 55-year-old Chamri Devi became the victim of witch-hunting in November 2109. The penetrators were her brother-in-law and his sons. Both the victim and her perpetrators belong to Munda tribe. In this village there are about 15 to 20 families belonging to this tribe. At a distance of 7 km is Barudeeh Tola (hamlet). To reach this village one has to cross a mountain and a jungle area. There is no pucca road to reach the village.

Chamri Devi was killed after being branded a witch. This case study was prepared in concurrence with her husband Thakur Munda.

"My name is Thakur Munda. The name of my village is Barudeeh Neeche Tola; Panchayat Hahap; Block Namkum; District Ranchi. I am about 55-years-old. My wife Chamri Devi was killed in September 2019 by my brother Fauda Munda. Other accomplices in the murder were his sons Shyama Munda (35 years); Mangal Munda (26 years); Khudya Munda (22 years); and, Fauda Munda's wife's brother's son, Geda Munda (30 years).

Recalling the incident, 55-year-old Thakur Munda says that prior to his wife's murder his nephew Jadu Munda had been unwell for 2-3 days. Instead of taking him to a doctor they called an exorcist/ sorcerer to treat him. "Since then, my brother Fauda was angry with us. On 24 September along with my wife Chamri Devi and daughter Mangri Kumari, I had gone to the forest to fetch firewood. There is a forest on the way to the village. My daughter and I returned home. But my wife insisted that she wanted more wood so she left at around 2 pm to fetch more wood. Meanwhile from our neighbouring house Fauda Munda and his son came looking for my wife. They asked my daughter the whereabouts of her mother to which she said that she had gone to the forest to get wood. After that they went away. When my wife did not return for a long time I, along with my three daughters, set out looking for her. A little distance from our home I saw my brother and his sons coming in our direction. Upon seeing us they changed track and walked away in another direction. Further down the road on the *kuccha* path, we saw marks of someone being dragged. We followed those marks and reached behind a bush where we saw a blood-stained stone. Nearby we saw land which was freshly washed with water. Perhaps, it was at this spot that they had killed my wife on the pretext of witch-hunting. Then we also saw marks of someone being dragged in the direction of the paddy fields. On reaching the spot I saw my wife's corpse. Her face had been crushed by stones."

Thakur Munda claims that since in his household he has only daughters perhaps his brother and his family wanted to kill him and his wife. Jadu Munda's sickness became their excuse.

Case Study 2

(Prepared in concurrence with the victim's kin)

Gangi Kumari

(Witch-hunt victim Chamri Devi's daughter Gangi Kumari)

Killed after being branded a witch, Chamri Devi's 21-year-old daughter Gangi Kumari's eyes well up remembering the brutal incident. When I told

her the purpose of my visit, she remained quiet and after half-an-hour she started speaking sequentially, with the wish that no daughter's mother gets killed in this fashion.

Gangi said that before her mother's killing their family of five members earned their living through farm work and were happy. "I have studied up to intermediate level. After my mother's death I had to quit my studies. My younger sister has completed matriculation; while another sister could not attend school as she was helping our parents in the field." The family's only source of income is agriculture.

Gangi says before being killed and branded a witch, she had no inkling that her own uncle and his sons would murder their mother. On the day the incident happened, her mother had gone to get firewood. "When she did not return till 4 pm we started searching for her. A villager told us that he had seen her returning home with wood." He had seen her a km away from the village. After this information the three sisters with their father went out looking for her. On the way, they saw uncle Fauda and his son returning from somewhere. "They were carrying a bush cutting dauli, made of iron, in their hands and two persons had sticks with them. Seeing us they changed their way. After walking for some distance, we saw blood stains at one place. The blood trail led us towards the field and we started following the trail. When we reached the paddy field, we saw my mother's corpse." Her face was crushed with stones. When the villagers got to know they rushed to the spot. "My elder sister who is married got in touch with the official of Namkum and informed him about the incident. When the police arrived, our statements were recorded in which we mentioned that we saw our uncle coming from the same direction where mother's corpse was found. Their clothes were also blood-soaked. Thereafter, the police sent the accused and the dead body to Ranchi for post-mortem. Our uncle was nabbed from his house. When the police enquired, my uncle said Chamri Devi was a witch because of whom his youngest son remained sick and that's why he killed her." The police arrested five people responsible for the murder and sent them to jail in a week's time.

Asked about people's attitude after the incident, Gangi said that the villagers stood by them. Even an assistance of ₹5000 was provided to them by the gram sabha.

The villagers said that Fauda Munda and his son's sole intention was to usurp their land and for this he wanted to kill both husband and wife. When the police arrested Fauda Munda he confessed that he had killed her because she was a witch.

The victim's family living in the village has become possible because of the solidarity shown by the villagers. According to Gangi till the time police sent the perpetrators to jail they had to stay in somebody's house for about eight days.

Gangi and one of her sister's fear that to usurp land her uncle might kill their father too. Fauda Munda has returned to the village after being granted bail.

Case Study 3

(Prepared in concurrence with the survivor - **Mangari Kumari**)

"My name is Mangari Kumari. My mother was killed by my uncle, his sons, and their relatives. I helped my parents in household chores because of which I could not attend school. I am around 20-years-old. My uncle Fauda Munda envied us. We three sisters and our parents were living happily by doing farming. We all were industrious so our crop yield was always good. We didn't face any problems. Our uncle and his wife wanted to grab our land. For this, uncle Fauda had fought in the past to get my mother replaced by someone else. He was warned by the gram sabha not to pick up fights with our family.

When my uncle's youngest son fell sick, he held my mother responsible for the illness. After my mother's murder, when all the accused were sent to jail then only, we got to know that uncle and his wife wanted to kill my mother on the pretext of her being a witch. In reality his evil eye was on our land. In any case, after our marriages and after passing away of our

parents, the land would naturally be his. When uncle Fauda's older son was caught by the police he had said that after returning from jail we would also be killed.

"We are still terrified. It is because of the support of the villagers that today we are able to live in our own house."

When asked if they got any support from any social organization, Mangari said no and added that after the incident they not no such support. However, the panchayat head put pressure for the accused to be arrested. Presently, two of the accused have returned to the village after getting bail, instilling a sense of fear in the family.

Case Study 4

38-year-old Hahap Panchayat head, **Archana Munda**

When Archana Munda was told of the ongoing study, she came over to Barudeeh Tola. She said Chamri Devi was murdered on the pretext of being a witch. According to her, this was the first witch-hunting that had resulted in a murder in the last five years in the panchayat. However, a handful of cases came to light where tension was palpable among women, invoking witchcraft or leading to witch-hunting in villages falling under the jurisdiction of this panchayat.

She also said that in gram sabha meetings harbouring of such superstitious beliefs is discouraged and people are asked to be stay away from such practices.

The head woman on the basis of the information she had said that in the recent years, instances of women being tortured in the name of witch-hunting have been reducing. This is because living in the proximity of cities makes people rush to doctors if they fall sick. It is also true that a few people opt for traditional *vaids* to treat select diseases using medicinal herbs. "But sorcerers and exorcists are not entertained; nor are women branded witches in the panchayat. My understanding is that behind all

this, accusers have had their own vested interests.” The head woman also told us that Chamri Devi’s murder in Barudeeh Tola last year was for land grabbing.

Archana Munda attributes superstitions like witch-branding to lack of education and paucity of adequate health facilities in the tribal community. She believes that for improving the situation in tribal areas, there is a need for the government to strengthen health facilities and education systems.

Archana also reiterated that in the name of health facilities in the panchayat area a big hospital building has been constructed but no doctors visit it. Even vaccinations are given by the ANMs.

Case Study 5

Date of Incident - 1 September 2020

Village - Budubeda; Panchayat - Bandua; Block - Namkum; District-Ranchi
Village is situated at a distance of 30 km from Ranchi

Demography of the village: - 70 tribal families out of which 80 families are from the Munda Tribe; Backward Castes - 10 families of Ahirs and Yadavs; 5 families of Scheduled Castes.

Budbeda village is situated 3 km from Ranchi city. There is a pucca approach road leading to the village. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood here. Additionally, people also go to Ranchi for wage labour. Lalu Uraon (55 years) was beaten up after being accused of practising sorcery and witchcraft.

(Case Study prepared in concurrence with the survivor)

Gangi Devi (55 years), Lalu Uraon’s wife)

Gangi Devi said that her husband was brutally thrashed by Fawda Uraon for allegedly practising sorcery and witchcraft. Durga Ahir and her husband Lalu Uraon were brought home at about 3 pm in a bloodied condition. Gangi Devi said, “Fifteen years back my own family members...my husband’s brothers, after branding me a witch had beaten me up so badly that my hand broke. After this incident my husband had quit the work of a vaid.”

Speaking about her family, Gangi Devi said that there are five members in her family comprising her son Raju Uraon, his wife Sushma Devi and their 4-year-old son. The son and daughter-in-law go to Ranchi every morning for wage labour and return late at night. Back home, the husband and wife look after agriculture work.

“On 1 December, Fawda Uraon from another Tola beat up my husband with sticks when he had gone out for work in the fields. My husband was beaten up on the pretext that he practised sorcery. Since then, his mental condition has not been good. Not getting proper treatment for his injuries, he is now unable to do any work. When my son reached home after the incident, he filed a complaint with the police station the next day. My husband was beaten in the name of practicing sorcery.”

When asked about sorcery, she said crying that they didn't follow any tribal religion nor did they indulge in any kind of prayer rituals. “Fifteen years ago, we had joined Hallelujah Church. Perhaps that is why my husband was thrashed because we chose to convert to Christianity.”

When asked about the attitude of villagers, she said that the accused was summoned for a gram sabha meeting but he did not turn up. The accused is an influential person. On the other hand, the police have registered the case as a minor scuffle. The police did not even arrest the accused. Most people in the village follow Adivasi religion *sarna* or follow Hindu religion. Villagers believe that the victim was targeted for accepting Christianity. Practising sorcery was a mere excuse.

Case Study 6

(Anima Tirki, Former Ward Member, Budubeda)

“In our panchayat area, the Lalu Uraon incident took place after 15 years. It so happened that 15 years ago her own family had branded Gangi Devi a witch and her husband's brother had beaten her up. Fifteen years later an old man Lalu Uraon from the same family was thrashed for being a sorcerer. Can an old man be a witch? It appears that the main reason why he was beaten is the family's decision to embrace Christianity.”

Anima says that social evils such as witch-hunting/ witchcraft are possible only when feelings of envy and animosity or hostility exist. Some people try to take advantage by accusing others by branding them witches. Women suffer the most by such acts. There should be government drives for getting rid of such superstitious beliefs. "We panchayat representatives also try to create awareness about these issues at our level." This recent case of torture involving Lalu Uraon has to do with the family's acceptance of Christianity. In the past also there was a gram sabha meeting concerning this issue in which all the concerned parties were advised to act with utmost restraint."

Anima concurs that despite proximity to the state's capital Ranchi, it is the inadequacy of basic facilities such as health and education which makes superstitions rule the roost. Gram sabha meetings take place on the 26th of every month. In these meeting all matters are discussed. The gram sabha also punishes the guilty.

Case Study 7

Prafulla Linda

Associated with the mahasabha (grand council) Prafulla Linda opines that the evil custom of witchcraft is still prevalent. Even in villages close to Ranchi, superstitions are at a peak. In the name of a witch-hunt families are persecuted, especially those where there are no male members. As per Munda customs girls have no right over land. If there are no male heirs in the family, then the land is distributed among blood brothers. Under such circumstances, men and women are often targeted and branded as sorcerers and witches.

On the basis of his experience Prafulla asserts that in tribal areas people become victims of witchcraft during August to November. In the last 10 years, it has been noticed that when Adivasi families face food shortages and start frequently falling sick, they tend to attribute the blame to some close relatives or neighbours. A sorcerer is often found to be an accomplice or facilitator in this game. Since Namkun block is in the vicinity of a city

and also due to easy availability of transport, most people visit hospitals or private clinics for treatment. This is the reason why witch-hunting cases are less these days. Awareness is spreading among people. In the last two years, only two cases of witch-hunting have been registered or have come to light in this panchayat/block area. Police also avoid registering cases of witch-hunting. It is only when a death occurs as a result of a beating that the police registers the case. Otherwise, they try to hush up most cases.

Prafulla says that all sorcerers and persons practising witchcraft should be identified by the police and firm action be taken against them. Such efforts can prevent witch-hunting related murders.

Madhya Pradesh

Case Study 1

Name: Bakhi Bai Bilala

Age: 35 years

Block: Nanpur

Bakhi Bai, a resident of Nanpur block was married to Nasriya Singh, who was electrocuted by an electricity pole in an accident and died. Bakhi was later married off to her brother-in-law Kesar Singh. They have two daughters and a son. In July 2019, Bakhi's neighbour's son died in an accident and a few days later her sister-in-law died due to snake bite while working in the fields.

The villagers alarmed by the two deaths in a short period of time visited a traditional healer or *badwa* for guidance. The *badwa* informed them that there was a witch who was causing all the deaths. Since Bakhi was in proximity when the deaths occurred, the *badwa* labelled her a witch. She was beaten up by community members. The *badwa* claimed that if he was given ₹1000 he would exorcise Bakhi and set her free of the spirit of a witch. Bakhi was forcefully taken to the *badwa* where she was fed *raakh* (residue of burnt wood) and some grains to ward off the evil. Even after this Bakhi was mentally tortured and heckled by her family and neighbours.

Bakhi even filed a complaint in Nanpur thana but no action was taken. Presently she is living with her parents, away from her children. She wishes for justice and to be able to live with dignity with her family.

Case Study 2

Name: Vesti Bai Bhilala

Age: 34 years

Block: Nanpur

Vesti Bai is residing in Rajavat village with her husband and five teenage children. Her husband is a small farmer and they also graze sheep and goats. Her neighbour, Chamaria went to Gujarat for work in October 2020 along with his family. On his way back his daughter Ruana developed high fever and died. On arriving at the village everyone was perplexed how a young girl could die suddenly. Ruana's dead body had developed some patches on her face and the villagers thought she was poisoned or some evil eye had been cast on her. The local *badwa* and *ojha* were called and they identified Vesti who was present there as a witch who had cast her evil eye on her. The villagers brutally hit Vesti and her husband and forced her to leave the village. The family left and informed the police in Nanpur thana but the police showed no interest and called it a feud. The police asked the family to have a dialogue and solve the matter.

Vesti is still living with her parents and still hesitant to go back to her husband's home. Vesti's husband is living alone in Rajavat village to take care of his land and cattle. Vesti wishes to join her husband and live peacefully in her home.

Case Study 3

Name: Gajri Bai

Age: 80 years

Location: Kathithvada

Gajri Bai is an 80-year-old woman who has cataract and is partially blind. After the long lockdown during to COVID-19, she wanted to visit her

daughter in nearby Chandpur village. She left alone for her daughter's village in October 2020 and after walking for 3 km she stopped at Bokadiya village where there was a wedding celebration. Some people who were celebrating were drinking and rejoicing.

As soon as Gajri Bai passed by some children due to her old age and eyes, they started shouting 'a witch has come.' Children have imbibed the stereotype that old women with scary eyes are witches. Since her eyes had visible cataract, Gajri Bai was heckled as a witch. The villagers came running and Lakshman who was highly intoxicated, attacked her with an iron rod.

Gajri Bai succumbed to her injuries and died. The villagers threw her body on the roadside. A man informed Gajri Bai's family about the incident. Her son Naan Singh immediately reached Bokadiya village and informed the police. The police investigated the matter and arrested two people, Lakshman and his father Chandriya. They are still in prison and the case proceedings are on.

Case Study 4

Name: Lal Bai

Age: 32 years

Location: Sorwa Block

Lal Bai lives in Bajoriya village in Sorwa block with her husband; they have no children. Lal Bai's neighbour Jhelariya lost his son due to an illness, as he took him to the *ojha* rather than taking him to the doctor. The *ojha* suggested that his son had caught an evil eye of a witch in the village. Jhelariya got suspicious of all women in the village. One day out of anger he caught hold of Lal Bai working in the field and attacked her and hit her several times. The people standing nearby did not intervene due to superstitious beliefs.

Lal Bai along with her husband went to the police station and filed an FIR in September 2016. She moved to her parents' village with her husband, as she feared for her life. A year later the panchayat called Lal Bai and her

husband to the village and tried to convince her to take the FIR back and she would get ₹1 lakh. Reluctant and wanting to come back to her own village she agreed.

Lal Bai is presently living with her husband in Bajoriya village. However, she still feels discriminated due to the accusation of being a witch. People here and there refer to her as a witch.

Case Study 5

Name: Meena Basod

Age: 38 years

Location: Sorwa Block

Meena lives with her husband and children in Madrani village, Sorwa block. She was living next to her brother-in-law and his family in their ancestral home. Her brother-in-law's daughter fell ill and was not recovering so instead of taking her to a doctor they took her to a local *ojha*. Her condition deteriorated further. Meena's brother-in-law and his wife started blaming her for the illness. They started arguing and fighting with Meena and her husband forcing them to leave their house.

Meena and her husband now live separately and Meena is constantly heckled for being a witch by her sister-in-law and others in the village. She is still being harassed because of this and she has been unable to take any legal action due to the absence of legal mechanisms.

Stakeholders' Interviews

Name: Yogendra Sojtiya

Post: Than Incharge Thana Sorwa

Thana Incharge Yogendra Sojtiya said that he had often seen women being labelled witches in the district. Women and their families often came to report incidents of violence and harassment against them. "We charge them with the crimes against them under criminal laws and try to bring justice, but there is no law specific to witch branding (*toni pratha*)."

He also stated that due to lack of education people are very superstitious, they trust traditional healers more than they trust doctors. The police department tried to catch the *badwas* and traditional healers who try to fool people and make money through their tricks, but there is resistance from the villagers also. This can be tackled when there is awareness and strong laws to stop this kind of practice.

Name: Tafu Chanderi

Post: Field Worker, Adivasi Chetna

Place: Alirajpur

Tafu Chanderi has been working in different areas of Alirajpur as a social worker. He has closely seen the practice of witch-branding and said that intervening is not easy. Whoever supports a woman branded as a witch is labelled as her accomplice and targeted by the villagers.

He pointed out that a major role is played by *badwas* or traditional healers, as they fuel the superstition of witch craft and evil eye. They are no doctors and when unable to treat a patient they blame it on vulnerable women in the community. The police also provide no help saying that there is no law regarding witch-branding.

He said that through his organization there is an effort to raise awareness among people, but superstitions and blind faith are difficult to erase. If there are strong laws against witch-branding and *badwas* operating in the region, some change can be bought about.

Mukesh Patel Rawat

Member of Legislative Assemble (MLA)

Alirajpur District

Mukesh Patel Rawat, MLA Alirajpur, was of the view that women are not witches; these are superstitions and often a planned move to torture women for dowry, money, and other material things. These largely take place in villages where people are gullible and still believe in old traditions. As there are no laws, the police books these matters and violence against

women under IPC and other related laws. Often, they try to mediate between the parties through the panchayat. The victim is sometimes given compensation to take back the complaint, however, she is still considered a witch by the villagers and remains socially ostracized and at risk of being murdered. He is willing to introduce this issue in the legislative assembly, as there are still no laws.

Than Singh Bariya

Sodwa Block

Badwa

Than Singh Bariya, a *badwa* or traditional healer was of the view that certain women are witches and involved in witchcraft. He even said that they are shape shifters and can turn into a dog, buffalo, or other any other animal and harm people. Whoever the witch casts an evil eye on can get stomach ache, itchy eyes, body rashes, and fever. Although all women are not witches but it is hard to find out who is and who is not a witch.

“Whenever someone is ill in a family, I visit and do a simple ritual with barley seeds and say that if any witch is responsible for this, she will also fall sick. I never name any man or woman as a witch. If any woman or man nearby falls sick then the villagers themselves think that he or she is a witch. I refrain from naming a particular woman as a witch, because I am not able to find out.”

Meghalaya

Case Study 1

The incident happened in Pashang at Lad Mawlang, in East Khasi Hills District. The victims were nine boys who had gone to celebrate their friend’s birthday in March 2020. Apparently, they had been drinking and had lost their way returning home to Shillong and passed by the road in Syntung twice. This led to suspicions among the villagers and one thing led to another and before long, a mob of 300 had dragged the nine boys out of their cars and burnt their vehicles. The OC of Madanrting, received

a call from a friend who had heard of the incident from someone else. He was not on duty at the time but he sent two constables to handle the situation. On the way he met the *sordar* of Pashang who helped him. When he arrived at the scene, he found that the villagers had three of the victims they had assaulted, whereas the other six had fled into the nearby forest. There is no network connectivity in the area and so the OC was not able to inform and ask for reinforcements. Faced with a mob, the OC asked them to release one of the victims as he had been hurt badly. He was able to take the victim to Jatah CHC, which was unfortunately closed. He tried to leave the scene in his car along with the victim but a couple of boys from Jatah village threw stones and blocked the road. He tried to again mediate with the crowd to let the other two victims go. However, the crowd demanded that he find the other six and hand them over to the crowd. The headman of Syntung was also involved in the crime and had physically assaulted the victims.

In the meantime, one of the victim's mother, Kong Rita received a phone call at around 8 pm from Rangbah Dong and some neighbours at Madanrtng who informed her that her son was in trouble. She left for Syntung along with her eldest son and one of her middle sons along with the parents of the other victims. On reaching Lad Mawlang, they lost their way and had to wait for other people to ask for directions. Since it was a rural area and there were no houses near the roads, they got lost several times before they finally spotted a farm house near the road. The women walked up to the house to ask for directions and even then, it took them another hour to reach the outskirts of Syntung. They had an inkling that they may have reached the village when they saw boulders lying on the road with the intent of stopping cars from entering the village. However, as the police had already arrived before them, the stones had been pushed to the side of the road. On reaching the village, they saw hundreds of people standing outside their houses. This was quite a strange sight as normally people slept early. It was around 10 or 11 pm when they reached the village. As they moved further into the village, they saw a huge crowd gathered around the police vehicle, in this case the OC and two constables. Kong

stated that she heard things like *'beh nongshohnoh'* and *'uweï te ym long shuh'* (one looks like he won't make it). The crowd surrounded the cars and starting asking them questions as to why they were there. Kong and the rest of the persons who had come with her in the other car stated that they were just passing through the village and were curious as to what was happening. She got out of the car and went to the police officers who had the body of her son, whom she recognized from his clothes. Her son had been beaten and she was scared as they were surrounded by a huge mob. The OC asked her to go back to her vehicle which she did. The OC surmised that there was no hope for him anymore but reassured her that he would try his best to get his body back home. The crowd was becoming restless and the OC asked the Khasi constables to tell the crowd that they would not go down without a fight. Even though it was three against 300, the OC stated that he and his constables would be able to take down at least 30 people. On hearing this, the crowd started thinning out. It is to be noted that one of the constables was a Khasi who disappeared in the middle of the incident.

Simultaneously, the crowd started becoming suspicious and started murmuring that they were the employers of the *'nongshohnoh'* saying *'lah wan ki trai shohnoh'*. Kong told her sons to deny any relations to their brother because she feared for their lives. At this point, the villagers started interrogating her eldest son who was driving the vehicle. He stated that he was no relation of any of the passengers and that they had rented his vehicle. The crowd started murmuring to burn their vehicles. Kong and the rest of the relatives of the victims were not allowed to leave till about 2 am when reinforcements were sent by the District Magistrate (DM). By the time the DM arrived, the police had been able to drive away with her son. Kong followed. However, she could not catch up with the police and so went to the Madanrtng PS to enquire where the OC had taken her son. Since no one from the PS knew his location, they waited for the OC who arrived after a couple of hours to inform her that he had taken her son to Civil Hospital but that her son was no more.

An FIR was filed against the whole village. Around 25 individuals were arrested, including the *Rangbah Shnong* of Syntung, who was involved in the murder of Kong's son. The case, as far as she knows, is still under investigation but has not yet gone to court. She received a compensation of ₹1 lakh from the court but according to Kong, her son was the main bread winner of the family. No amount can compare to the loss of her son.

Soon after the incident, the OC was transferred to Mawsynram PS where he is now working as an OC. He stated that his transfer was directly related to the incident where he was blamed for escalating the situation. However, in the District Magistrate's report, he was given a good review. The headman of Syntung was taken into custody and the sordar of Pashang would have also been taken into custody had the OC not spoken of his help on his behalf.

Case Study 2

In 2019, four individuals - Bah T Rynjah (47 years), Bah D Rynjah (36 years), Bah C Mawkynrih (40 years), and Bah S Kharkongor (under 30 years) had gone to Mawkynring village in East Khasi Hills District to attend a funeral. Wanting to drink, they decided to stay in a secluded place a little further from the village footpath. They had also secretly bought alcohol. However, when they were on their way to buy alcohol, they met some children who were frightened by them. They started shouting '*menshohnoh*' (practitioner of black magic) even though a lady nearby told them they were not. Further, it seemed that there was another person in the same village who had had liquor and had fallen off a cliff but had miraculously survived with some injuries. He was found by some villagers and brought to the village; on being asked what had happened, he stated that he was accosted by some '*menshohnoh*' and stated that there were four of them. The villagers then saw the four victims and assumed that they were the '*menshohnoh*.' They were physically assaulted and kept in the village hall forcefully. The sordar of Laitkyrhong was informed and he immediately rushed to the scene where the police had also arrived. FIRs were filed against them on the basis of 'intent to rape' since according to the OC, the villagers could

not use the term '*nongshohnoh*.' On investigation, the police found that the FIRs filed were baseless. They initiated a meeting between the two groups and the assaulting group admitted to overreaction. The victims also filed an FIR against the headman. However, the police closed the case by sending a final report after mediation and there was no chargesheet filed.

When the four victims were brought back to their village after spending a month in jail, the whole *dorbar* decided to welcome them to show support. They did not want them to feel ashamed of what had happened. So, while the victims were initially uncomfortable and sad about the situation, the *dorbar* decided to include them more in village activities by entrusting them with some responsibilities. This seemed to provide some support to the victims. At the same time, the *sordar* stated that the village dance which was supposed to be held around the same time had been postponed due to the incident and on the arrival of the victims in the village, they decided to hold the dance in their honour. As of today, one of the victims has left the village for *bhoi* after his marriage and another has migrated for another job.

The *sordar* (headman) stated that such incidents were quite common in Nongkynrih said. However, the last incident forced all the nine *sordars* under the raid to conduct *dorbars* in all the villages to discuss this issue. The result was that they made a law in the raid whereby in case of physical assault, there would be individual liability. This was done to prevent such incidents from happening in the future and according to them, no such incidents have been heard to occur after they passed the law.

Case Study 3

In 2013, Bah Hudson (around 50 years) was a resident of Sohryngkham in East Khasi Hills District, when a child in the village who had been suffering from epilepsy stated during delirium that '*ka bor ka shong haba tap tupia*' which can be roughly translated to 'the power lies in the one who wears the cap. 'Bah Hudson was known to wear a cap whenever he went out. The girl's relatives, who also happened to be clansmen of Bah Hudson, carried the girl and asked her to point to the direction of the witch. She pointed in

the direction of the path going to Bah Hudson's wife's house. On reaching the path near his house, she started mumbling incoherently that she was not sure but it seemed like they forced her to point to the house. At this point, the group forcefully entered the house and demanded that the family release Bah Hudson to them. They were not satisfied on hearing that he was not in the house as he and his wife had separated. They accused the family of hiding him and forcefully entered the house to find him. At the same time, they threatened the whole family. When they couldn't find him in his wife's house, they went to his place of work in the jungle where he was often engaged and as a result, stayed away from home a lot. The family of the accuser brought him to the house of the sick child and locked the gate. A crowd had gathered outside and while his family, along with some members of the *Dorbar Shnong* tried to reason with the accusers they would not let them inside. Bah Hudson was beaten not only with fists but also shoes and slippers and forced to eat excreta as a punishment for his 'crime.' After this incident, he lost his sense of hearing in one ear. At the time, he was around 50-years-old. The police were able to rescue him after many hours and took him to the Civil Hospital in Shillong.

After the incident, the family members of both parties organized a clan meeting where both the accusers and the victim were present. In the meeting, his sister stated that they should not have resorted to physical violence and that making him eat excreta was over the limit of human decency. She stated in front of all her clan members that if they found proof that he had indeed made the girl sick, then she and her sisters and brothers would take it upon themselves to punish Bah Hudson. However, as it stood, it could not be proven. She berated them for still believing in such things as the accusers were converted Christians. They also had a meeting with the sordar of the village for mediation. However, no apology was given to the victim and till today, though Bah Hudson's family and the accusers greet each other in the village as they are still clansmen, they are no longer close to each other. Bah Hudson is still working in the forest, and his comings and goings are erratic, although when he does visit the village, he stays with his sisters.

Case Study 4

Bah Trey is a businessman in Mawryngkang, near Pongkung, in East Khasi Hills District. In 2013, he and his family were accused of practicing witchcraft when one of their labourers was accused of chasing a cowherd from Domsophian village, who was apparently 'not well in the head.' Consequently, the labourer was physically assaulted by some family members of the accuser. The situation escalated and the family of the cowherd along with other villagers from Mawryngkang and nearby villages flocked to his house and set the house on fire along with a couple of cars that the family owned and some that they had hired for their business ventures. His family was threatened by the 300 strong crowd which accused them of hiring the labourer to chase the cowherd. Some members of the crowd were their labourers; one, in particular, worked in their shop. It is believed that their house was torched because the crowd believed that they harboured a U Thlen and burning the house would burn the U Thlen. The eldest daughter called the police during the incident after which an FIR was filed by Vivek Syiem, IPS. However, the case did not reach the court and those arrested by the police faced three months imprisonment.

On enquiry after the incident, they found that there were three other cowherds with the accuser and all three stated that no one had chased him. However, till today, his mother strongly believes that he was right. The family received sympathy from their relatives and fellow villagers and apologies from those involved who stated that they were caught in a mob mentality. Some of the villagers who took part in the mob attack do not show their faces near the family anymore. The victims stated that they did not want any other form of punishment stating that they had resigned themselves to the fact that god will be the one to see to their punishment. The family has shifted to the house of their eldest daughter and resumed their business activities. After filing an FIR, things have become calm and safe again. The victim also stated that the incident happened during the election campaign and hinted that that could have been a motivation as Bah Trey was known as a powerful influence in the area and he did not support the candidate from the village.

Case Study 5

In 2017, Kong Mary (approximately 60-years-old), a widow since 2003 with eight children was coming back from the fields along with other labourers. She was accused of cutting the hair of some children and was ambushed by a large group of people who threatened her and verbally abused her. Her accusers were also members of her clan. She did not file a complaint immediately and since she was living alone in her house and without her children it was only after a couple of days that her children were informed by some neighbours. Kong Mary lived in fear during those days and two weeks after the first incident, some villagers threw stones at her house and that's when she decided to file an FIR at Sohiong outpost, in East Khasi Hills District. This further kept her in a state of constant fear for her life and she was unable to sleep properly at night.

After the incident, Kong Mary and her family were excluded from social activities in the village and according to her daughter, the whole *Dorbar* was implicit in the incident and the resulting impact as well. As far as support is concerned, they have only received some from a few relatives and fellow villagers. Their relationship with the family of the accuser has soured and though they may come and go to their houses, they are no longer as close as they used to be. They do not want anyone to face any form of punishment but they would like an apology from those involved. However, this has not happened and does not seem likely in the near future.

Case Study 6

Bah Sam (around 35 years), a resident of Sohiong area, in East Khasi Hills District was accused of cutting the hair of some children along with Bah Henry in 2018. Both the victims are step-siblings. It was midnight on a Saturday when they were woken up by the *sangot* (person who announces news of the village) who summoned them by saying that they had caught a '*nongshohnoh*.' Bah Sam, his wife, mother-in-law, and kids were woken up and Bah Sam was forcefully taken to the Dorbar hall where he was

asked to return the hair he had supposedly cut. Bah Henry admitted to the accusations because he was assaulted and to stop the assault admitted to cutting someone's hair. At the same time, he was asked to name an accomplice and since he had heard of previous accusations against Bah Sam, he named him as his partner. Bah Sam denied any knowledge of everything and even denied that he knew that Bah Henry had confessed. Even though he was found not guilty, he was physically assaulted by the villagers that night and kept in the village church. His wife could not help him. He was again assaulted in the *Dorbar* meeting the following day by the relatives of the accuser and this was when the secretary asked them to stop. As a result of the incident, Bah Sam lost some of his teeth.

The *sordar* decided to chase them out of the village whereas the secretary opposed this. The other members of the *Dorbar* stated that if they were against the decision of the village, then they would be considered in league with the other victim, Bah Henry. All the relatives and wives of both the victims were coerced to sign papers to leave the village as they feared for their lives. The villagers did not allow them any time to pack their things; rather, they followed them till their homes and till the time they left the village. The *sordar* advised them not to come back for fear of the mob. Bah Sam's wife and children remained in the village but they were mentally in a weak state. She had undergone an operation before the incident and her children became sick and asked for their father time and again. Bah Sam later filed an FIR after he was refused re-entry into the village. His FIR was on the basis of his ostracization. The court ordered a police escort to help him relocate and so he was able to come back to his village after three to four months. However, after this, the family has not been included in any activities in the village. They have been shunned socially by almost everyone although they have not received any trouble from the *sordar* since then. The FIR still remains as far as he knows although he wants to clear it now.

Bah Henry, on the other hand, has not tried to return because he stated that his wife had remarried and there was nothing for him to return to.

His reasoning was also that because he believed that if the accusations against him were true, then they would in time be revealed and if they were false, then they would disappear. He also stated that he had got calls from the *sordar* where he asked him to visit the Sohiong outpost to clear the FIR filed by Bah S. It is to be noted that in the FIR, Bah H was also named along with the members of the Dorbar Shnong.

Case Study 7

In 2013, Kong Jane of Pynursla area, in East Khasi Hills District was accused of practicing witchcraft, after which she was ostracized from her village. Kong Jane had a neighbour who, after childbirth, became mentally ill and wandered around the village. She visited Kong Jane's house and Kong Jane had even given her drinking water on a couple of occasions. However, one day, the neighbour had uttered the name of Kong Jane and her family decided that she was a '*men-ai-ksuid*.' A crowd consisting of the relatives of the neighbour and some other villagers came to the house of the victim accusing her of being a witch and hurled stones at her house. During this time, only the children were at home. Later, in a *Dorbar* meeting, it was decided that they would ostracize the victim and her family. The *Dorbar Shnong* did not inform the police of any of the happenings. They gave the victim and her family 24 hours to vacate their house and stated that the things that they could not carry with them would belong to the village, including the house. The family relocated to the land of Bah Prestone Shullai in Thain Thynroh where they stayed in makeshift plastic tents for a year, after which they built a house of tin.

During this time, they received sympathy from their relatives and also from Kong Agnes Kharshiing, a social activist, who helped them in filing an FIR against the *Dorbar Shnong*. Additionally, the family faced social persecution in the village where they feared for their children who were not allowed to walk around freely. Since they were studying in Shillong, they were spared the brunt of the aftermath of the incident. For the rest of the family, however, it was another matter. The husband of the victim

who worked on his own farm could not walk through the village to reach his farm without fearing for his life. He had to take a longer route around the village instead. Similarly, the eldest daughter who was a teacher in the local school in the village was forced to find an officiate for her position and later, resign after many parents did not allow their children to attend her classes. It came to a point where only four or five students attended her classes. Another daughter, who was a teacher in another village also had to appoint an officiate for her position.

After filing the FIR, the headman came to ask them for forgiveness and to clear the name of the persons named in the FIR. They were invited by the *Dorbar Shnong* along with a police escort. However, they were not able to move immediately. Kong Jane passed away three years ago while they were re-building their house in the village. The family was able to relocate in March 2020. As of now, they are able to move freely within the village but they feel hesitant in attending social events.

Case Study 8

In 2014, Bah Terry (around 60 years) of Mawryngkang village, in East Khasi Hills District, was accused of practicing witchcraft when a couple of young women who were sick uttered his name which in turn led to their family members and other villagers threatening Bah Terry. He approached the police to file an FIR. Papers were served to the *Dorbar Shnong* after which, the *Rangbah Shnong* reacted by reprimanding him. He also asked Bah Terry to retract the FIR. After coming back from the police station, the victim was taken to the community hall where he was physically assaulted and made to consume excreta. He was also warned not to inform the police of this incident. However, the police got wind of the incident and arrested the then *Rangbah Shnong* and secretary of the village. It is to be noted that after the incident, the ailing young women did not face any improvement. The victim was socially excluded from village life. Bah Terry left the village a year after the incident (six years ago) because he did not feel safe and protected in the village. He now resides in Shillong.

Case Study 9

In 2013, Bah Yesly, Bah Besly, and Bah Enstarsing were brutally hacked to death by a mob in Smit village, In East Khasi Hills District, after being accused of practicing witchcraft. Bah Yesly and Bah Besly were brothers and the third victim, Bah Enstarsing was one Bah Yesly's children. The incident was unexpected as there had been no other problems between their families and the accuser's family, who also happened to be their nephew. Their nephew, Bah L (around 30 years) had been beaten up and left in the football field behind their house. As he was known to be a drunk, he may have been beaten by other persons unknown to them. However, he was taken to the hospital. The next day was a market day in Smit and after returning from their fields, Bah Yesly and Bah Besly wanted to visit their nephew's house to enquire about him as they had heard that he had been beaten up and taken to a hospital, the details of which they wanted to know so that they could visit him. Bah Enstarsing stated that he would go with his father and uncle, along with three other children, as they thought that he should not go alone at his age. On reaching Bah L's house, they were taken directly to the kitchen by his elder sister and locked inside. They heard some commotion outside the room and some people accusing them of being '*ki nong ai ksuid.*' The *sordar* and *Rangbah Shnong*, entered the kitchen and told them that the situation was out of control '*kane te ym long shuh phi bah.*' They were surprised and asked him what he meant. He left and arrived after some time and explained that their cousin and nephew, Bah L had stated that Bah Yesly and Besly had beaten him up the previous day and done some witchcraft on him before throwing him in Umiew river, and that it would be better if they left the village. They vehemently denied practicing witchcraft but they were physically assaulted. Bah Yesly decided that he would sign the papers for the sake of his children. Even then, they were assaulted by the crowd, consisting of the relatives of the accuser, the members of the *Dorbar Shnong*, and other villagers. Bah Yesly's son was able to flee to one of his uncle's houses who gave him shelter for the night. Another brother reached their farmland whereas Bah Enstarsing stayed with their father.

In the meantime, someone called the other children of the victims and informed them of what was happening. They, however, were too scared to do anything as there was a huge crowd.

The police found that there were thousands of villagers who had gathered and some hurled stones at them. They had blocked the road to hinder any vehicle movement to and from the village. It was only hours later that they were able to disperse the crowd. However, by that time, the mob had killed Bah Yesly, Bah Besly, and Bah Enstarsing.

The following day, the *Dorbar* had a meeting where it was decided to burn the house of the victims. However, no one took any such action. The families of the victims appealed to the village *Dorbar* to allow them to collect the bodies of their fathers and brother for the last rites in their village but this was denied. With support from the police, they were able to finally get the bodies and take them to the Civil Hospital in Shillong and on its advice, they decided to cremate their bodies in the crematorium in Jhalupara.

Some family members of the accuser were later imprisoned. As of today, they do not maintain any contact with the accuser and his family although they are still on good terms with other paternal relatives. It seems that even today, there are many who still believe in the accusations against the family although no one has ever accused them to their face. The family has good relations with the current sordar. They have not been denied any government schemes and according to them, they have been regularly receiving PDS and other benefits and this could be because the *Dorbar* does not want to have any more trouble from the police.

Case Study 10

In June 2016, Bah Dipak (around 40 years) was accused of being a '*men ai ksuid*' by a young girl from the same village. The accuser was a cousin of the victim. On the day of the incident, the girl's family arrived at the victim's house and dragged him out and physically assaulted him. The

Rangbah Shnong intervened and stopped the assault. Bah Dipak was taken to the hospital but he stated that he had fallen down so that there would be no police enquiry. They also held a meeting to judge the accuser and the accused and the judgment was in favour of the victim. However, the *Dorbar* asked them to reconcile for the sake of peace in the village. The accuser left the village six months after the incident. That was also the only case of dispute that they had with the accuser and her family. In a way, the victim felt that the police “supported them as it is hard to provide proof of a person practicing witchcraft.”

Case Study 11

In 2014, Bah Leo was assaulted by a mob in Mawmyrsiang village on accusations of being a ‘*menshohnoh*.’ Bah Leo is intellectually disabled and had often aimlessly roamed around the area. He had previously been found in Mawngap and in Mawkyrwat, both around 50 km from his village. In both the instances, he was taken to the police station where he was able to recall his home address. His father picked him up from the police stations. However, in 2014, Bah Leo reached Mawmyrsiang, although he could not remember how. His father was informed by a fellow villager who happened to drive his truck through Mawmyrsiang that his son was found in Mawjrong and had been beaten up. He was also informed that his son was taken to the hospital so he went directly to NEIGHRIMS, Shillong. He stayed in the hospital for two weeks to recover. In the meantime, Bah Leo was able to identify his assaulters from videos taken on that day. Additionally, his father also showed the police receipts of his son’s visits to MIMHANS, which proved that his son was not capable of such violent acts, let alone practicing witchcraft.

This must have reached the ears of the *Dorbar* of Mawmyrsiang because Bah Leo was visited by the *Rangbah Shnong* of Mawmyrsiang who offered his father financial compensation and mediation for peace. However, he refused any financial compensation saying that he did not want to sell his son. As far as he knows, the case has ended.

Case Study 12

In April 2011, Bah John and his family were accused of being '*men ai ksuid*' when a girl from Dong Massar became sick and accused the family. At midnight, when the family was fast asleep, stones were hurled at their house. The mob was able to enter the premises and destroy the property. Bah John, on being woken up, ran to the terrace. However, he was caught by some persons and physically assaulted, which led to a broken arm. His wife ran outside with one of her sons who was able to escape. She was also physically assaulted. The younger children hid under their beds, scared of the whole commotion.

When the police arrived to disperse the crowd, the media was already at the scene and had captured videos of the crowd hurling stones at the house. Bah John was taken to the Civil Hospital in Shillong and later to Nazareth Hospital where he stayed for two weeks to tend to his injuries. A case was registered at the police station. Later, the *Dorbar Shnong* initiated mediation for peace between the two to reach a compromise for the sake of peace in the locality. The accuser admitted that it was a false allegation that was a result of her own illness. Bah John and his family along with the family of the accuser signed a peace mediation document. However, even after this, the police arrested some family members of the sick person. Bah John asked the police to leave the person alone since he felt that the problem had been resolved in the *Dorbar*.

The family of the accuser offered financial compensation for the damage done to the property and the medical bills incurred. However, Bah John refused because he felt that since they were a poor family, asking them for financial compensation would only lead them further into poverty. He stated that they would have had to sell their house or mortgage it to be able to compensate him. As of today, the family has been assured by the *Dorbar Shnong* that no other such incident will happen again.

Odisha

Keonjhar

Keonjhar is a town with a municipality in Keonjhar district in Odisha. It is the administrative headquarters of Keonjhar district, and it is one of the 5th scheduled areas in Odisha.

The Scheduled Tribes constitute 44.5 per cent of the total population of the district whereas the Scheduled Castes constitute 11.62 per cent. The concentration of Scheduled Tribes is the highest in the Keonjhar sub-division and the lowest in Anandapur sub-division.

Case Study 1

Date of visit-29.11.2020

Village- Kalanda, Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

Village Kalanda is situated in Banspal block in Keonjhar district and is about 67 km from the district headquarters. The village has 199 households with a population of 883 people (385 male and 498 female). A primary school and a community health centre have been established for education and healthcare services respectively; 80 per cent of the population belongs to the ST category, 7 per cent is SCs, and 13 per cent is OBCs. The primary sources of livelihood are forestry, daily wages, and agriculture. Animal rearing and podu cultivation are also practiced. Literacy levels are low and exposure to the outer world is close to nil.

Description of event/s:

An alarming incident took place at Kalanda village in 2020. Shrikanta Dehury (ST), about 49-years-old, lived with his mother, wife, and two children-Sambhu Dehury (son, 18), and Jyosnarani Dehury (daughter, 21). He earned his livelihood from animal rearing, daily labour, and agricultural land. According to the villagers, the family was content. However, the

daughter was reportedly suffering from chronic fever since childhood which could not be cured even after several treatments. There had also been instances of the son suffering from fits of insanity. One day, a fellow villager suggested to Shrikanta Dehury that his children were sick due to the presence of a witch and that he should get them diagnosed by an *ojha* (village exorcist). After his diagnosis the *ojha* indicated that Shrikanta's father's sister Raibari was the reason behind the ill-fated lives of both the children. Immediately after this, Shrikanta approached Raibari and warned her to stop such practices. He continued visiting Raibari as his children's health kept deteriorating. In the meantime, he had an accident while riding his motorcycle and he had to undergo treatment. This took a toll on his mental health and he started showing symptoms of bipolar disorder. One time when Shrikanta was out in the field grazing animals, Raibari arrived and started quarrelling with him regarding some family matters. Shrikanta firmly believed that Raibari was behind all his misery and her goal was to occupy Shrikanta's share of land.

In a fit of anger, he attacked Raibari and killed her. The details of the murder are not clear due to lack of witnesses as soon after killing Raibari, Shrikanta headed back to his home and spent the night there. Missing Raibari was reported, and Shrikanta was arrested the next day by the police. He did not get any support from his community or family. However, the daughter has now recovered from her chronic illness and is continuing her studies along with earning for the family. But the son's condition remains the same. The family is struggling to get Shriakanta released from jail.

Persecution status:

Raibari (38 years) lived with Karuna Dehury (Shrikanta's uncle) some distance from Shrikanta's house. She was unmarried and was earning a living through daily wage labour and agricultural activities. The villagers are of the opinion that Raibari always lived a secret life and was involved in mischievous activities for which she was constantly warned by the villagers. Her suspicious acts and complaints by the villagers led to the crystallization of Shrikanta's suspicions of her being involved in witchcraft.

The incident was purely a family matter which later changed into witch-branding due to the prevailing superstitions among the villagers. As Raibari was unmarried, no legal action was taken on her behalf. Shrikanta is now in jail and his family is financially incapable of fighting his case in court.

Findings of individual and group discussions:

- » Black magic and blind faith in witchcraft exists in the village. The village ojha Mangulu Dehury is continuing with his practice. However, it should be mentioned that his influence has decreased among the villagers. People are now visiting hospitals and are aware of medical science, rather than going to ojhas to find cures. But Mangulu Dehury's influence still exists in nearby villages.
- » Insufficient infrastructure and awareness are the root causes of witch-hunting.
- » People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent witch-hunting.
- » People said that no such incidents occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » No action has been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to dissuade the practice in the village.

Case Study 2

Date of visit-30.11.2020

Village-Saharpur, Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

Village Saharpur is situated in Banspal block in Keonjhar district and is about 37 km from the district headquarters. The village has 175 households with 980 individuals. It is close to the block headquarters and an education institution. The village has a PHC for delivering education and health services. The block headquarters support the infrastructure of

a police station, a weekly market, and a small market complex; 89 per cent of the population is STs, 3 per cent is SCs, and 8 per cent is OBCs. People earn from forestry, daily labour, and additionally from agribusiness. Animal rearing and *podu* cultivation also supplement their incomes.

Description of event/s:

Jema Dehury, Rajan Dehury's wife had been living in village Saharpur for a long time. They have a son and three daughters. Both work as daily labourers and to meet their everyday expenses they sometimes migrate to nearby villages. They also have a small property in the village. Back in the day, the villagers were sceptical of Jema Dehury's behaviour. A bunch of villagers believed in her supernatural healing abilities. They came to her for rescue when their children fell sick due to an undiagnosed disease. She was believed to perform mass pujas in front of the ghouls by chanting mantras for their recovery. Eventually, she was accredited for having metaphysical powers by practicing black witchcraft and became well known among the villagers for mantra/tantra. Occasionally her actions overturned and inflicted harm to others. This bizarre and superstitious practice was used for achieving privileges and establishing fear among the villagers. Jema's practice sometimes inflicted harm to blind believers.

Women asserted that she was a blood sucker, if she glanced at a crop field then it was destined to be obliterated, auspicious occasions turned grim, and good things turned bad if she said something about them. People were so petrified of her that they hid themselves in her presence. The community urged her to halt her puja/mantras and not to victimize the villagers. But she allegedly did not pay heed and proceeded with her practice. These activities enabled her to earn, so her spouse also supported her. Reportedly, the villagers had to put up with a lot due to her practice but Jema overlooked this. As a result, a disastrous incident took place. It was the optimistic day of Laxmi Puja in November 2016. People celebrated the festival and 11 individuals (10 male + one female, Padmabati Penthei) hurried to Rajan's house at about 8 pm. They circled his wife and without uttering a word they started thrashing her with sticks.

Fortunately, their children were able to escape from the house. They ran out and hid themselves in a shady place in the jungle. People dragged Ranjan and his wife to the middle of the village. Both pleaded to be left alone and vowed to leave the village. But no one paid attention to their appeals. Amidst the confusion someone slashed her head with a sharp iron article. Then they caught hold of Rajan and they proceeded to behead him with an axe. People grabbed their heads as well as bodies separately and began to dance with joy. This happened within a few minutes. They tossed their carcasses in the jungle to eliminate any evidence. Someone from the village notified the police. During the preliminary investigation, the bodies were recovered and on the same night all the accused were arrested. After six years, nine of them including Padmabati were released while three of them remain behind bars. Jema and Rajan's children are living with their uncle in Kusmita village. They were coerced to live outside the village. After the event they were unable to return to their native place and were incapable of cultivating their own land because they were scared. They are continuing their studies now and attempting to lead normal lives.

Persecution status:

This practice has ruined people's dignity, temperament, lives, and property. Nine of the accused have been acquitted. They were imprisoned for only six years. They work as daily wage labourers. They move outside the village for work to earn more. After their release from jail, they are attempting to lead normal lives in their respective villages.

Findings of individual and group discussions:

- » Superstition and blind beliefs are still prevalent in the village but they have reduced.
- » Poor conditions, insufficient healthcare services, and lack of awareness are the root causes of witch-hunting.
- » People are oblivious of the law and the method to deter witch-hunting incidents.

- » People said that no such incidents occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » No action has been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to dissuade the practice in the village.

Case Study 3

Date of visit-30.11.2020

Village-Singhpur, Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

Singhpur village is dominated by tribals. It is situated in the middle of Banspal block in Keonjhar district, about 57 km from the district headquarters and 27 km from the block headquarters. The village has 289 households with a population of 844 individuals (442 male and 402 female). A primary school has been established to provide education and people depend on the CHC in Kalanad village including the PHC at the block headquarters for healthcare services. The police station is at Nayakot which is 10 km away. Collection of forest goods, agribusiness, and animal rearing are the primary occupations of the people. *Podu* cultivation is also practiced to add to their incomes.

Description of event/s:

Boita Naik (38 years), a member of the ST community, worked as Assa in Singhpur village. She lived with her husband and son who worked as daily wage labourers. They earned their livelihood by collecting NTFPs and agriculture. They also reared animals to supplement their income. In 2013, Boita Naik had recently joined her service. Her son and husband while ploughing in their backyard, heard a noise. Her husband rushed inside and found Kalakar Dehury dragging Boita out of the house. He and his wife with some other villagers were armed with wooden planks and were yelling dahani (witch) at her. They were blaming her for some matter regarding their baby. The story started when Kalakar's wife was six months pregnant

and wanted to abort her foetus. She came to Boita and requested her to do so. Boita refused to support her. Kalakar's wife got her foetus aborted at a local facility which lacked professional expertise, which led to her reproductive health being affected. As a result, she could not conceive again. Kalakar was disheartened till he got to know that Boita was the reason for this suffering. He was convinced that Boita was a witch and that she had cast a spell on his wife. Later that day he reached Boita's house with a group of villagers and started blaming her for practicing sorcery. They blackened her face and made her parade throughout the village. In the meanwhile, Boita's husband informed the police. Fortunately, the police came on time and was able to rescue Boita from the mob. The assembly was arrested and Boita was saved.

Persecution status:

After their release, the village committee agreed on a mutual bonding among all the families with Boita Naik. Now Kalakar is striving to lead a normal life. Occasionally he goes outside the village in search of work. His wife has been blessed with a child. Both are working as labourers. They also have a small property in the village. The whole episode indicates that women are more likely to become victims in tribal areas. Family disputes and caste-related conflicts are the driving factors for such ghastly violence.

Findings of the Group Discussions (Singhpur ICDS hall):

- » Myths, folklore, and blind beliefs are still prevalent in the village but they are reducing as compared to before.
- » Poor conditions, insufficient healthcare services, and lack of awareness are the root causes of witch-hunting.
- » People are oblivious of the law and the methods to deter witch-hunting incidents.
- » People said that no such incidents occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- » No action has been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to dissuade the practice in the village.
- » It is obvious that the impoverished and the defenceless fall prey to sorcery-related problems.
- » In such deplorable conditions the only hope is that some optimistic change can bring a better tomorrow for society.

Case Study 4

Date of visit-04.12.2020

Village- Bhaliadiha, Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

District Keonjhar is one of the most backward districts in Odisha which is dominated by a tribal population. Banspal is one of the hill-based and inaccessible blocks in the district, where nearly 87 per cent of the population belongs to the tribal and marginalized groups besides OBCs. Bhaliadiha, is a hamlet of Luhakala, one of the most backward villages in Kadakala GP in Banspal block. It is about 62 km from the district headquarters and 43km from the block headquarters. The village has 65 households with a population of 310 people. The location of Bhaliadiha village is in a geographically critical area. The undulating hills, valleys, and the presence of wild animals, form obstructions to village life. The location of the government school is not taken seriously since the geographical condition of an area cannot be changed. Agriculture is the main source of income but production is unable to meet the requirements. Traditional agricultural methods result in low production year after year. Every year people face crop losses due to irregular and erratic rainfall, though some people are engaged in other income generating activities like small livestock farming and ginger and vegetable cultivation but due to financial problems and inadequate skills they are unable to up-grade. People depend on the CHC in Nayakote village and the PHC in the block headquarters for health services. There is a police station in Nayakot which is 10 km away. As 30

per cent of the people do not have Aadhar cards, they are excluded from the government's poverty alleviation programmes. Without a source of drinking water people collect water from dirty water bodies which results in rampant water borne diseases.

Description of event/s:

Swapna Dehury (45 years) lived with his wife Pulmani Dehury (34 years) and one child Ramesh (13 years). He worked in mining and the forests as daily labour and had a small plot of agricultural land. At times he also engaged in pujas/mantras and advised others about the causes of their good and evil deeds and their karma. He became popular as a *guina* (occultist) in the nearby villages. This practice was a source of income. Dhenu Padhan (51 years) another villager, lived with his wife and children. He worked as a daily labourer and sometimes went outside in search of work. He was constantly worried about his son as he was seriously ill because of an unknown fever which remained incurable even after several rounds of treatment.

Members present in the group discussion:

Teachers, ward members, and villagers were there to share their views and opinions. The villagers cited an incident in March 2013. There was a double murder in Bhaliadiha because of blind faith and witchcraft. In those days, an age-old practice called the Krishna Guru Puja was performed which helped eliminate any issues in the village by helping find solutions for the problems. According to belief, on the day of Krishna Guru Puja one gets possessed by a spiritual power (usually a goddess) and he/she indicates the name of a *dahani* (witch) who is involved in evil doings in the village. Phulmani's behaviour was doubtful and Dhenu suspected Swapna for his son's illness.

On the day of the incident, he organized Krishna Guru Puja to discover the cause of his son's illness. Unfortunately, the one who apparently possessed the power gave the name Swapna. Eventually, Dhenu was assured that Swapna and Phulmani both were the cause for his son's misfortune. As a

result, there was a shocking development. He rushed into Swapna's house. Without any dialogue he started thrashing Swapna with a wooden stick.

Luckily, their child was not there. When his wife Pulmani opposed she also had to face the consequences. The couple pleaded for mercy, Dhenu did not pay heed to their appeals. He slashed Phulmani's throat with a sharp iron article. Swapna became unconscious but Dhenu did not stop his vicious attack. He again clasped Swapna and cut his head. He threw their bodies beside their house and fled into the forest.

Persecution status:

Swapna's relative Banamali informed the officers at Nayakote police station. During the preliminary investigation, the bodies were recovered and on the same day, the accused was arrested. The murder was confirmed, and the court convicted him for 14 years in jail. It has been six years since he was imprisoned.

Some Individual views:

According to Suresh Dhamulia, (37 years), Swapna and his wife were innocent. Due to prejudices and other provocations the accused was instigated to commit the crime.

According to Purnima Dhangudia, (28 years), Pulmani Dehury was the real culprit. She practiced witchcraft. She was a bloodsucker too. She performed black magic on him and wanted to kill. Purnima favoured Dhenu's reaction.

According to Samal Munda, (teacher) they never practiced witchcraft. For some bizarre and mysterious reason, the villagers suspected them to be witches. It was merely folklore.

Other views and findings:

Witchcraft is a belief among the tribal communities primarily in vulnerable areas. Women being the weaker section are easily humiliated by men. In many villages, such social evils exist. But people are apprehensive about

bringing these affairs into the limelight. Lack of awareness, ignorance, and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system. But the percentage of such cases has been decreasing after the villages have got access to health services. During the pandemic no such incident occurred in the village.

Case Study 5

Date of visit- 06.12.2020

Village-Simnapatali, Block-Banspal, District-Keonjhar, State-Odisha

Demography:

It is one of the hamlets of Sudanga village in Kadakala GP in Banspal block which has a large number of people below the poverty line. The habitations are scattered and isolated, where nearly 93 per cent of the population belongs to tribal and marginalized categories beside OBCs. Simnapatali, is one of the vulnerable villages, which is about 61 km from the district headquarters and 29km from the block headquarters. The village has 35 households with 321 persons. Simnapatali village is in an area surrounded by hills and forests. There is a primary school in the village headquarters Sudanga and an ICDS which provides health services to children. Girls are treated as liabilities and are not encouraged to study. Inadequate institutional facilities for health and education and administrative barriers seriously impede villagers' participation in key development sectors. Agriculture and wage labour are the major sources of livelihood. As 10 per cent of the people does not have Aadhar cards (specifically in Munda households) they are excluded from the government's poverty alleviation programmes. Without a source of drinking water people collect water from a *chua* (a small water body) from a *nala* (drain) named Gedughigi Nalah which leads to water-borne diseases.

Description of event/s:

In 2000, an alarming incident took place in Simnapatali village. Bana Munda (ST) about 32-years-old, lived with his wife and three children. He earned

his livelihood from animal rearing, daily wage labour, and agriculture. He owned a big agricultural property in the heart of the village. He led a peaceful family life. But his son had been suffering with an unknown fever since childhood and the family could not find any cure even after several treatments. Due to financial constraints, he could not take his son out of the village for proper treatment. Days passed, and his son's condition worsened. One day a fellow villager suggested that the reason for his son's prolonged illness might be black magic. He further advised him to go to the *ojha* to find out who was behind his illness. Bana Munda later went to the village *ojha* and on hearing the whole story the *ojha* started chanting mantras and indicated that his niece (younger brother's daughter) Gunjari Munda (22 years) was responsible for his son's fever. Furious, Bana Munda rushed to Gunjari and warned her to stop such practices. However, his son showed no signs of getting better.

Meanwhile, Bana Munda kept visiting Gunjari requesting her to stop but the situation remained unchanged. His child's health worsened. Bana Munda started thinking that Gunjari and his brother were conspiring to acquire his land. Bana Munda believed that Gunjari was doing this to kill his only son to occupy his land. A quarrel started between them and in a fit of rage he smashed Gunjari's head. He threw her body in the field and ran to the forest. When Gunjari did not come back her father and relatives informed the police. Next day Bana Munda was arrested and sent to jail. Nobody from the community or his relatives supported him. But his son's condition is better now.

Persecution status:

At the preliminary investigation stage, the body was recovered and the accused was arrested. The murder was proved, and the court convicted Bana for 13 years of jail time. He escaped from the jail and was later found hiding in the forest for two years before being sent to jail again. He has been released and is living with his family now, but he and his family are not staying in their house. The house and their land are ownerless.

Some individual views:

According to Sukutu Giri, (52 years), black magic exists, but Gunjari was innocent. Somebody instigated Bana to kill her.

Champa Munda, (26 years) a relative of Gunjari Munda, said that they could not zero down on who instigated Bana to kill her, but they could never forgive him for what he did.

Raising Munda (36 years), a fellow villager stated that the belief in witches and witchcraft is prevalent in many villages. He further stated that he too strongly believed in witches and that they possessed powers to hurt the villagers but Gunjari was not one of them.

Outcomes and findings of the group discussions:

Witchcraft still exists in tribal communities. People visit ojhas for inquiring about a vulnerable situation to do with their land, health, agriculture, and cattle. Not only this village but also many villages live under the shadow of this belief. The inhabitants are afraid to bring these affairs to the limelight. Sometimes, certain matters are discussed and brought to light by the community. Victims are excluded from their homes, land, sustenance, and other rights. These decisions have led to the violation of their human rights. But the matter is still not under the court's jurisdiction.

Awareness about the laws is very poor. Ignorance and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system but the situation is improving after healthcare access has been provided to the villages. No such incident took place during the pandemic.

Case Study 6

Date of visit- 05.12.2020

Village- Gajapur, Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

Banspal block is one of the 13 blocks in Keonjhar district. It has a higher percentage of economically backward individuals. A number of people

below the poverty line earn their livelihood through off-farming and non-farm agricultural activities as well as through seasonal migratory jobs. The habitations are scattered and isolated. Nearly 83 per cent of the population belongs to the tribal and marginalized communities besides OBCs.

Gajapur, one of the most backward villages in Singpur GP in Banspal block. It is about 54 km from the district headquarters and 24 km from the block headquarters. The village has 92 households with 445 people (210 male and 235 female). Gajapur village is in a geographically critical area. There is a primary school in the village and people depend on Jamiriposi village for higher education. Girls are treated as a liability and are not encouraged to study. Inadequate institutional facilities for health and education and administrative barriers seriously impede villagers' participation in key development sectors. Not a single person from the village has completed higher education and taken up a job either inside or outside the block or the district. Lack of proper knowledge about scientific techniques of cultivation, less exposure to technologies and skill upgradation, improper ideas about marketing, and low bargaining capacity have made agriculture a low-income sector in the area. Hence, wage labour is a major source of livelihood -- 20 per cent of the people have no access to Aadhar cards (specifically Munda households). They are excluded from the government's poverty alleviation programmes. A tube well is the main source of drinking water. A poor diet has led to poor health and exposed the people to various diseases.

Description of event/s:

Kalu Naik (49 years) lived with his wife Tara Naik (38 years) and three children. He earned his livelihood from the forest as well as from daily labour and from his insufficient agricultural land. He once engaged in a puja in the forest under a Sal tree and chanted spells on others about the causes of his problems and a possible solution. He was known as a *raulia* (witch) in the village. There was a strong belief among the people about his mastery. People came to him with several problems. Bhatta Naik (51 years) another villager had a small piece of agricultural land and a

number of cattle (buffalos and cows). But he was working as a labourer and he occasionally went out to search for work. He had frequent exposure to areas outside the village. He was worried about his cattle and agriculture when he was out. Cattle dying and seed not sprouting on his land were his major concerns. He was curious to know what the solution was.

In 2015, on Astami festival unexpectedly Bhatta Naik rushed to Kalu and Tara's house, dragged them outside and slashed their heads with a sharp axe. Nobody knew why he did it. It was speculated that Tara Naik was suspected of being a witch and blamed for the death of Bhatta's cattle and the destruction of his agriculture. He was prompted by outsiders that Tara and her husband both practiced black magic and evil that was formulated to bring him misfortune.

Persecution status:

The villagers reported the incident to the police at Nayakote police station. During the preliminary investigation, the bodies were recovered and on the same day the accused was arrested. The murder was proved, and the court convicted him. He was released on bail six years ago.

Some individual views:

According to Laxmi Dehury (42 years), Kalu and Tara were innocent. Due to biases and other instigation, Bhatta was inspired to commit the crime. Alcohol and a wrong mindset were the reasons for his crime.

According to Suni Naik (45 years) Kalu's wife Tara was the real culprit. She practiced witchcraft. She cast evil spells on him to destroy his agriculture and cattle. They were interested in grabbing his land. She agreed with Bhatta's response.

According to Kami Dehury (35 years) they never practiced black magic. The villagers suspected them to be witches. It was only folklore. Bhatta was instigated.

According to Radha Dehury (39 years), both were innocent. Superstition and prompting by others led to the incident.

Outcomes and findings of the Group discussions:

Witchcraft still exists in tribal communities. People visit apparent witches for inquiry regarding a vulnerable situation over their land, health, agriculture, and cattle. Not only this village but many villages live under the shadow of this belief. The inhabitants are afraid to bring these affairs into the limelight. Sometimes, certain matters are discussed and brought to light by the community. Victims are excluded from their homes, land, sustenance, and other rights. These decisions have led to the violation of their human rights. But the matter is not under the court's jurisdiction.

Awareness about laws is very rare. Ignorance and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system. But the situation is improving after access to healthcare has been provided to the villages. No such incident took place during the pandemic.

Case Study 7

Date of visit- 30.12.2020

Village- Kishan Sahi, Block- Hrichandanpur, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

Kishan Sahi is a hamlet of villages in GP Pitapiti, Harichandanpur block. It is under the supervision of Hrichandanpur police station located about 34 km from the district headquarters and 6 km from the block headquarters. Kishan Sahi, Tangarpasi, and Dhobasahi come under the Mahanta Sahi ICDS centre. The village has 109 households with a population of 457 people (218 male and 239 female). The people are mostly from tribal communities. They migrate in search of livelihood. Wage labourers and part time farmers are common in the village. The village has compact habitation for each caste. There is a primary and a high school in the village and ICDS provides child healthcare and education. People prefer to

go to the block headquarters and to the district headquarters for adequate health services.

Description of event/s:

Lochan Kishan, a daily wage labourer, lived with his wife Bulari Kishan in his paternal village Kishan Sahi. They lived a happy life with their two children Rajan Kishan and Brundaban Kishan. Unexpectedly, one day Lochan died and left his wife alone with two children. Bulari was a hard-working woman and was devoted to her children. She struggled a lot to survive and to provide a decent life to her children. Now both her children are old and married. Rajan is 27 and Brundaban is 25-years-old. Both their wives also work as wage labourers to supplement the family income. Bulari Kishan is still working to earn even at the age of 57 years. After her sons' marriage she lives alone and cooks for herself. A couple of months back her younger son Brundaban fell sick and was taken to the hospital at the block headquarters for treatment and thereafter to the chief medical officer, Keonjhar headquarters. Even after treatment, he did not recover. Brundaban's wife was worried about her husband and could not find a way to alleviate his health condition. She was especially curious to find out the cause for his illness. Meanwhile, one of their neighbours informed her that someone might be spelling a cast on him. Rajan also informed her that he sometimes observed that his mother behaved abnormally. Brundaban believed Rajan's statement and suspected his mother to be a witch. He believed that she had cast an evil spell on him and that was the reason for his ailment. In October 2020, Rajan and Brundaban with their family members attacked Bulari when she was going to sleep. They dragged her outside the house and started beating her with wooden sticks. They acted brutally and injured her badly. They alleged that she was a witch and held her responsible for Brundaban's condition.

Bulari appealed repeatedly stating her innocence but they ignored her. Bulari got away narrowly from that place and went to the police station. She complained against both her children and narrated the entire matter to them.

Persecution status:

The police came to the spot with Bulari. Rajan with Brundaban were arrested on the basis of their mother's allegations. There is a case pending against Rajan and Brundaban at the Harichandanpur police station. Later, the community people got to know the fact, and nobody supported them for their ruthlessness. After police intervention everything is normal now. Bulari lives in the same house. Brundaban's health is normal.

Some individual views:

According to Sabitri Patra, (23 years), Bulari Kishan is an honest, sincere, and hard-working woman. She is innocent and did not conduct any black magic on her younger son. It was a misunderstanding.

According to Rajan Kishan his mother was innocent. He repents his actions.

According to Jala Naik (37 years) Bulari never practiced black magic. The one who provoked both the brothers to suspect their mother of being a witch is unknown and the incident was very unexpected.

Outcomes and findings of the Group discussions:

Champabati Naik, (ward member), Pravat Sahu (villager), and Dharani Sethy (teacher) shared their views. According to them, customary practices and the belief systems of the tribals are the reason for such evil activities. Without any exposure to the outer world, the people live in isolation. Lack of education and awareness led to incident. Not only here but in other inaccessible villages this blind belief system still exists. Sometimes innocent people are victimized and are excluded from their fundamental rights. According to the participants in the group discussion there is no awareness about the prevailing act. Lack of knowledge and illiteracy are also key contributing factors. There is a need of interventions for creating awareness.

Case Study 8

Visit to Sukdola on 24.12.2020

Village- Sukdola, Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

The remote village of Sukdola is dominated by Bhuyans and Mundas besides a few OBCs and general families. Among other villages of Jatra GP in Banspal block in Keonjhar district, Sukdola is located about 46 km from the district headquarters and 14 km from the block headquarters. The village is under the Nayakote police station and has 180 households with 933 members (455 male and 478 female). Geographically, the village is situated amidst hills and forests beside arable homestead land for agriculture and vegetation. The villagers are either small scale farmers or daily wage labourers. The villagers are mostly below the poverty line. The habitations are scattered and isolated. There is a primary school and an ICDS centre to provide healthcare and education. For better treatment, the people prefer going to the block and district headquarters. Very few people have frequent exposure to places outside the village. Only a few people have access to public service providers like teachers and panchayat workers.

Description of event/s:

Ratna Naik (42 years) lived separately from his relatives with his three sons and wife in the corner of the village. He was hard working, healthy, and strong. The young couple and their three children were happy till a critical day ruined their life. That day, one of the relatives of Mitrabhanu Dehury (14 years) fell sick and did not recover after numerous medications. The villagers believe d that before any additional treatment they had to seek the advice of the village quack. Accordingly, they took the boy (7 years) to the quack. The quack suspected Ratna to be a witch and he rooted black magic in Mitrabhanu's home. Mitrabhanu discussed the issue with other members of the village and created an inaccurate impression of Ratna

practicing witchcraft. Mitrabhanu said that because of his black magic the boy's fever was not being cured. He then planned with his family members and joined Pradeep Thakur (15 years) to teach him a lesson. In January 2016 in a marriage ceremony Mitrabhanu and Pradeep Thakur diplomatically invited Ratna for a drink. After that Ratna did not return home. One of Ratna's younger brothers Dinabandhu Naik, working as a primary teacher called a village meeting and told them that Ratna was missing. The villagers also tried to find him, but failed. They then decided to inform the police. The police found Ratna's dead body in a cave 12 days after he had gone missing. Ratna's head was found separated from his body by a sharp axe. The police also seized the weapon used for the murder.

Persecution status:

During the preliminary investigation, Mitrabhanu (14 years) and Pradeep (15 years) accepted that due to witchcraft they had brutally attacked Ratna. The police detained both of them and seized the sharp axe that they had hidden in the forest. They were arrested and sent to jail. The accused being minors are detained in the juvenile jail in Rourkela.

Some individual views:

According to Debananda Thakur (43 years), an eminent person from the village, Ratna was not a witch. His family was innocent. His brothers and relatives were educated. Probably excessive drinking and personal quarrels turned brutal. Without hospitalisation the boy was improperly treated by the village quack and he died after one and a half years. It shocked Ratna's family as well as Pradeep and Mitrabhanu's family.

Outcomes and findings of the Group discussions:

According to Swapna Naik (44 years) Ratna's elder brother, witchcraft is deep rooted among the villagers and no step has been taken to create awareness among the people against this superstition. Ward member Budhan Senpati said that witch hunting is more prominent in the socially and educationally excluded parts of society. Kailash Padhan argued that panchayat leaders

are the most important people who have been negotiating and discussing such issues resulting in violence. People consider witch-hunting a social threat, specifically to those who are identified as witches. It damages their reputation and lives. Sometimes the police do not find the motive except that the victim was suspected to be a witch. In tribal culture, tradition and liquor addiction are responsible for this social evil. The participants in the group discussion said that during the pandemic no such incident happened in their village. There is a law to safeguard the people, but they are not aware of it. The participants suggested rigorous action to educate the excluded villages to eliminate this social system.

Case Study 9

Date of visit-20.12.2020

Village- Rangamatia village (Phulajhar), Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar, State- Odisha

Demography:

Rangamatia is a hamlet/ward in Phulajhar village in Banspal block. It is a tribal dominated village having the highest number of people below the poverty line who earn their livelihood from lower off-farming and non-farm agricultural activities. The habitations in the village are scattered and isolated. Nearly 79 per cent of the population belongs to the tribal and marginalized communities besides OBCs. It is a mining prone area. Adent Steel and Shree Metalics operates in Dudhposi village which is adjacent to Phuljhar. It is located about 37 km from the district headquarters and 24 km from the block headquarters. Presently the village has 128 households with a population of 701 people (344 male and 357 female). The village is located in a geographically accessible area. There is a primary and high school in the village. People depend on the block as well as district headquarters for healthcare services. Lack of proper knowledge about scientific techniques of cultivation, less exposure to technology and skill up gradation, improper ideas about marketing, and low bargaining capacity have made agriculture a low-income sector in the area. Hence, wage labour

in mining and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act's provisions are the major sources of livelihood, besides animal rearing. As 12 per cent of the people do not have Aadhar cards (specifically Munda households) they are excluded from the government's poverty alleviation programmes. A tube well and the government's water supply project are the sources of drinking water.

Description of event/s:

Bamia Pradhan (55 years) lived with his wife Gangi Pradhan (50 years) and five children (two sons and three daughters) in Rangamatia village (word no.13). He earned his livelihood from mining and the forest as a daily wage labourer and from his little agricultural land. Both engaged in pujas/mantras instead of going outside for work. The community people believed that they practiced witchcraft and sometimes Gangi's activities were found to be suspicious by the villagers. They cast spells on others about good and evil or good and bad situations. This practice was a secondary source of income for their family. Kaira Sinku lived with his family and relatives in an area where those from the Munda tribe lived. Kaira was suffering from an unknown fever. His relatives tried to provide him with adequate treatment, but his condition worsened.

His nephew Laxman Sinku took him to a hospital in Cuttack for better treatment. But they did not admit him there because he was in the last stages of the disease. Soon after he returned home, he died. Braja Sinku, one of his relatives, suspected Bamai and Gangi for Kaira's death. Laxman planned to teach them a lesson and got the others to act against them. In 2017, a misfortune occurred in Bamia's family. Mangal Munda, Satari Munda and the others rushed to Gangi Pradhan's house in the night, dragged them outside the house and slashed the heads of both using a sharp axe. When their eldest son opposed them, he was injured using a bow and arrow. They also dragged their daughter Risa Pradhan (23 years) and brutally injured her. She became unconscious and the accused ran away from the spot. After six months of treatment their eldest son recovered and got back to the family. Risa Pradhan is still under treatment. She is unable

to erase the memories of the atrocities she went through that night. Braja was the mastermind behind the incident but he cleverly excluded himself from the matter.

Persecution status:

After receiving information from the villagers, Nayakote police arrested both the accused Mangal Munda and Satari Munda. They were sent to jail. The murder was confirmed, and the court convicted them for 14 years in jail. It has been three years since they have been behind bars.

Some individual views:

According to Kuntala Naik (35 years) all these are blind beliefs. Unnecessarily they suffered a lot, specifically the girl who lost her entire life.

According to Sujan Munda (35 years) they never practiced black magic. The villagers suspected them to be witches. It was the people who prompted each other.

According to Sunakar Hasda (29 years) ward member, the reactions of Kaira's relatives were quite normal. Pradhan was a branded witch crafter. After Bamia and his wife, their eldest son is practicing witchcraft.

Outcomes and findings of the group discussions:

It is obvious that witchcraft still exists not only among the tribal communities but in OBC communities as well. People go to *ojhas* to enquire about their sufferings related to health, land, agriculture, and cattle rearing. People have no other source to find solutions, so they end up going to *ojhas*. But the people are afraid to bring these affairs into the limelight. Sometimes, matters are discussed and resolved by the community. Victims are excluded from their homes, land, food, and other rights. There is almost zero awareness about the law. Ignorance and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system. However, the good news is that this is decreasing after the village has been provided access to health facilities. The villagers also said that no such incident occurred during the pandemic.

Case Study 10

Date of visit- 25.12.2020

**Village- Rugudi Sahi, (Sukdola) Block- Banspal, District- Keonjhar,
State- Odisha**

Demography:

Sukdola is a culturally mixed village in Jatra GP, in Banspal block in Keonjhar district. Village Rugudisahi (ward no. 13) in Sukdola is under the Nayakote police station which is about 46 km away. The village is dominated by Bhuyans and Mundas, besides a few OBCs. It has 46 households with 352 people (171 male and 108 female). Geographically, the village has hills and forests beside some arable land for cultivation. Animal rearing, vegetable cultivation, and wage labour are practiced to supplement family incomes. The villagers are mostly below poverty line, living in scattered and isolated houses. There is a primary school at the entry point to the village and an ICDS to provide healthcare and education to children.

Description of event/s:

Bharda Padhan (23 years) was a young, energetic, and healthy person living with his parents. He was the eldest son and had two brothers and a sister. Though he was uneducated he had better exposure to outside societies and cultures. As per their customary practice he sometimes did pujas offering gratitude to their traditional deities in the forest as well as in the house. The village had a traditional practice of inter-feast celebrations. Every summer, one village (*pada*) invites another village (*pada*) to enjoy a feast and the other village does the same. In Rugudi Sahi village a girl died after falling sick and was taken to hospital for treatment. After the funeral, one aged woman behaved abnormally and uttered the name of the witch who was the cause of the girl's death. In June 2019, the inter-feast celebration was organized and Rugudi Sahi was hosting Thakur Sahi. The women SHGs were given the responsibility of performing all the responsibilities. They finished the celebrations before the evening and bid farewell to the villagers. But Bharda Padhan did not return to his house.

The next day the people found his head on a pole at the end of their village boundary. A village meeting was called and the village sarpanch informed the police about the incident. The police started an investigation and found his body in an abandoned field.

Persecution status:

Jayaru Naik (19 years) and Ganeswar Naik (14 years) were arrested and the police seized a sharpened axe from the forest and sent them to jail. Jayaru is now in Keonjhar jail and Ganeswar, being a minor, was sent to the juvenile jail in Rourkela. The incident happened because Bharda was suspected of being a witch and of practicing black magic. On the day of the feast, the aged woman pointed him out and so Ganeswar and Jayaru killed him. Nobody supported Jayaru and Ganeswar's behaviour.

Some individual views:

According to Kalu Dehury (45 years), Bharda was not a witch. His family was innocent. The woman who prompted them about Bharda may have had some personal differences with him.

According to Padmini Mahanta (39 years) another villager, Bharda was innocent. That girl died because of inadequate treatment. She never saw any doubtful activities being done by Bharda. It was very shocking for the family.

Outcomes and findings of the Group discussion:

According to Deleswar Naik, (34 years) ward member, Pradeep Padhan, (41 years) a villager, Budhan Senpati, a villager, CDS worker, Kailash Padhan, teacher, liquor is the root cause of all violence. Not only Sukdola, but nearby villages also believe in black magic. They have strong faith in village quacks and witches. People have no idea about the law (Odisha Witch-hunting Prevention Act). So, it is a matter of lack of awareness and lack of knowledge. Due to misunderstandings, sometimes innocent people are offended and are excluded from their fundamental rights. Tradition, tribal

culture, and belief systems are responsible for these social evils. However, during the pandemic no incident happened in the village. The participants suggested that action must be initiated to remove this social stigma.

Case Study 11

Date of visit- 19.12.2020

**Village- Khuntbandh, Block- Harichandan pur, District- Keonjhar,
State- Odisha**

Demography:

Rukmini Padhan (66 years) was branded a witch living in village Khunbandh with her son Jayan Padhan and one grandson. Khunbandh is a mixed population village in Tentalaposi GP in Harichandanpur block in Keonjhar district. It is 28 km from the district headquarters. Agriculture is the main source of income for the people, but the production cannot meet the requirements. Some people are engaged in other income generating activities like small livestock farming and vegetable cultivation. People depend on the CHC in Janghira village and the PHC in the block headquarters 24km from the village for health services. The police station is at Harichandanpur, 24 km away. A primary and high school are there to provide education.

Description of event/s:

Rukmini Padhan (49 years) lived with her elder son and grandson in Khunbanh village. Jayan Pradhan was the only earner for their family and he earned his livelihood from the forest as daily labour and from a little agricultural land. Before coming to this village Rukmini was living with her husband, one son, and three daughters in Mangalpur, a small village in Kuanar GP in Banspal block. That village was geographically not accessible and was thickly populated by the primitive tribe Bhuyans (ST). That time the village had the tradition of Krishna Guru Puja. Rukmini engaged in pujas and spells on others about the causes of their problems and possible

solutions. Gradually, she came to be known as a *raulia* (witch) in the village. There was a strong belief among the people about her abilities. Hence, people came to her with their problems. Tura Pradhan (42 years) belonged to the village with a small agricultural land and had some cattle (buffaloes). Despite that, he worked as a labourer and sometimes went outside to search for work. He had frequent exposure to places outside the village. But he was worried about his cattle and agriculture. Cattle dying and seeds not sprouting were major headaches for him. He was desperate to find out the cause and the solution. In 2009, suddenly Tura Pradhan and others rushed to Rukmini's house, circled her and start biting her. They dragged her outside and tried to hit her using a sharp axe. Her husband opposed and a crowd of villagers gathered there. Nobody knows why it happened suddenly. Tura Pradhan and his relatives with the help of some other villagers paraded her in the villages and punished her to go away from their village, if not, Tura threatened to kill her and her entire family. Rukmini left the village and went to stay in Dumuria village, where the villagers are from a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) Juanga (ST). Dumuria is also geographically inaccessible and has Juangas and some OBC families. Rukmini started her practice again.

In the meantime, her husband died. She was alone with her children. Siba Juanga's only daughter (7 years) suffered from unknown fever and after treatment she did not recover. Siba came to know that Rukmini was the root cause of this. He suspected her of being a witch and blamed her for his daughter's illness. He was prompted by the outsiders about Rukmini's history and convinced that Rukmini practiced black magic and that evil was designed to finish his daughter off.

One day, Siba called a village meeting and charged Rukmini for his daughter's condition. They decided to punish her. Fortunately, Dhusa Gadua, an eminent person in Khuntbandh was there. He rescued Rukmini from the villagers and gave shelter to her at Khunbandh village. Rukmini was saved and is now staying in Khuntbandh with her family.

Some individual views:

According to Bainsi Juanga (52 years) of Mangalpur, Rukmini was innocent. Bias inspired them to assault Rukmini brutally. She does puja as a *Sanka* but did not harm others.

According to Jema Pradhan (35 years) of Dumuiria, Rukmini was the real culprit. She was practicing sorcery; she did black magic to destroy people's agriculture and cattle and wanted to kill Siba's daughter. She agreed with Siba's reaction.

According to Dhusa Gadua (65 years) of Khunbandh, they never practiced black magic. The villagers suspected them to be witches. It was only rumours.

According to Jayan Pradhan (39 years), Rukmini's son was totally innocent. Superstition and being prompted by others led to the incident.

Outcomes and findings of the Group discussions:

People still believe their traditions and culture. The Odisha Witch-hunting Prevention Act is not known to many of them. Otherwise, Rukmini would not be assaulted and humiliated. But many villages are still in the grip of social evils. People are afraid to bring these affairs into the limelight. Sometimes, matters are discussed and sorted by the community. Victims are excluded from their homes, land, food, and other rights. These decisions lead to a violation of their human rights. But still the matter is not under the court's jurisdiction. Awareness about laws is very poor. Ignorance and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system. The villagers said that there was no incident during the pandemic.

Case Study 12

Date of visit- 21.12.2020

Village- Medinipur, Block- Harichandanpur, District- Keonjhar,

State- Odisha

Demography:

Medinipur is in Jamjodi GP, in Harichandanpur block in Keonjhar district. It is about 34 km from the district headquarters and 10 km from the block headquarters, Harichandanpur. The village has 36 households with 202 people (107 male and 95 female). Medinipur village is dominated by OBCs besides a few tribal families.

The village is geographically accessible. A large number of its residents live below the poverty line. They earn their livelihood through lower off-farming and non-farm agricultural activities. The habitations are scattered and isolated. There is a primary school in the village and an ICDS to cater to children's healthcare and education. Wage labour is the major source of livelihood. Only 5 per cent of the people are excluded from the government's poverty alleviation programme as they do not have Aadhar cards. A tube well is the source of drinking water. Poor nutrition leads to poor health and increased exposure to various diseases.

Description of event/s:

Padmabati Mahanta (45 years) a graduate in Arts is wife of Kantamani Mahanta (49 years) who lived with his two children in a thatched house in the village. Kantamani has a bachelor's degree and is the only earning member of the family. He earns his livelihood from a private school where he works as a teacher. Besides that, they have some agricultural land and livestock. Both their children (one boy and one girl) study outside the village. Kantamani Mahanta also lives in the school premises about 11 km from their village. The condition of their house and their circumstances show their financial and life status. Chanchala Mahanta is their neighbour. She is about 35-years-old. She fell ill and her mental condition deteriorated. Sometimes she talked to herself. Her father-in-law Shiba Mahanta (60 years) was upset for his daughter-in-law. It came to the notice of Shiba Mahanta that Chanchala went to meet Padmabati at her house when she got an opportunity to go there. Shiba Mahanta tried to find out the cause of her daughter-in-law's mental condition. After providing adequate treatment

to Chanchala, he questioned what was wrong. In the meantime, he came to know from a villager that Padmabati was practising witchcraft to murder his daughter-in-law. Shiba Mahanta suspected Padmabati and regretted that he had introduced Chanchala to her. But Chanchala did not understand the situation and continued to meet Padmabati. Now Shiba Mahanta was determined that Padmabati was a witch and was conducting witchcraft to kill her. He blamed her and threatened her not to meet his daughter-in-law ever again. But Padmabati did not care. Days passed and Chanchala's condition worsened. In April 2019, on the day of incident, Shiba saw that Chanchala was talking to Padmabati when she was bringing water from the tube well. Shiba could not tolerate Padmabati's with his daughter-in-law. He rushed there with a sharpened axe and clutched Padmabati's right arm and slashed it. Then he tried to severe head her using the sharpened axe, but the people opposed him. Nobody knows why it happened so suddenly. A crowd gathered and they released Padmabati Mahanta.

Persecution status:

The villagers informed the police station. Padmabati was injured but had a narrow escape. Shiba Mahanata was arrested and sent to jail. People do not know the facts, and nobody supports Shiba for his heartlessness. Chanchala passed away without receiving adequate treatment for her mental condition. Shiba Mahanta repents his action. After being released on bail he is trying to lead a normal life but the case is continuing.

Some individual views:

According to Jadumani Mhanta (51 years), Padmabati and her family were innocent, and they were unaware about who prompted Shiba.

According to Golap Mahanta (35 years), an ICDS worker, Padmabati and Kantamani Mahanta were both innocent. Chanchala passed away due to inadequate healthcare.

According to Kantamani Mahanta (49 years) Padmabati's husband, he has never seen Padmabati perform any doubtful activities. She is simple and

innocent. It is not known why Padmabati was branded a witch. Investigations can reveal the reasons behind it.

Outcomes and findings of the Group discussions:

According to Kunda Kishan (28 years) ward member, Golap Mahanta, an ICDS worker, and Arjun Sahoo, a teacher, not only Madinipur but many other villages are also in the grips of social evils. They gave an example of Pitapiti village, which is only 3 km from Madinipur. People are afraid to bring such incidents to the notice of the police. They also indicated that as teacher Kantamani was unaware of the laws (Odisha Witch-hunting Prevention Act) so it is a matter of lack of awareness and ignorance. According to them sometimes innocents were victimized and excluded from their home, land, food, and other rights.

Our tradition, culture, and belief systems are responsible for these social evils. During the pandemic no incident happened in their village. They suggested that more action must be initiated to eliminate this social stigma.

Mayurbhanj

Mayurbhanj district is one of the 30 districts in Odisha. It is the largest district in the state by area. Its headquarters are at Baripada. The other major towns are Rairangpur, Karanjia, and Udala. As of 2011, it was the third-most-populous district in Odisha after Ganjam and Cuttack. The total tribal population of the state is 8.15 million or 22.13 per cent of the population. More than half of Mayurbhanj's population belongs to tribal communities.

Case Study 1

Woman brutally murdered over suspicion of witchcraft

The state government's efforts to end violence because of witchcraft allegations does not seem to have yielded the desired results in Mayurbhanj district. Cases pertaining to attacks on women for practicing suspected witchcraft are on the rise in remote tribal-inhabited pockets in this district.

Jambani village under Badasimulia revenue village is a tribal-dominated village in Jadida gram panchayat in Kaptipada block in the district with 109 families (352 male and 358 female), and 97 children aged 0-6 years. There was one case of witch-hunting in the village in August 2014. Sumi Singh (42 years) was brutally murdered in broad daylight while leaving for her field to work, by Bajju Singh because of suspected witchcraft. After perpetrating the crime Bajju Singh absconded and was later arrested by the police and sent to jail. However, after three years and two months, he was released from jail due to insufficient evidence.

Sources said that Bajju's son Tirsi Singh was suffering from fever for a long time. Instead of going to the hospital, Bajju opted for local treatments which were not effective. Presuming witchcraft as the reason behind his son's illness, Bajju took him to a sorcerer (*gunia*) who informed Bajju that the child had fallen prey to witchcraft. One day Sumi came to Bajju and suggested he should take his son to the hospital for better treatment otherwise he would die as his health condition was constantly deteriorating. Due to these remarks, Bajju suspected that she must be a witch, and intended to cause harm to his son. Bajju Singh was addicted to alcohol.

After drinking, Bajju attacked and murdered the woman at 2 pm after spotting her alone in her field. Her husband Mangal Singh searched for her and found her dead body in the field. With Bira Singh who the then ward member of the village he informed the nearest police station. Police authorities did an investigation after registering a case. They caught the accused, and he was imprisoned. Now, he is residing in the village with his family. He still boasts about assassinating the witch and saving his son's life. There is no apparent realization in his mind and he continues believing in witchcraft.

After Sumi Singh's murder, the condition of the family was pathetic as Mangal Singh had tuberculosis. The local AWW Madhabi Singh and an ASHA worker helped him in his treatment and he is doing well now. The family had a 5-year-old daughter when Sumi was murdered. As her father was affected by TB, there was no one to provide for her and she repeatedly fell

ill. She was eventually taken to Kaptipada Hospital and later to Baripada DHH with the help of an AWW and NGO workers but unfortunately, she could not survive. Sumi was Mangal Singh's second wife from Mahulpunga village in Majhigadia GP nearly 15 km from Jambani village. Another three women from the same village got married in Jambani village. As confirmed by them, Sumi had no association with any activities related to witchcraft. The cook of the local school and an SHG member Sankari Singh also gave the same opinion about Sumi Singh. She was murdered deliberately and witches don't exist. It is merely superstition. The male members of the tribal community were apparently impacted by a *gunia* and they came up with such allegations.

After Sumi's death, Mangal Singh married again but he still lives in fear as Bajus can wrong them again. While collecting information and interacting with the people, it was observed that they believe that the district administration should take steps to do away with these superstitious beliefs. At the same time, they also said that till now no such steps had been taken by the administration.

The collector had started a drive for awareness generation and decided to form a rapid response team at the block level and have a close watch on such cases. However, the proposal never materialized after his transfer from the district.

Case Study 2

Torture of a married woman suspected of being a witch

The incident occurred in Sanajupala village in Chakradharpur GP in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district situated near the Simlipal National Sanctuary. The village has 97 households (262 males, 251 females and 113 children). It is about 35km from the block headquarters. It is a comparatively backward village in terms of health, education, and other development indicators. The village lacked any connectivity to the world till recently. The only road that connects the village to the nearest town was only built five years ago. As a result, people visited gunias at the time

of health emergencies due to their deep-seated superstitious beliefs. The thinking persists even after development was introduced in the village.

Sambari Tudu (43 years), wife of Sabala Tudu (Suna) is an inhabitant of the village. It is believed that for the last 10 years, during the Punei festival (primarily observed by the Santhal tribe), Dasi –a goddess of Santhals, enters the body of Sambari Tudu. On several instances Sambari was found wandering in the village or the nearby forest alone. She was even found sleeping in a patched forest near the village, as was informed by a youth named Chandray Soren. Such behaviour led to suspicions that she might be a witch. In 2019, some youth attacked and injured her. A meeting was held where it was decided that she had to be punished with a fine of Rs 2500. The village men suspected that Sambari may cause harm to their families so they eventually isolated her and cut all contacts with her. People still perceive her to be a witch. Sambari hails from a poor family which primarily depends on agriculture, collection of NTFPs, and daily wage labour. She has a son and a daughter who are continuing their studies in the village school. For collection of relevant data, the ActionAid team interacted with villagers Hira Sore, Basanti Soren, Chandray Soren, and Mahadev Sore. However, they were reluctant to provide proper unbiased information about the events that occurred.

Sularam Tudu, a ward member, the AWW, and the ASHA of the village were also silent regarding the incident.

Case Study 3

Widow suspected of being a witch

Suba Bhendaria (54 years) is a widow living in the Salachua Colony hamlet, Salachua revenue village in Salachua gram panchayat in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district. Her late husband Sukura Munda died four months ago. She has two daughters. The elder daughter is married and is living in her father-in-law's house. The younger daughter is aged about 19 years. She is unmarried and is living with her mother in Salachua. Everything was fine at

the time of her marriage but 20-22 years after her marriage her neighbours and community members perceived her to be a witch.

Suba belongs to the Scheduled Tribes and her tribe is Bathudi. The people who live around her also belong to the ST category; 98 families live in Salachua Colony.

Scheduled Castes, General Castes, OBCs, and ST families live in this colony (110 male, 124 female, and 140 children). Most of the families belong to the ST category. Considering the traditional mindset of the ST community, they are prone to blind beliefs and they accept of witch-hunting and sorcery.

The people of the colony noticed that she was talking to herself while walking or was doing some suspicious activities. It was probably due to some psychological issues at that point of time. But the people started a rumour that she was a witch. If anybody suffered from fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, dysentery, or any disease they claimed that it was due to Suba. If she visited any family while they were having food, then all the members would complain about impending stomach pain or other digestion problems. Everyone started suspecting her. Due to this, the neighbouring families stopped interacting with her. She lived in isolation. As Suba belongs to a marginalized family, her primary means of livelihood is daily wage labour. When it was propagated that she was a witch, the people in the locality stayed away from her and isolated her. She was not given any jobs and as a result her situation worsened. All this affected her mental health, she remains alone and is psychologically barred from the mainstream.

Frontline workers like ASHA Manasi Majhi and AWW Tanuja Sahu have the view that Suba is a witch and she gets people in trouble. The SHG members of the hamlet like Debajani Biswal, Tapaswini Madhei, Minati Aruk, Sampati Biswal, and Sukanti Biswal also blindly believe that Suba is a witch. Apart from that, other reputed persons like the sarpanch (head) of the gram panchayat Sandu Sing, ward member Sarbani Biswal, and community head Balia Jena also responded in a similar manner.

Suba is now in a neglected and distressed condition. She is not getting any benefits of any government plans and schemes. Based on the social activist's version of the story, development actors and PRI representatives are not cooperative with Suba, as all of them are blinded by the superstitious belief in witchcraft. The family lives in a broken house without any doors. Although the family fulfils all the criteria for Awas Yojana, they still have not benefited from it. Moreover, Suba being a widow is entitled to a widow pension. But till date she is not a beneficiary of the scheme. The family being cut off from society is not only suffering discrimination socially, but also economically. Suba's daughter has also been barred from the mainstream. The people in the locality look at her in a negative way as they feel that she is the daughter of a witch. So, Suba is the only bread-earner and the family needs immediate help and support to get out of extreme penury.

Case Study 4

It is very unfortunate that poor and marginalized women in society are being abused, tortured, and their rights violated in the name of punishment for practising 'witchcraft.' At times they are thrown out of their homes and are ostracized for allegedly practising witchcraft.

An unfortunate incident took place in Bidyadharnagar village in Salachua GP in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district. An elderly woman, Tulsi Bindhani (about 70 years) is a survivor of a witch-hunt. She left the village because of constant harassment and threats from the villagers. Due to such ostracization, her daughter Bhanumati Nag also had to leave her home. She presently works as an ASHA worker in ward number 6 in Bidyadharnagar village. She lived with her husband Raju Nag and three children- a son about 14-years-old and two daughters aged 11 and 5 years respectively. Due to prolonged illness Bhanumati's husband passed away in 2015, when her younger daughter was less than a year old and the elder one was about 6-years-old and her son was 9-years-old. As Bhanumati was living alone as a widow, she called her mother Tulsi to come and look after her children. She eventually came to her daughter's place and lived there for two years and took care of her grandchildren.

In 2017, a woman of the village, Sangita Soy, wife of Akshya Soe went for a family planning operation after persuasion by ASHA worker Bhanumati, but soon after the operation she fell sick for two weeks. Being a neighbour, Tulsi Bindhani occasionally went to their residence. She got to know from one of the family members about Sangita's incurable illness so in response she suggested some treatment that might be helpful. It was alleged that Tulsi's husband, late Bhaskara Bindhani, was a practitioner of black magic, as a result they suspected that Tulsi might also be into witchcraft. In the meantime, another woman in the village, wife of Roy Soy, also fell sick. They suspected that Tulsi was a witch and that she was behind Roy Soy's wife's sickness. Due to this suspicion, the husbands of both the women united and tortured Tulsi and one day they thrashed her and threatened Bhanumati to get rid of her mother otherwise, they would kill them both. As a result, her work as an ASHA was disturbed. One day the sector ANM asked Bhanumati about the irregularities in her duties. Bhanumati explained to the ANM. The ANM informed the medical officer of Kaptipada CHC. The officer conducted a meeting in the village and tried to convince the people about the superstitions and proposed a better treatment for Sangita and the other women. However, the meeting did not affect the villagers. Instead, they threatened Bhanumati and her mother for informing the medical people and warned them not to inform the police. The medical team was planning to lodge a police case, but the villagers put pressure and did not let that happen.

Later, at the initiative of the village headmen Nauru Soy and Gaira Soy a meeting was held in the gram panchayat in the presence of sarpanch Sandu Singh, the ANM, and the medical team. In the meeting, the villagers pressurized everybody and at last it was decided that Tulsi should leave the village and not go for any police case. Tulsi left the village. Now she is staying with her son in his village. After Tulsi left the village, the ASHA worker also left the place and is now staying in another hamlet in the same village which is 2-3 km from her original home. She is living with her brother-in-law and his family members. She still is living in fear.

Case Study 5

Pama Murmu, wife of late Tapa Murmu (who died four years ago) lives in a majorly tribal populated village Sanjonpura. All the people in the village belong to the Santal tribe. It is situated near the Simlipal tiger reserve in Chakradharpur GP in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district which is 35 km from the block headquarters and 55 km from the district headquarters. The village consists of 97 households (262 male, 251 female, and 113 children). Agribusiness and daily wage work are the main source of livelihood for the families residing in the village. Though there exists an AWC and a primary school in the village, they are grossly underdeveloped in terms of health and education. A pucca road was constructed in the village five years back. It connected Udala and Kaptipada which is 35 km from the block headquarters. Even in this modern era, the villagers prefer going to a gunia and sacrificing animals to cure ailments instead of visiting a doctor.

Suspecting Puma Murmu of being a witch, the villagers ostracized her from the village. None of the inhabitants contacted her presuming that she would hurt their families. When any religious occasion or marriage took place, it was speculated that the deity (locally known as Dasi) entered Puma Murmu's body. This made the people of the village believe that she was a witch. If anybody from the village suffered from fever, dysentery, or any other health problems, they deduced that it was due to the Puma Murmu's witchcraft.

Three individuals from the village believed this as when they went to the gunia to treat a patient, he saw a portrait of Puma as she was the one who had led the person to fall ill. The people of Sanjonpura village have been extremely displeased with Puma Murmu for the last 10-12 years. Due to social exclusion by the villagers, Puma Murmu is living in Itagarh village in J.S. Jamudia GP with her two sons and two daughters. It is 2 km from her village Sanjonpura. Even though she is destitute, she has not been included in any government schemes like the provision of PMAY or lavatory construction under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Nobody from the village including the

ward member, ASHA or AWW help her, rather they suspect her of being a witch. Nevertheless, there is no proof against Puma Murmu.

Case study 6

Pregnant woman thrown out from the village as she is suspected of being a witch

The life of Parbati Murmu and her family was cursed due to the superstition of witch-branding.

For three years her family was ostracized by the villagers and they were forced to live like outsiders. Even when she had to give birth to her baby, she had to do so under a tree in a mango orchard. When the news was published in an Odia newspaper, the health administration rescued the couple with the new-born baby and admitted them in DHH, Mayurbhanj. The couple Parbati Murmu and Chaitan Murmu are inhabitants of Jualikata village in Shyamashundarapur GP in Bangiriposhi block. As Parbati told the centre administrator of the Sakhi-One Stop Centre, she was branded a witch by her own family members in 2015-16 and thrown out of the house so they had to roam from one village to another for shelter, till the situation was taken up by the media. After this intervention and some aid from the One-Stop Centre, her life became liveable to some extent.

On being asked she said, "Me and my husband were staying in our house but one day my family members, uncles-in-law Orap Murmu, Dabli Murmu, and Bhima Murmu beat me suspecting me to be a witch and expelled us from our home. In protest we informed the villagers, and a meeting was held in the village, where the villagers supported my in-laws and ordered us to leave the village. As it was now impossible to stay in the village we opted to leave and went to our sister-in-law's house. She gave us refuge and after some months, our nephew Ratei Hansda again threw us out of their house for the same reason. Then we went to Kanchiasole village and stayed there for some days, but the house owner also expelled us, then we went to our uncle's home in Jambadi and again left the place and

stayed at Takatpur. We faced the same situation and went to another village Kanchiasole and stayed there on a rent of ₹1000. However, it was very difficult for us to meet our expenses so we migrated to Kolkata in search of work. After returning from Kolkata, we stayed in our uncle's house where I got pregnant. Meanwhile my uncle got the news of witch-branding from other relatives. He was furious and ordered us to leave as their village may get impure due to my presence."

As there were no other options left, the couple went to the forest to save their lives and stayed there. "Here also our lives were far from normal due to the curse of witch-branding. The forest personnel displaced us two times from two different forests. By that time, my date of delivery had approached, I arrived at the weekly market complex in Chuapani and settled there but the people expelled me from there also and we went to the mango orchard near Chuapani village. We continued to live under a tree. Under a mango tree, I gave birth to a baby boy in 2019. After six days of giving birth to the baby, a villager Sukra Singh gave clothes and some food to us."

She also informed a reporter of the Odia daily newspaper Prameya and the news was published. After the publication of the news, a medical team arrived and took them to the Bangiriposhi CHC and then to PRM medical college and hospital.

While Parbati was in hospital, she applied to the Sakhi-One Stop Centre in Mayurbhanj for assistance. The OSC of Mayurbhanj, intervened in the case and informed the police, held a meeting in their village and convinced the villagers to let her stay in the village.

Most of the frontline workers and people's representatives like ward members, AWWs, ASHAs, and the sarpanch did not support Parbati. They supported the culprit. To root out such incidents, there is an urgent need for massive awareness drives in the district and implementation of the law in an effective manner.

Case Study 7

Murder of a young man suspected of sorcery

Bidyadharnagar village is in ward number 6 hamlet in village Pathanipaka in Salachua GP in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district. In 2018, a young man in the village was brutally murdered during Birswakarma Puja. Some misunderstanding took place between Surendra Patra and Jama Sijui, during an ongoing football match on the following day. The fight escalated and the two men started threatening to kill each other. The next day Surendra Patra was found dead and it was suspected that Jama Sijui had killed him.

Jama Sijui's mother Pangila Sijui had died two years back. It was rumoured in the village that she practiced witchcraft and black magic. As a result, Surendra, Jama's neighbour, suspected that Jama also practiced it and was behind his son's ill health. Therefore, there was hostility and enmity between these two men. On the day of the incident, under the pretext of playing cards the arguments escalated and Sijoi was later stoned to death. He was assisted by Nidhi Hembrum (Surendra's neighbour) and another man, about whom the police found out later. The police lodged a case and all three are now in Udala jail. Sijoi is survived by his wife Rupa Sijoi and three children. Now they are staying in Katuri grama in the same block. However, almost nobody is concerned about the deceased man. Most of the villagers believe that Sujoi was at fault and he, in fact, practiced black magic. It is also suspected that his mother was also murdered but it was painted as a natural death. Due to this reason, the enmity between the two families continues. However, they have more sympathy for Surendra and his allies. The villagers are hesitant in talking about this due to fear of outsiders.

Case Study 8

Year of incident: 2018

A widow woman from Thakurasahi hamlet in revenue village Badasimulia in Jadida gram panchayat in Kaptipada block was murdered. Her children

are distressed. From a situation analysis it was found that poor widow Basa Murmu (wife of late Chhabi Murmu) was living with six children. Her elder son Padan Murmu was 23-years-old, second son is married, the third daughter Sakhi is living in the family, and there are Dhani (daughter-15 years), Rupai (daughter-12 years), and Hadia Murmu (son-10 years). The elder son married last year. After the assassination of Basa Murmu the family members are living in a miserable condition, because the elder brother is the only earning member in the family. Basa Murmu's husband with his elder brother Kaila Murmu and younger brother Rabi Murmu were living separately with their family members in the village. In 2018 a couple of weeks before Basa's assassination Kaila had fever and after some days he died. Kaila's son Siba thought that witchcraft was the reason for his father's death. He suspected her aunt Basa to be a witch and organized the heinous murder. As per Basa's eldest son's view enmity arose between the two families two years ago and was related to the purchase of a piece of land. For purchasing the land Basa Murmu stopped Kaila Murmu and from that time they had been fighting for which Siba Murmu murdered Basa. It is notable that on the day of Rakhi Purnima in 2018 when Basa was returning from the market with grocery and vegetables, Siba murdered him. A police case was filed and Siba went to jail for two years and returned to the village after getting bail. Now Siba is living in the village. The case is continuing. Some of villagers said that it is not only Siba, but even his uncle is involved in this case. But Siba says that he is the only murderer, and nobody else is involved.

Case Study 9

Murder after a witch hunt, 4 persons arrested

Date of Incident: February 5, 2014

There was a murder after a witch-hunt in February 2014 in Rajatnar village which comes in the Ranipokhari gram panchayat under Sarat police station in Kaptipada block I, Mayurbhanj district. The accused were arrested by the Sarat police station and sent to the court. It was found by the fact-finding team that Bhanja Mohakud, son of Gangaram Mohakud was

staying in Rajatnagar village in his father-in-law's home. Six months earlier a quarrel had broken out with Laduram Deogam related to witch-hunting. Three days before the assassination both had drunk country *liquor* (handia) and had quarrelled with each other. The quarrel continued and after the fight Laduram went into the forest and Bhanja followed him. In the forest Bhanja crashed Deogam's head with a stone and he died on the spot. Bhanja returned to the village and took the assistance of Naga Sing (25 years), Sudam Deogam (25 years), and Sahu Deogam (45 years) and burned the body in the forest to hide the murder. But Sande Sing Deogam, Laduram Deogam's elder son filed a written FIR against the accused. The then in-charge of Sarat police station Naba Kumar Dash and assistant sub-inspector S.K. Jena with the tehsildar of Kaptipada investigated the matter and seized the burnt dead body. The half burnt body was sent to Udala for a post mortem. The accused were arrested by the Sarat police station.

Before this murder Bhanja had committed another murder and had been jailed. After coming from jail, he was at Rajatnagar. The villagers said that this murder was due to witch-hunting. The villagers of Rajatnagar are objecting to the murder cases. But the villagers have a mindset of believing in cases of sorcery and witch-hunting.

Case Study 10

Date of incident: March 12, 2017

Now-a-days society is not free from sorcery and other such ills although a great deal of effort has been made at the governmental and non-governmental levels. Tribal and Dalit families are mostly involved, influenced, and worst affected by these. During any disease or health problems, they accept sorcery rather than medical treatment. A mother tried to treat her mad son with the cooperation of a witch doctor and stayed with him for one month which became a sensation in the locality. The family of late Chhatra Soren lives in Kalia Sahi village in Pingu gram panchayat in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district. Champa Soren's widow with three sons (Ram, Mangal, and Bhala) lives in this family. The middle son is mentally

unstable. For his treatment the family went to the witch doctor Chhotray Murmu in Balidar village in Majhigadia gram panchayat. ₹5000 was given for the treatment by Champa's family which was to be done through chanting mantras and worshipping gods and goddesses. The treatment was done but there was no change in Mangal's condition. So in March 2017 Champa with Mangal and other family members went to Chhotray Murmu's home, and they stayed there for the night. The next day Chhotray worshipped the photographs of goddesses Tarini and Durga and warned that a witch in the form of a human was living in their family. After completing the worship the person in whose body, the witch was living would be injured. During the worship a fire was burning in front of the family members. Someone from the witch doctor's side pushed Champa from the back and her face and right palm were burnt in the fire. Chhotray and the so-called Baba told the children that their mother was a witch. Other people present there became angry. The Baba told them that if you tell the others, your son may suffer more. Baba trapped the family members in his home for some days. Then without the Baba's knowledge a family member made a call to a relative (Ram's wife) and shared the difficult situation and requested that they should be rescued. Relatives with other neighbours visited the spot and rescued them forcefully from the Baba. They were admitted in sub-divisional hospital Udala. All the family members got well and recovered. But till date Mangal is not well.

With information from the family members an FIR was recorded in Kaptipada police station and the case is going on. The so-called Baba is absconded.

Case Study 11

Woman killed after being suspected of witchcraft

Date of incident: June 15, 2020

Kirikichia village comes under Khunta police station in Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. The village consists of two wards and has a population of 228 people. In June 2020 during lockdown due to COVID-19, an old woman was brutally killed. The deceased woman Champa Singh was killed by her nephew. The accused Budhram Singh (22 years) alias Sukura is the son

of Kanda Singh of the same village. After killing her aunt, he went to the police station and surrendered before the police. While discussing with the villagers, they informed that the 4-years-old daughter of Sukura was sick and died after some days. People informed that at the beginning of the child's illness he went to a sorcerer for black magic instead of going to the hospital and at the last stage of the disease he went to the hospital. There the little girl did not get well and died at the hospital during treatment. However, Sukura believed that his daughter died due to the witchcraft by Champa Singh.

In the morning, the accused Budhram (Sukura) went to Champa's husband and asked him about Champa and got the information that she was in someone else's house in the village. There he summoned Champa and killed her with his axe on Nuasahi road. After that he wrapped the severed head along with the axe and was going to the police station on the farm road but he was arrested by the police on the way and taken to the police station. A villager keeping his name secret informed us that some people the murder, but no one objected. The police launched an investigation into the incident. Now Budhram (Sukura) is in jail as a remand prisoner. The case is now under trial.

While we went to the village to inquire, nobody came to give any information. However, after much effort, one villager came and gave the information but he requested us to keep his name secret. We did not get any information, whether there was any scuffle over the land between the two families. Everybody in the village believes in witchcraft and nobody dares to take any steps against witch-branding.

In the 21st century, this type of brutal murders are happening in front of the villagers due to black magic and witchcraft. It appears that we do not live in a civilized society. A woman only because of suspicions becomes the victim of a murder in broad daylight. In this district the lives of women are not safe because of black magic and witch branding.

Ganjam

Ganjam district is in Odisha. Ganjam's total area is 8,070 km². The district headquarters is Chhatrapur. Ganjam is divided into three sub-divisions -- Chhatrapur, Berhampur, and Bhanjanagar. The economy of the Ganjam district is supported by both industry and agriculture. The district is well known for its food grain production and its exports. The agricultural sector supplies about 75 per cent of the total workforce in Ganjam district. The district has almost 20 per cent SC population and 3.5 per cent ST population.

Case Study 1

**Four suspected of practicing witchcraft- shaved head and teeth pulled out
Date of incident: May 18, 2017**

Ulapur is a remote village in Chikiti assembly constituency under K. Nuagaan police station in Ganjam district. It is about 18 km from Digapahandi Junction and 54 km from Berhampur. The total population is 831 and the number of households is 197. The female population is 53.8 per cent. The literacy rate is 52.7 per cent whereas female literacy is 23.0 per cent.

The culprits of a series of incidents that took place in Ulapur village under Nuagaan police station of Ganjam district caused a stir in the entire Ganjam district. They were arrested by Chikiti police. Then they were sent to the Berhampur district jail. They are ward members of Ulapur village -- Ram Behera (45 years), Prashant Naik (35 years), and Tarini Nalak (50 years). For the past three years, the village has been in a state of panic and suspicion. The villagers have been at the tantrik's door since the death of a child two months ago. An unnamed girl from the village was attributed as the goddess by the tantrik and according to her orders four men, including two young women, were shaved bald and their teeth uprooted. The victim's family denied the allegations and appealed to the police for justice. An emergency meeting was called in the village at around 9pm. Another unmarried girl named Lata was attributed as the goddess and after the girl's instructions, Shapani Behera, Mohan Sahu, Sukant Behera, Keith Behera, Amar Behera, Kak Behera, Kumari Jhunu Behera (18 years),

Kumari Sushma Behera (40 years), and two others has their heads shaved and their teeth uprooted. Not only that, a young woman and four men were made to go through the same torture. They were even threatened that they should not inform the police and that if they did they would be punished. Out of the eight, six have been in hiding since then. Surprisingly, the Chikiti police *fandi* is merely 5 km away from the scene of incident but even then, the police was completely unaware about the happenings of such crimes in a nearby area. However, two survivors, Dehpani Dehra and Kak Behera, managed to escape from the village and filed an FIR with Chikiti police.

Later that day, the Sadalbal police force led by Chikiti SDPO Bijay Kumar Nayak reached the village and heard from the families of the victims the details of the incident. Three accused were arrested under Case N.0 7/15, under various sections of the Indian Penal Code. After bail was refused, the accused run away on their way to Berhampur district jail, regarding which SG Nayak has informed they were caught again.

In the village, on the other hand, another young woman claimed that some inhuman actions were performed. After this incident, an armed police force has been set up in the village premises and efforts are being made to trace the survivors who are in hiding, to provide them medical assistance and thereafter record their confessions.

Persecution status:

- »» After the case details were published in the media, the victim's family members Dandapani Behera and Kartik Behera approached an advocate in Patrapur and the case was filed and three accused arrested and booked under Sections 341/294/325/307/342/355/506/34 of the IPC.
- »» Instead of booking the case under the Odisha Prevention of Witch-hunting Act, the police booked it under IPC. It seems that the police is also not aware of the act.

Findings:

- » The community is more supportive of the accused than the victim. This reflects that the community believes in witch-hunting practices.
- » The three accused persons were released on bail after three years of imprisonment.
- » The witch doctor was called from Sanakhemundi which is 30 km from the village. He was paid with ₹80,000 to identify the witch. While the police arrested three persons, the other accused involved in the case flew to Surat as per the police report. However, there was no further action by the police to arrest him.
- » The witch doctor plays an important role in deepening people's belief in the existence of witches and their ill effects on people. Also, many people identify them as having the power to detect witches and protect people from ill effects.

Case Study 2

Two killed and bodies burnt after being suspected of witchcraft.

Date of incident: August 9, 2017

Chudangapur is a tribal dominated village in Mohana assembly constituency under Mohana police station. It is about 110 km from the Gajapati district headquarters and 42 km from Adava. The Sabars constitute most of the population and Panas and Dambas are the two scheduled caste communities residing in the village. There is no hospital in and around the village. However, one ANM centre exists in the village.

Chudangapur panchayat witnessed the tragic consequences of a superstitious movement in the tribal-dominated areas of the Mohana block in the Gajapati district. Ganga Saba of Medical Sahi of Chudangapur village and Ranjit Bastray of Odia Badadanda Sahi were reportedly burnt to death after being beaten by some villagers. Simba Rait (22 years), Shabar (40 years), Jayant Gamang (25 years), Sudhur Rait (27 years), Rabindra Rait

(23 years) Rajiv Badrait (20 years), and Bali Paika (22 years) were arrested by the Adaba station police.

A few days earlier, an elderly man named Patira Gamanga of Chudangpur village died of a disease. Suspecting witchcraft, Simone Raith and others threatened and warned Ganga and Ranjit. Frightened, on August 8, Ganga appealed to Adaba police station to provide him security. However, the police did not take any special action. Simon and the others found out about the appeal and went on to threaten Ganga for filing an appeal in the police station. They further demanded ₹5 lakh from him as compensation or else they would kill him.

Persecution status:

- » A few PRI members were involved in this murder case.
- » The local Adava police arrested seven persons Simon Raita (the village headman), Ganga Sabara, Jayanta Gomanga, Sudhir Raita, Rabindra Raita, Rajib Badaraita, and Bali Paika under Section 341/294/302/34 of IPC when Bastaray's younger grandson went to the police.
- » The accused are in jail.

Findings:

- » The sole intention behind this case of witch-branding was to grab land. The village headman mobilized tribal communities in this case of witch-branding. Also, the tribal people were motivated by the conspiracy of the village headman had collected money and kept ready with them to use in the legal process.
- » Powerful people in the village often use witch-hunting as an instrument to grab land and for mobilizing people's support.
- » People without rational thought become easy prey to such witch branding.

Case Study 3

Eight shaved bald and their teeth broken because of suspicions

Superstition and blind faith are so deep rooted in Ganjam that instances of humiliation by shaving, breaking the teeth, and force-feeding excreta are rampant now. Police usually reach after the crime has been committed. Perpetrators are often arrested but the survivors do not get adequate justice.

Such an incident took place in the Olapur village in Chikiti block. In this case nobody personally identified another as a witch, rather the goddess (allegedly) identified some persons as witches. According to the village men, the goddess entered the body of Lata Behera, an unmarried woman from the village, and enlightened them about the cause of misfortunes happening in the village and stated that a tantrik was behind all the misfortunes. The villagers had gathered to hear the words of the goddess. The next morning a bunch of men barged into the tantrik's house and dragged him out of the house. They also captured eight men and two women and took them to the nearest Hanuman Math. They complained to the police that they heads were shaved and teeth broken. They also complained of being forced to eat excreta. The victims include Mohan Sahu, Subash Behera, Keith Behera, Amar Behera, 'Ka Behera, Dandapani Behera, Jhun Behera, and Sushma Behera. Dandapani Behera, a victim of torture who threatened to kill himself lodged a written complaint with Nuangaan police station. The defendants were on high alert and could not be reached for comment. The case is being prosecuted under Sections 371, 29.3 25, 334 2, 506, 304, 355, 306 and 34 of the IPC and the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013. Pukhanta Nayak, Tarini Nayak, and Gam Behera have been questioned at the police station in connection with the incident. The police arrested the accused soon after, according to police sources.

Case Study 4

Survivor beaten and fed excreta in suspicion of witchcraft practice

This time the complaint of witch-hunting was reported in Sorada district, Ganjam. The incident took place in Mayanki village under Asurbandha panchayat. The practice of Khatabidya (the process by which four men of the village hold a cot which, according to the belief, which pulls and guides them towards the witchcraft practitioner) was used on the survivor out of suspicion of the death of a village man. The cot detected Mitu Swain as the practitioner, soon after which the survivor was beaten and forced to eat excreta. The Sorada police raided Mayanki village and arrested 23 people, including two women, and took them to court. He was sent to jail after his bail was denied. According to police sources, the reason behind the incident was a feud between the two cousins, Mitu Swain and Babu Swain. Due to differences in opinion between the two cousins, Babu Swain plotted the witchcraft practice story to get back at his cousin for his brother's death. Babu Swai Mitu attacked the house, blaming his brother for his death. But after the police intervened, the situation calmed down. Both came to a mutual compromise as informed by the police. It had come to light that a few days ago Babu's brother got electrocuted and died an accidental death. However, Babu framed Mitu as the perpetrator of this accident by claiming that he practiced witchcraft and used it on his brother. Not only that, a couple of months ago two village men named Saniya Swain and Uddhav Swain died, for which fingers were again pointed at Mitu Swain. A few other deaths also followed which made the suspicion of witchcraft stronger. A complaint was lodged in the village committee followed by which a tantrik was called to the village. the Khatabidya process was used as instructed by him and Mitu Swain was identified as the practitioner.

Case Study 5

Old man killed due to witchcraft suspicions

Ramgiri, Sheragada, Ganjam

Date of incident: August 28, 2017

Demography:

Rampur is a village in the Sanakhemundi assembly constituency of Sheragada police station. It is about 22 km from the Digapahandi Junction and 70 km from Berhampur. The village is mostly inhabited by the Gauda community. Most of the families depend on agriculture for their livelihood. A few villagers have migrated to Surat for better livelihood opportunities.

The incident:

The incident took place in Ramgiri village under Shergarh police station. A man was killed by his nephew and three grandsons. He was choked to death and later they poured acid on him. His wife was seriously injured in the attack. The deceased was identified as Dandasi Gaud (45 years). Dandasi's grandson, Pana Gaud, and his wife Jhunu Gaud were shifted to Visakhapatnam Private Hospital in critical condition. Police are investigating the matter. The body was sent to the Berhampur General Hospital for autopsy, police said. Police are holding a man in custody.

To take revenge for the murder of their father, the angry sons of Dandasi went to the nephew's house and attacked him with a Tangia (axe). The injured nephew was shifted to Sheragarh, Berhampur and later to Vishakhapatnam in critical condition. Police are detaining one of the four suspects. Police said the search was intensified to catch the others as soon as possible.

Persecution status:

Police arrested three accused persons in this case

Findings:

- » Property dispute was the main reason behind this incident of witch-branding.
- » Witch-branding was used as an instrument.
- » The family of the deceased is still facing social stigma.
- » Witch-branding is one of the worst forms of violence that prevents people from living a dignified and respectful life.
- » Due to lack of awareness people prefer to go to witch doctors for treatment instead of going to the hospital.
- » Elderly people become easy targets of witch-branding.
- » Health issues amongst the children are usually considered due to the ill effects of witchcraft and people prefer to go for local solutions from witch doctor.
- » The number of witch doctors in this area is more and they have opted for this as a very good source of income.

Case Study 6**One murdered and killed in witchcraft suspicion****Date of incident: November 10, 2016****Demography:**

Benipadar is a village under Merapalli gram panchayat in Mohana block. It is dominated by mostly Scheduled Caste community. It is 130 km from Gajapti police headquarters. Most of the households are landless with no or marginal agricultural land. Daily wage is the only source of income for all the poor and landless households.

Description of the Incident:

One person was murdered and the body burnt. Despite rumours circulating, no action was taken by the police or the authorities to unravel the mystery.

Jagbandhu Malik of Benipadar village under Merpalli panchayat in Mohana block was allegedly killed by a group of people and set on fire in a nearby forest in November 2017. The media went to the village to get details of the incident, but they could not get any accurate information of the deceased Jagabandhu, from his brother Madan Malik and wife Sumitra Malik. Later, some local people asked the media to maintain anonymity in return for information and after this assurance and they provided information about the incident. According to them, Jagbandhu Guni of Benipadar village was killed by some people on suspicion of murders by witchcraft and his body was burnt in a nearby forest. Whereas Jagabandhu's family said that his death was caused by minor abdominal pain. Meanwhile, Jagabandhu's funeral had also been completed. Reliable sources said that some burnt ash had been found in the forest near Benipadar. In the forest mantra, some of the bones of the ashes were visible at the base of a Dhau Tree. More than ten days have passed since the incident, but no one has been notified. However, the question of why Jagbandhu was buried in the forest without being cremated in the village cemetery has been widely questioned. On top of that, Police are not investigating this matter and the non-cooperation of family members has made sure that the incident remains a mystery. The police have given a statement that the investigation could not be carried on due to lack of written complaint.

Persecution status:

- » No one from the village filed a case or informed the police about the incident.
- » Despite rumours, no action was taken by the police or the authorities to solve the case.
- » Due to the regular threats by the miscreants, the helpless villagers remain silent.
- » No one was arrested in this case. The police filed it as unnatural death and closed the file.

Findings:

- » The incident shocked the entire village and with regular threats their helplessness increased.
- » The absence of a written complaint by any person became a reason for the police to be free from its responsibility.
- » Even the media failed to make the administration accountable for ensuring justice to the deceased family.
- » Without the support of the people from outside family members of the deceased lost their courage to raise their voice and fight for justice.
- » The silence of the community on the issue reflects their sense of belief in witchcraft. And people have silently accepted violence as the obvious result.

Case Study 7

Tooth broken and force-fed excreta, 34 arrested, including 7 women

Date of incident: July 2, 2019

Demography:

Goborlundi village comes under Badagada police station in Ganjam district. The village is dominated mostly by Dalits and is 130 km from Ganjam police headquarters. Almost all the Dalit households in the village are landless. A few households are marginal farmers. However, they work either as agriculture labour or construction workers to earn their livelihood.

Description of the incident:

Four members of a Dalit family from Gobarlundi village under Ganjam district's Badagada police station were force-fed excreta and their teeth were broken on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. The incident took place at night in July 2016. Badgarh police arrested 36 people, including four women, on suspicion of involvement. Earlier, the police arrested a village

man in connection with the case. All the accused have been arraigned by the court, while others are said to be in police custody. According to reports, suspicions about witchcraft surfaced after the untimely death of some villagers in Gobarlundi. The villagers held a meeting and sentenced four members of a downtrodden family to death. Uchchab Naik along with his wife, son, daughter, and three sons were kept under house arrest. Their teeth were broken, and they were forcibly fed excreta. Uchchab was forced to pay ₹4 lakh and four others ₹2 lakh. When they said they were unable to pay such a large amount, the villagers started getting violent. They united and did not let the police into the village. Later, in the middle of the night, the victim's family hid from the villagers and lodged a complaint with Badgarh police station. The men from the village also fled the village and hid in fear of the police. The village head was later arrested and tried. Later in the night, police raided Gobarlundi and arrested four women and 26 men and took them to court, said a Badgarh officer.

Persecution status:

Thirty-four persons including six women and 28 men were arrested by the police in this incident.

Findings:

- » Due to staunch belief in witchcraft, it becomes easy to mobilize people around witch- branding.
- » Physical violence and financial penalties dehumanize people and subject them to multiple vulnerabilities.
- » Sometimes the police finds it very difficult to deal with people with a mob psychology.
- » The victim finds it very difficult to raise her/his voice where the entire village is involved in the conspiracy.

Case Study 8

Witchcraft Suspicion: Beaten and force-fed excreta

The incident took place in Jagdevpur village in Khariaguda fandi in Patrapur block in Ganjam district where two people were allegedly beaten in public and force-fed excreta. The incident did not take place due to unification and dominance of villagers against the backward and oppressed community. Neither the family of the survivor nor the village members came forward to file complaints against the mob, as a result there was a delay in investigation or any action.

Two children of a family had died in the village because of unknown reasons. However, word spread in the village that the reason behind the deaths was witchcraft practiced by two men Basudev Nayak and Bancha Nayak. Both were summoned to the meeting place and were beaten mercilessly, and their teeth were broken. They were even force-fed excreta in public. The Zarda police officer reached the village and interrogated the people. The victim, however, did not report the matter to the police. As reported, a group in the village threatened the survivors and the rest of the men to make sure that outsiders did not get to know about the incident.

Case Study 9

Three from the same family branded as witches

This incident took place again in Gobarlandia village in Ganjam district. The victims are women. Sajni, and her two daughters-in-law Puna Nayak and Puspanjali Nayak were preparing for Santoshi goddess's daily worship. Around 4:30 in the morning, a group of villagers stormed into their house. They started accusing the women of practicing witchcraft to make others fall sick. As a result, the village was facing a chicken pox epidemic and children were falling ill with dysentery. The women denied all such accusations and a quarrel broke out between the villagers. A tantric ritual, known as makha darpana (nail grazing) was used to 'verify' them as witches. Later in

July 2017, the real torture started. The whole family which included Sajni, her 75-year-old father-in-law, and her two daughters-in-law were tied in the middle of the village and force-fed excreta. The villagers demanded ₹8 lakh. On refusal, they were ordered to leave the village. The whole family had to leave the village. Now Sajni and her son live in a slum in Bahadurpu. The family is living off the eldest son's earnings as a mason. Other male members of the family have left for Kerala to earn some money.

Case Study 10

2012 Fasipada Guni Case: Peace committee meeting attempts to bring back Basanda family.

Phasi village is in Kodala tehsil in Ganjam district. It is 45 km from the district headquarters Chhatrapur. Phasi has a total population of 4,521 people (2215 male and 2306 female). There are about 921 houses in this village. Kodala is the nearest which is approximately 3km away. The village is inhabited by Dalit and non-Dalit communities who depend on agriculture and informal work on construction sites and agriculture for their livelihood. There are 904 households in the village, of which 341 households belong to Dalits.

In March 2012, a gunfight broke out in Fasipada in Danpur under the Kodala police station. Sudam Nahak and Bhim Nahak of the village were allegedly tied and their teeth broken.

However, members of the two families were able to escape. Sixteen members of the Bhim and Sudam families have been living in Khallikot for four years and have not been able to return to the village since then. Twelve cases were registered separately at Kodal thana for the incident. Bhim and Sudam appealed at all levels, from the Human Rights Commission to the district administration, to return to the village. A peace committee meeting was held in Khallikot block office's premises at the behest of the Khallikot tehsildar to bring the two families back to the village after receiving a report from the State Human Rights Commission. The meeting was attended by

the Deputy District Magistrate Dhakar Shabar, Khallikot Chidi Rajjnikanth Swayam, Beguniapada BDA Paresh Nayak, Purusho Mapur SDPO Dillip Das, Khallikot Police Station Officer Vivekananda Swayam, Kodala Police Station Officer Anil Mohanty and two members of the family. Both sides were persuaded by the administration to stay in the village with peace and brotherhood, but to no avail. However, village head Ramchandra Naha told the villagers that the matter would be taken up by in 20 days (2019).

The district attorney's office said in a statement that under no circumstances would anyone be allowed to violate anyone's privacy or be deprived of their constitutional rights.

Case Study 11

Men from an stigmatised class targeted.

The incident took place in Dadarakholo village in Buguda block in Ganjam district in Odisha. The survivors are Surendra Sethy and Sankar Behera aged 45 and 48 years respectively, belonging to the same village. It was discovered during the interview that they were forced to drink urine, consume excreta, and their teeth were broken on the suspicion that they practiced black magic and witchcraft. It is alleged by the survivors that the reason for such an action was jealousy and apprehensions that they were hurting fellow villagers. All members of the village other than their immediate family believed that they were involved in witchcraft.

The survivors stated that the branding was based on frivolous grounds. Allegedly the survivor was given a witchcraft practice book by a neighbour around 10-12 years back and recently a rumour spread among the villagers that Surendra Shetty had a witchcraft practice book. The village men forced him to accept the fact that he had been performing rituals to maintain the book and practiced by reading chants from it, even though he is illiterate and could not read a word. Surendra Shetty's wife and children also faced many hardships and the family is still struggling to pay off the debts that they incurred to pay the fine.

The villagers released both the alleged practitioners on the condition that they will deposit a sum of ₹50,000 and that they will not reveal the name of the villagers or the key persons to any authority. They were also made to commit that they will get their teeth uprooted by a local doctor. However, on reaching the clinic the doctor refused to remove the fresh teeth and informed the social worker. Both Sankar and Surendra were convinced by the doctor to go to the local police station to lodge an FIR against the villagers. The police advised them to mitigate the situation with understanding among the local people.

As per an advocate in the local bar, because of some pressure, both Surendra and Sankar deposited ₹50,000 and gave a letter that they will not do any witchcraft in the future in their village. Despite police involvement, nobody was arrested in the village.

Findings

Land-owning women, especially single and/or old women and widows are targeted for land and other monetary resources. Perpetrators usually aim to grab land or other monetary resources from these vulnerable women under the veil of witch-hunting. The survivors lead a life of trauma, stigma, ostracization, and indignity.

Children of both the deceased and survivors are deeply impacted by the events of witch-hunting, which often include public humiliation and heinous murders. They are traumatized for life and develop feelings of vengeance. Not only the children, but the family members also face social stigma and are completely cut off from mainstream village activities.

Health issues related to children are oftentimes associated with witch-hunting practices and usually a single or widow in the family is targeted and eventually blamed for casting an evil-eye.

Because of any event of deteriorating health, the patient is taken to a witch doctor. Treatment at health centres is second preference or not preferred at all due to two main reasons:

Due to ingrained belief in black-magic and other superstitions

Unapproachable and unaffordable health infrastructure

Witch doctors or ojhas are overly compensated for their services, which encourages them to turn into this profession. These self-proclaimed 'doctors' misuse people's trust and unquestioning belief to earn for their families, making it a full-time business.

In certain cases where the district administration has given proper attention to the case and a proactive investigation has been done, the victims have been rescued and properly rehabilitated.

Media, by covering and airing the sensational aspects of the cases, to some extent does spread awareness. However, when it comes to helping a victim get justice, it fails.

As most of the survivors belong to poor and backward families, they lack required funds for court procedures. Moreover, the police is not very benevolent towards helping these poor survivors and no support from the external world reaches them.

Most people are not aware of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-hunting Act, 2013. As a result, the perpetrators do not fear the law.


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