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Witchcraft in Tribal Society: Historical Analysis of Origin and Practice

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Abstract

The Witchcraft is an ancient black magic and art of the tribal community where it also roots back to 25,000 BC. It is very common that some tribal people of India believe on divination and witchcraft for cure from diseases. Mostly the male religious leaders practice this kind of healing method, which is largely accepted among the tribal communities like Santal, Kharia, Munda, Oraon etc. If some become ill, they suspect and believe the attack of an evil spirit and take help of nuanced witchcraft. Specifically the santals were tried to combat and overcome this source of their own disease.¹ Witchcraft contained the tribal peoples those who are deprived from basic amenities for development of mental, physical, intellectual faculties. Illiteracy, extreme poverty and lack of scientific knowledge keep the people believe on blind faith, superstition, and social stigma and so on. Now, it is not yet removed from our society which is prevailed now over the countries. The Govt. of India Government has also taken some the initiatives and enacted laws for elimination of the horrible art of the tribal community. This paper aims to study the heinous practice, how an innocent women converted/branded as witch. Intention behind witchcraft and Legal provisions for eradication is highlighted in this paper.

Introduction: As per 2011 census of India, about 8.6 percent of total population belongs to tribal community. These communities are also known as Adivasi, Girijan (Hill people), Vanabasi (forest dweller) etc. They are considered as aborigines, son of soil or autochthonous inhabitants. Generally tribal people live outside the mainstream of religious practices of India; they are the worshiper of nature. Many of the tribals are animists who believe in spirits, and some of them are Hinduised and some are Christians found in India. Among these tribal communities, the religious specialists act as priests for conducting spiritual functions to suppress the evil spirits by offering different religious methods. Tribals referred to the practice and belief of magical skill and ability known as Witchcraft. It is purported for intervention against the evil spirits in the tribal society when natural calamities, deaths and epidemics have appeared in the tribal society. Many of the cases have been reported and recorded that witchcraft has its feminine affiliation. The alleged women

are trialed, branded as witches and after that raped, burnt alive and in many cases ruthlessly murdered.

Witchcraft in India: the Practice and Meaning: In British India, colonial officers were tried their best to investigate and regulate this heinous practice. Witchcraft has slowly but surely evolved over the time and will continue to do so, if any positive action will not be taken. During the ages the term "Witch" has tagged as healers, medication men, psychic and every sacred practitioner in between. The practice of witchcraft was banned by the Britishers for killing the widows and women by the barbarous nature of trialing. (Mallick-2008) claims that Adivasis did not regard the occurrence of deadly disease or calamities as a natural phenomenon, but as caused by some malevolent spirits or by the mischievous activities of a witch. (Mallick-2008) claimed that during 1850s "allegation of witch was not universally accepted in the tribal society. Some of the records found that killing of alleged witch was for encroaching the property of the deceased and some males were haunted as witch".

Evolution and dimensions of the Witch practice through ages: The Tribes are various different dividing walls from the ancient times to present society. There are Santal, Mundari, Bhumij, Koda, Ho, Tui, Asuri and korwa are only lightly differs from each other. But there are some similarities found in the language¹. Many Anthropologists defines that the race originate to Hihiri-pipri, and enthused consecutively to the sui forest, Hradata, khojkeman Chai and Champa, where a long halt was made. They were edifice a barracks and present social dissection was formed and forts were build².

The ancestry of present-day Witchcraft has heredity to long time ago. Female china doll metaphors and pictures of been discovered during Europe .All over the centuries there have been many attempt to put an end to worship of the Goddess, all in futile. Goddess worship has stood the test of time. Witchcraft has gradually evolved over time and will continue to do so. Throughout the ages the term "Witch" has label healers, remedy men, psychic and every spiritual practitioner in between. It was not all "Witches" worship the Goddess as witches are labeled as such in many areas, religions, and traditions of the world.³

Actually, "Witches" were seen in a positive light up until around 1020 AD. Many of them also understood how to use plants and nature for remedial and used these skills to help others. All of that changed under Pope Benedict VIII. He executed the first "heretic" (a Witch) in 1022. Thus, the "burning times" had begun and would continue for over 753 years in Europe. People of all races, creeds, and religions including children were killed in crowd throughout this time. Torture and death for "Witches" was common place.⁴ In fact, in Scotland, James I wrote "Demonologies" which explained various "methods" of determining who was a Witch. One method was to find the "Witches Mark", which was a place on the body that felt no pain. Thus, suspected Witches were inundated with needles over every inch of the body in an attempt to find the "Witches Mark" and prove they were a witch. Another method was to bind an accused Witches hands and feet together and throw them into a river. It was believed (by James I) that since water is a holy substance, it would

keep Witches pushed to the surface. Unfortunately, the accused would die either way. If they sank, they'd typically drown. If they floated, there were burned at the risk. The burning times forced most real Witches to practice in secret. Starting in 1930, there has been a slow re-emergence of Witchcraft of multiple traditions. The leader of the "new age" movement of Witchcraft is and was Gerald Gardner. Once the "Witchcraft Laws" were repealed in 1951 and it was on track to grow more rapidly. Two main "new age" groups emerged one headed by Gerald Gardner and one headed by Doreen Valiance. Gardner was the main influencer of the Wicca tradition until his death in 1964 and still is a main influencer.⁵

Absurdity of the Heinous Practice: At present, in some parts of the world some of the lives are being ended with 'witchcraft'. In Twenty First Century, it is very surprising that the practice of Witch craft in tribal society which is also related to local politics.⁶ So, I am intending to highlight in this paper that how a tribal women convert as witch and secondly various type of mental and physically torture are given her. There is inhuman behavior without proper reason and destroyed the witch family.⁷ Certain ideas, such as evil spirits, sorcery, spell casting, magic, and harmful curses are all equal with the idea of witches or witchcraft. A witch can be described as "a person with an incorrigible, conscious tendency to kill or disable others by magical means," or as someone "who secretly uses supernatural power for corrupt purposes."⁸

In fact Dan –it is called trial man and tribal woman is called 'Daine. A witch who belongs to a secret "society"-the members of witch meet at certain place and at certain times. Actually, these assemblies take place either every night on certain fixed nights (particularly- Saturdays or Sundays).The place of meeting is either at the man jhithan, the sacred grove, a lonely dale, a great tree the end of the village or a cross road.⁹

The witches have their own secret songs and mantras. There is secrecy among the Santal village where witch acts are found. Tribal believe that they have magic powers and are able to influence supernatural beings. This being so it is not strange that a suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when people fall ill and do not recover. If they have got to them satisfactory proof after that a woman may be a witch.¹⁰

Tribal girls how was imminent into crease of witchcraft. They are taken place by force and made to lead tigers about. This makes them fearless. They are then most to all the most powerful *Bangas* through succession and are taught to summon and them as school bags are taught lessons and to become possessed, they are taught mantras and songs. The learner is made to come out of the house with a lamp in her hand and broom tied round her waist, she is then conducted to the great bongas one of whom approves of her and when all have agreed she is married to that bonga.¹¹ To abolish system of witch craft the tribal society has perform some rites and rituals. If the witch has been suspected for same time or the village doubts it of her own will she can abandon the art, they proceed to disqualify her from further intercourse with banga by causing to drink a mixture of human excrement of wine. No banga will ever go near excrement and accordingly a witch has once been polluted is deprived of all her maleficent power.¹²

A tribal girl who is suspected witch, she has to suffer various tortures from her male members of her society, just like –

- 1) She may be compelled to eat or drink cow dung even human urine and so on.
- 2) Some time she is tortured through not providing to her any kind of food or drink for long time and some time she has to eat unprepared or rather dried flesh of various animals etc.

It is very surprising that Europe suffered by the course of witchcraft with innocent hunting in the period of Renaissance, when there was mountain progress occurred in science, art and culture.¹³

In modern period, if we look at our society then we can easily get the smell of witchcraft. In North India, North-East India and even different parts of west Bengal like the interior portion of purulia, Bankura and many other places the system of witchcraft. Most of the time, tribal women were suspected or accused as witch, sometimes accused as witch for their property wealth or some personal rivalry .After suspecting woman as witch the head of the village with all his supporter imposed brutal torture to garb the property. Over all the total system prove to be very cruel for particular woman who is supposed to be a witch. 14 Witchcraft is a black art and superstition in our tribal society. The practice of witch craft is something like the subjugation of woman by their male partner; it was very cruel and inhuman practice which curves the mind and soul of a woman and cripples her mentally or physically forever.

Belief in witchcraft continues to be present today in some societies and accusations of witchcraft are the trigger of serious forms of violence, including murder. Such incidents are common in places such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal and Tanzania. Accusations of witchcraft are sometimes linked to personal disputes, jealousy, and conflicts between neighbors or family over land or inheritance. Witchcraft related violence is often discussed as a serious issue of violence against women of lower people in our society.15 Between 2010 and February 2015, as many as 77 people died in so-called witch-hunts, 35 of them women, and around 60 were injured. Where victims weren't killed, they were chased away from the area and yet nobody was ever punished for doing so.¹⁶

Recent initiatives to combat witchcraft: In search of an end to this violence, civil societies have been demanding a fixed anti-witch-hunting law in our society. But the Government took note of the calls only when the Gauhati High Court intervened through a public interest lawsuit filed in 2013 and passed an order directing the state to adopt adequate measures including legal prohibition. The bill drafted in response titled Prevention and Protection from Witch Hunting Bill 2015 makes witch-hunting a cognizable non-boilable and non-compoundable offence and rules out anticipatory bail.17 Any death due to the practice it says should be prosecuted under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code which provides for punishment for murder. In other cases, it proposes fines and imprisonment. The victim the outline says should be given compensation or financial assistance which may be provided by the Government as an immediate grant. All offences it adds should be tried by a special court presided by a judge not below the rank of additional sessions judge.18

Recently, the Assam Assembly on Thursday commonly passed the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015 making any offence under the Act as non-billable, cognizable and non-compoundable to abolish the superstition from society. The Act was prepared to restrain in the rising incidents of witch-hunting cases across the State, following demand from cross-section of society. The Bill was tabled in the Assembly on the first day of the continuing Monsoon Session on Monday and was put forward for discussion today. "Every offence under this Act shall be cognizable, non-boilable and non-compoundable within the meaning of the Code," the passed Bill said. The Bill made provisions for imprisonment up to seven years along with a fine up to Rs 5 lakh for identify and calling a person witch.¹⁹

This will come with Section 302 of the IPC if someone is killed after brand as witch. The punishment for leading a person to commit suicide after unapproachable, stigmatizing, defaming and accusing as witch may be extended to life imprisonment and fine up to Rs 5 lakh. The Bill also talked about various measures that the administration and police need to initiate along with NGOs and civil society to educate people about witch hunting.²⁰ Besides, the Bill said the fine realized as punishment for an offence shall be paid to the victim or his/her next of family as compensation by following the procedures. Witch-hunting has become a burning issue in the Assam state. While both men and women fall victim to this insidious practice, predominantly women bear the brunt of this atrocious crime.²¹

Conclusion: A final motive driving modern witch hunting may be more venal than spiritual. In recent years, there has been a wave of attacks against people accused of witchcraft in Africa, the Pacific and Latin America, and even among immigrant communities in the United States and Western Europe. Researchers with United Nations refugee and human rights agencies have estimated the murders of supposed witches as numbering in the thousands each year, while beatings and expulsion could run into the millions. "This is becoming an international problem — it is a form of hounding and aggression that is spreading around the globe,"²².

Witchcraft or commonly called as Black Magic is becoming more of an epidemic in our modern society; unfortunately our politicians are not looking into this issue which is spreading like natural flames in our modern civilization. In fact, politicians have started using the help of black magicians to win elections. Businesses are using it to destroy their opponents and attorneys are using it to win cases for their customers and gradually mob lynching also rising. The most unfortunate thing is that majority refuses to believe in the survival of the spirit world which is used by these black magicians to inflict hurt on their sufferers sitting thousands of miles. It is a matter of great concern and shame to the nation which may be eliminated by the measures of holistic approach.²³

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