

POWERLESS WITCHES OF KHUNTI: A PITEOUS FORM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Witch hunting involves branding of victims, especially women as 'Witches' after an observation made by a witch doctor, personal and property disputes and attempts of land grabbing. Superstition, bad economic conditions, lack of education and health care services has fuelled the alarming number of witch hunting cases. It has been observed that superstitions and irrational beliefs are so rampant in rural areas that almost every untimely death due to disease sparks a hunt for women practicing witchcraft. This article aims to understand and analyze the extent of witch hunting primarily in Khunti district of Jharkhand. Besides understanding the article also focuses on the present status of witch hunting victims/survivors after intervention in the society to mainstream the targeted marginalized section. Apart from analyzing the status from various secondary sources, this article is based on the data collected from various primary sources of those branded as witches in Khunti district of the state. The findings show that once branded a witch, the victim is subjected to torture, paraded naked, forced to eat human excrement and sometimes even raped; impetus being stigmatization, stereotyping and superstition. Besides, the article also focuses on the outcomes to prevent witch hunting and the initiatives taken thereof.

INTRODUCTION

Witch hunting involves branding of victims, especially women as 'Witches' after an observation made by a witch doctor, personal and property disputes and attempts of land grabbing. Superstition, bad economic conditions, lack of education and health care services has fuelled the alarming number of witch hunting cases. It has been observed that superstitions and irrational beliefs are so rampant in rural areas that almost every untimely death due to disease sparks a hunt for women practicing witchcraft. This horrifying practice takes away the life of 150 - 200 innocent women every year in our country and Jharkhand tops the list with 5060 witchcraft-related murders every year.

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Witch hunting is perhaps one of the worst social evils that the state of Jharkhand faces. Witch hunting is prevalent in all the states across India. However, in 12 states —Jharkhand, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Assam and Bihar — are recognized as areas where witch hunting is more prominent. Unfortunately, Jharkhand has the dubious distinction of being at the top among the states where murders related to witch Hunting were the highest. According to a report shared by Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA), that deals specifically with monitoring incidents of witch hunting and providing counseling services to its victims, have collated data stating that between 2001-2008, 452 cases of witch-hunting related deaths were reported in the state of Jharkhand. This horrifying practice takes away the life of 150 - 200 innocent women every year in our country and Jharkhand tops the list with 5060 witchcraft-related murders every year. In order to prevent such evil allegations the government passed The Prevention of Witch (DAAIN) Practices Act, 2001, Jharkhand. 16 years have passed by but there no such amendments taken for making a strong law against witch hunting in Jharkhand. The Prevention of Witch (DAAIN) Practices Act, 2001, is not very effective as the punishment for killing a woman branded as witch is imprisonment between three and six months and fine of up to Rs. 1000 or Rs. 2000. In many instances, the cases go unreported & remain veil from the eyes for judiciary in case of victims seeking justice because the victims consider it as their fate & do not dare to go against the society. At best, they dismiss it as a social evil to be resolved within the community. The helpless witches are hounded and punished by being stripped naked , paraded around the villages , their hair is burnt off or their heads ensured , their faces blackened , their noses cut off , their teeth pulled out so that they can no longer curse , they are whipped , they are branded , sometimes , they are forced to eat human excreta & finally, they are put to death by hanging , impaled , naked or buried or burnt alive.

Awareness is perhaps the first and most important step to combat this deadly social evil. With that belief Social Development domain of Jharkhand State livelihood Promotion Society took the initiative to fight for the powerless witches of Khunti. This article portrays the identification of witches and their classification along with the after effects of the intervention and how it changed their life. The process involved awareness campaign in the sensitive villages of Khunti district whose major objective was the identification of those branded as witches to help them avail social and legal entitlements. During the campaign a team consisting of 10members stayed

in the targeted villages for 2 days. Street play was conducted to impart the message directly to a large mass of audience. The message was simple and straight that a woman who is a daughter, a mother, a wife and plays so many caring roles cannot harm anyone and should not be alleged as a witch. A woman who gives birth to a child cannot kill anyone or anyone's child. The team also took stock of the available medical facilities and its proximity and approach by the villagers. If they approach the local Ojhas/Bhagats, the message was conveyed to always consult medical practitioners which will lead to less witch branding. Besides, the team also enquired about those branded as witches in the villages. The targeted women were approached to know their situation in the past and present followed by collection of personal data regarding availing entitlements. The campaign was followed by a block level public hearing. During the hearing the cases were presented before the government officials of the concerned block i.e the SDO, BDO, CDPO, CO, S.I police and CBO's operating the area. The panel then decided the social and legal entitlements to be made available to the victims. Followed by the campaign a study was conducted to know the status of survivors of Witch Hunting and the prevention initiatives.

Objective

- Identification of the victims/survivors of Witch Hunting in Khunti district of Jharkhand
- To analyse the trend of identification and branding of witches.
- To study the reason behind branding of witches
- To combat the social evil
- To help the victim/survivors in attaining social status

Area of study

The selection of the block was based on the highest number of reported incidents in the district. The study was conducted in Murhu and Torpa blocks of Khunti district. Murhu block is 12 kms from the district of Khunti. Murhu Block of Khunti district has total population of 85,486 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 42,936 are males while 42,550 are females. In 2011 there were total 16,323 families residing in Murhu Block. The Average Sex Ratio of Murhu Block is 991. In Murhu Block out of total population, 44,786 were engaged in work activities. 45.3% of workers describe their work as Main Work (Employment or Earning more than 6 Months) while 54.7% were involved in Marginal activity providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Of 44,786

workers engaged in Main Work, 14,162 were cultivators (owner or co-owner) while 2,231 were Agricultural labourer.

Torpa Block of Khunti district has total population of 92,991 as per the Census 2011. Out of which 46,272 are males while 46,719 are females. In 2011 there were total 17,607 families residing in Torpa Block. The Average Sex Ratio of Torpa Block is 1,010. In Torpa Block out of total population, 39,683 were engaged in work activities. 59.9% of workers describe their work as Main Work (Employment or Earning more than 6 Months) while 40.1% were involved in Marginal activity providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Of 39,683 workers engaged in Main Work, 17,820 were cultivators (owner or co-owner) while 1,292 was Agricultural labourer.

Methodology

This study tries to portray the trend and reasons behind witch hunting in Jharkhand particularly in Khunti district and shows how the evil has taken hold in the society. It also a sketch of the status of the prey and the aftermath's of the initiative to combat it. It is based on retrospective prospective research design, whereby primary data was collected from the survivors and victims.

- Research design: The research was conducted in two blocks of Khunti district Torpa and Murhu which are highly prone to witch hunting. Data was collected by interviewing the individual survivors and focused group discussion with the family members and the neighbors.
- Sampling: Stratified random sampling was done to study the targeted population of those branded as witches.
- Tools of data collection: the data was collected by primary method of direct intervention by informal unstructured interview and interview schedule.

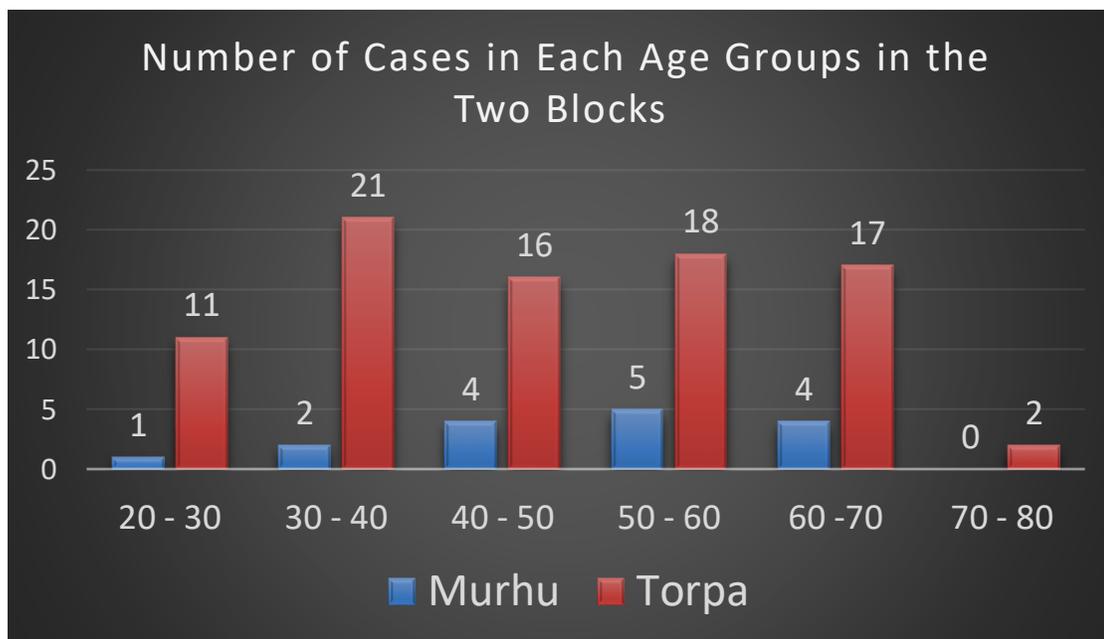
Findings and Analysis

The major objective of the study was to identify and register the women branded as witches in the villages of Khunti especially Murhu and Torpa which are more prone to witch hunting and superstition. The other major findings have been the trend of identification of witches and the impetus behind branding these women. It is to be brought to light that there were 14 targeted village sin Murhu block and 46 villages in Torpa block. The outcome of the Witch hunting

Prevention campaign was that there were 16 cases identified in murhu block from 14 villages and 85 cases from Torpa block out of 46 villages covered. The basic study of the victims revealed the following information.

- I. **Age profile of victims:** this section represents the age group of women victimized as witches. As age is a significant correlate of women's position in society, this discussion will allow us to locate the categories of women who are most vulnerable to being labeled and victimized as a witch in the areas of our study. The findings of our study in this respect reflect some general patterns as well as variations with respect to the age group of the victims.

Graph 1.1 presents our data regarding the age distribution of victims of witch hunting for the two blocks. The data clearly establish certain age groups as vulnerable.



From the above figure it is to be noted that women of age group 30-60 are more vulnerable. This is followed by women in the age group of 60-70. However, as is also apparent, witch hunting is not unknown in other age categories as well.

Analysis:

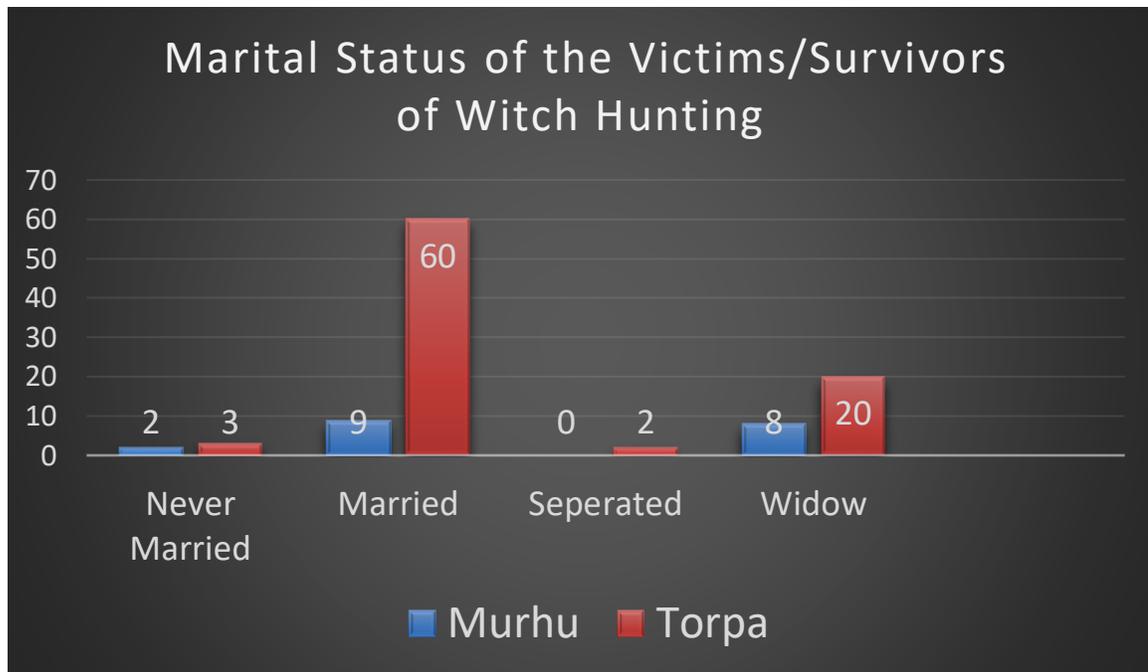
The distribution of victims of witch hunting according to age shows some interesting patterns. Given that the study explicitly sought to capture cases representing as wide a range of age distribution as possible, the data that has emerged indicates that age is a critical factor in shaping the vulnerability of victims of witch hunting. From the above description it is evident that witch hunting is a form of violence which disproportionately impacts older age groups of women whose vulnerability seems to be at a peak around the age groups of 50-60 while the chances of being labeled a witch are considerably less even in the category 20-30 and perhaps insignificant below the age of 20. While more thorough studies will have to be conducted to fully establish that incidence of witch hunting, cases in which victims are below the age group of 30 are very rare, we can with greater confidence insist that victims of witch-hunting are most likely to be women in the age group 30-60. Fewer cases in much older categories of course need not be a change in pattern but as linked with a demographic decline in number of women in these age groups.

Inference:

Witch hunting is a form of violence which primarily targets middle aged and older women. Because these two group of women have total control on property and assets.

- II. Marital Status of the victims:** A second important aspect of social position of women who are targeted as witches is their marital status. This is the object of discussion in this section. As might be expected from the discussion on age distribution of women victims in the last section, all women in our sample were presently or previously married. Few of them were unmarried.

Graph 1.2. Marital Status of the Victims/Survivors of Witch Hunting in Murhu and Torpa Blocks



Analysis:

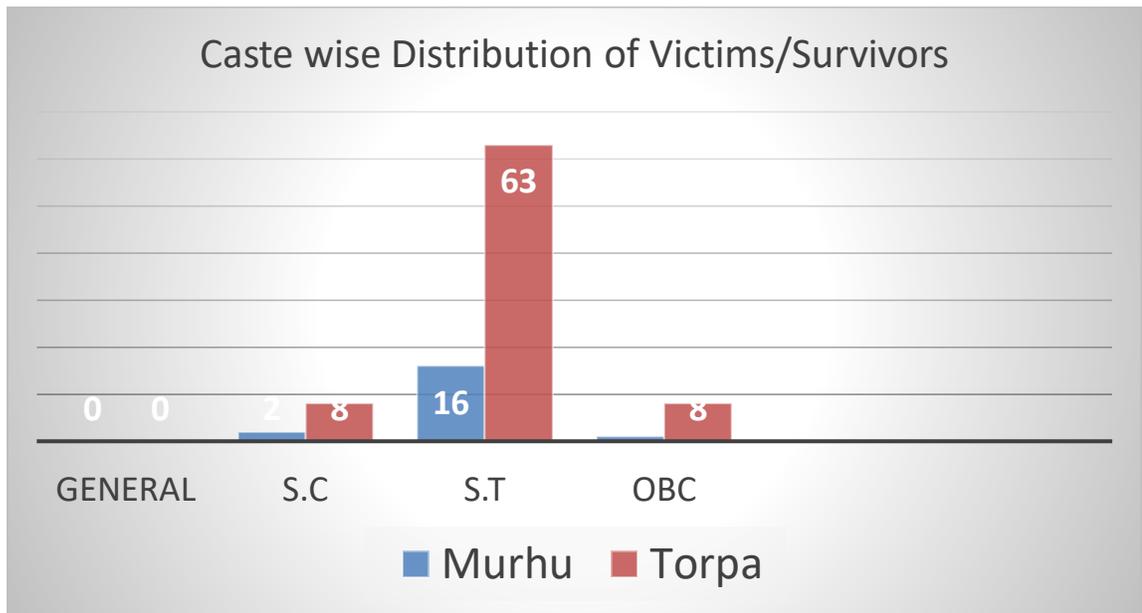
The most striking finding with respect to the marital status of women victims is that there are survivors/victims who have never been married. It appears that witch hunting is more likely to afflict married women rather than single ones. This may be somewhat unremarkable in contexts of a society in which most women are expected to get married. But it is believed that it may hold an important clue to understanding the social dynamics of witch hunting.

Inference:

It can be seen as an important sociological feature of this form of violence against women. It will also be seen in further findings that women's marital kin play an important role in perpetrating this form of violence in many instances.

III. Caste wise distribution of victims/survivors: the attempt to understand the social and individual location of victims of witch hunting would remain incomplete without a consideration of their group identity; primarily referring to the caste, tribal and religious identities of the victims. Hence this section will reveal about the group identity of victims of witch hunting.

Graph 1.3. Caste wise Distribution of Victims/Survivors in the Khunti District



Analysis:

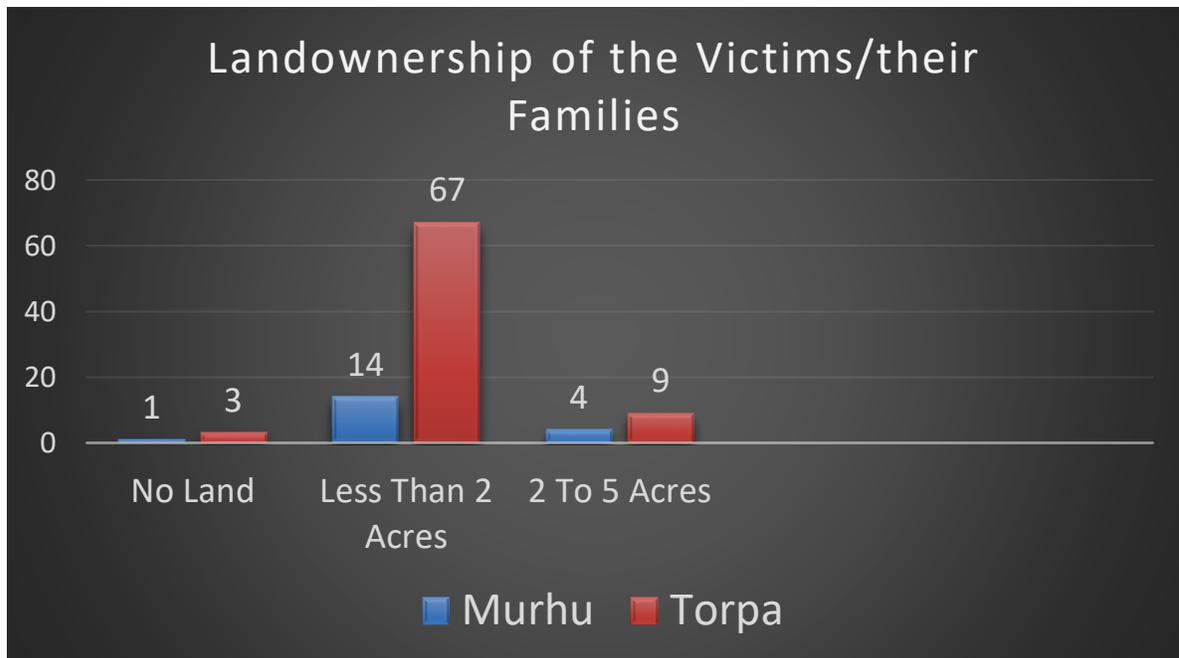
Khunti District shows a high percentage of victims concentrated in the ST category with a small number of victims from the OBC and SC categories, this is also due to large population belonging to tribal community and basically Munda. Data collected from this district also does not have any instances of victimization from the General and Others category.

Inference:

Caste played a very important role in branding of women as witches. In all two blocks only, lower economic strata and social strata women target as witch in the society. Moreover, it can also be inferred that tribal people have strong faith in superstition and believe in nature’s forces for curing of their ailments. Besides, they even alleged against women for practicing superstition.

IV. Economic Status of victims/survivors: the economic status of the victims serves as an important aspect to understand the position of the victims in the society.

Graph 1.4.Khunti: Land Ownership of Victims/Survivors



Analysis:

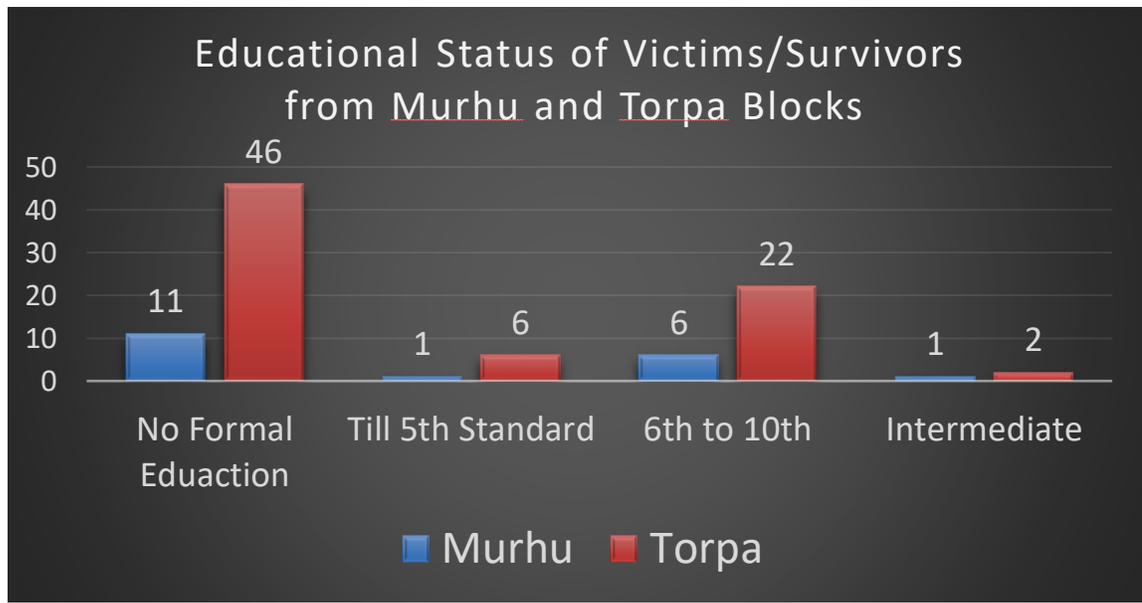
In two blocks of Khunti district there are 80 cases who have not more than two acres of land and very few cases who are landless. This data indicates that most of the women in this case were members of families which had very small quantities of land in their possession. However, even these small parcels of land are sometimes at the bottom of disputes which take the form of witch hunting.

Inference:

It is inferred that property is also one of the factor/reason behind the branding of women as witches. There are greedy land grabbers who lure such men with liquor and money, to get rid of the woman by declaring her a witch, which in popular parlance legitimizes the crime with no conviction or fear of punishment. Witch-hunters are basically land grabbers from or outside the family of the target, who with the collusion of ojhas commit the crime.

- V. **Educational status of the victims/survivors:** education of the victims and the community serves an integral part in eradicating such social evils. Education brings awareness among the people and reliance in science and medical. The data derived from education qualification is indeed very depressing.

Graph 1.5. Educational Status of Victims/Survivors from Khunti District



Analysis:

From the above data it is obvious that there is a very high level of lack of formal education among the victims of witch hunting. Although a clearer correlation between lack of education and witch hunting would require a different kind of macro-level study and would also have to include data from areas which have greater representation of educated population than is likely in a rural setting, it is nonetheless significant to note this connection. Quite apart from legalistic means of dealing with witch hunting, an immediate attention to lack of education can thus be an important intervention to deal with the social malaises which give rise to these violations.

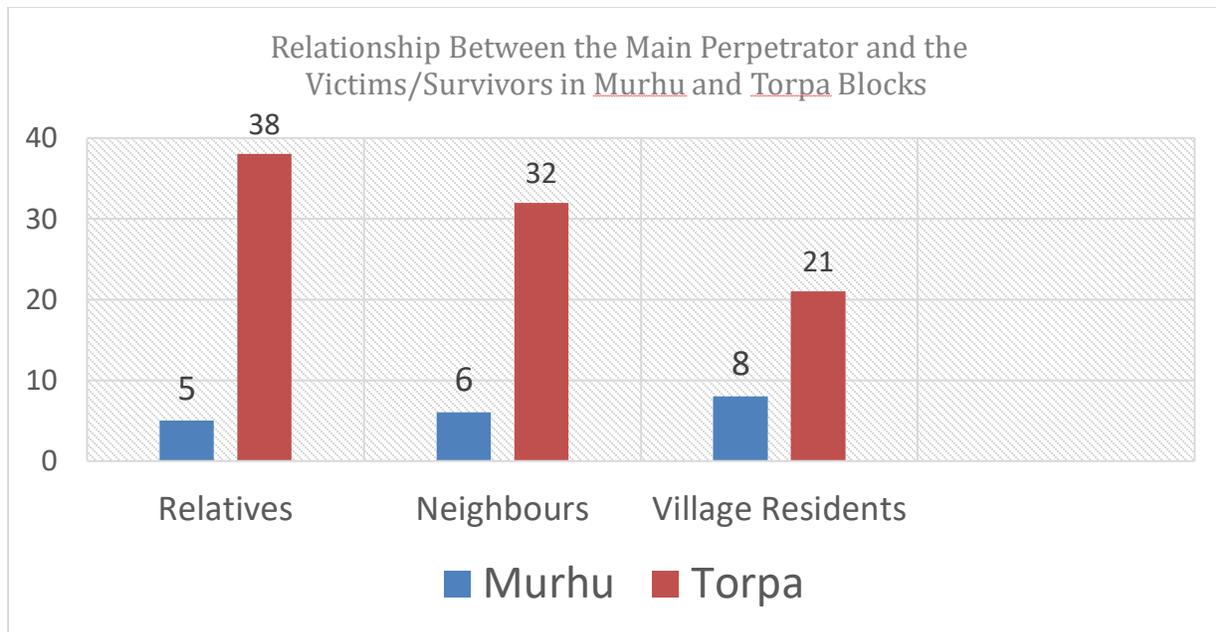
Inference:

It shows that the education is another factor behind the branding of women as a witch. In most cases, victims/survivors have not any formal education. Due to this, they are not aware of laws regarding witch hunting or approaching the administration.

VI. Relationship between perpetrator and victim/survivors:

One of the most striking findings of this study is that in a majority of cases the women who have been victims of witch hunting are related to their perpetrators through ties of kinship and marriage. In many of such cases the perpetrators are members of the husband’s immediate or extended family and there are a few cases involving distant relatives.

Graph 1.6. Relationship between the Main Perpetrator and the Victims/Survivors



Analysis:

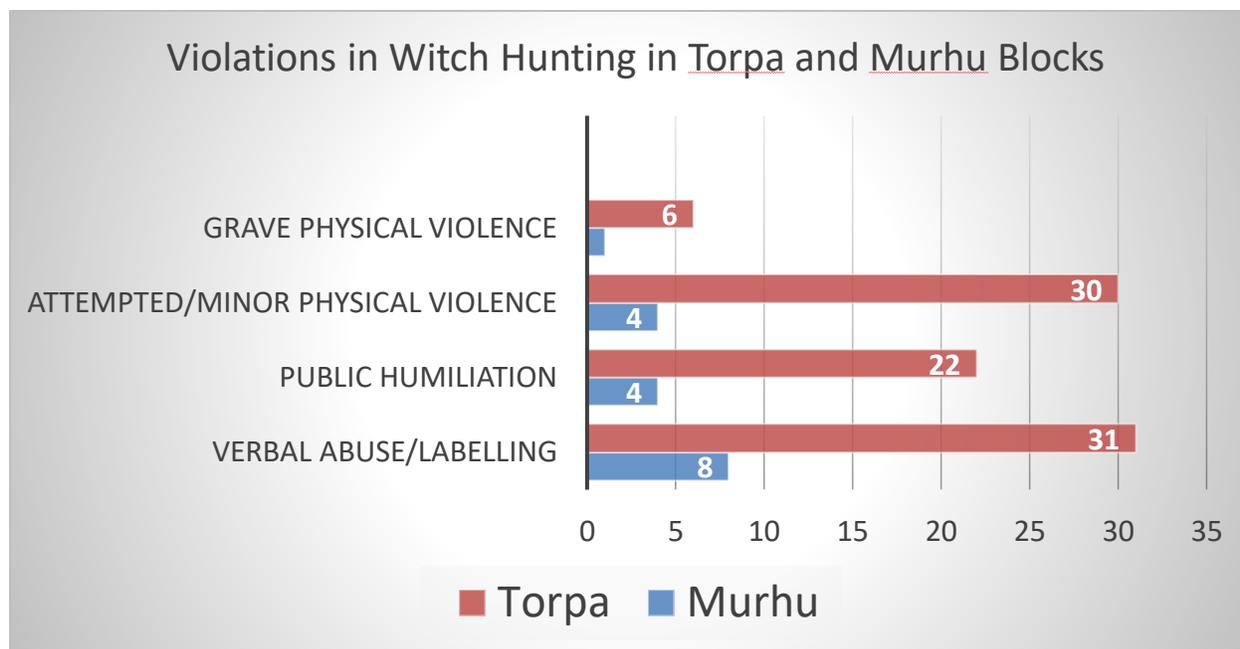
It is apparent that witch hunting is usually perpetrated by someone who is very close to the victim, either in terms of a kinship relationship (most often related through marriage) or it is living in the physical proximity of the victim (neighbor). Usually the last two go together.

Inference:

All cases involve someone already known to, if not intimately related to the victim and her family and therefore somehow part of the everyday life of the victim, this intimate everyday interaction of the victim and her perpetrators usually gives rise to situations which trigger the process of witch hunting. This dimension of witch hunting is a source of some very important insights into social correlates of witch hunting.

VII. Types of Violence and torture: There is a range of physical and non-physical violations which accompanies the process of witch hunting which displays the distribution of these different types of violations in the cases identified. From the chart, it is obvious that verbal abuse is present in all cases of witch hunting.

Graph 1.7. Types of Violence in Witch Hunting



Analysis:

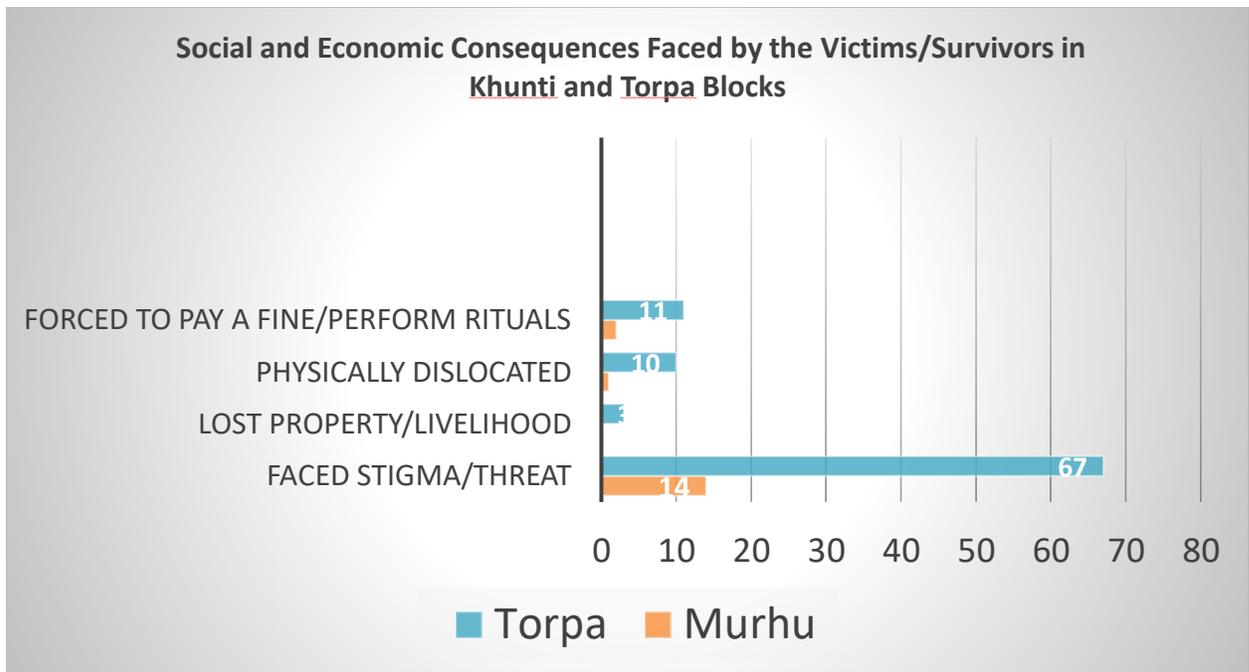
Physical violence is of course the most serious consequence of witch hunting faced by women. From attempts and threats to physically assault women, to gravely injure them, to murder, women labeled as witches face a clear possibility of physical violence.

Inference:

There is a range of violations to which the victims of witch hunting are subjected. While death, physical assault and torture are the most extreme consequences, they are not necessarily the most common. In most cases victims face threats of violence, public humiliation and verbal abuse. Witch hunting also leads to other less spectacular but nevertheless serious consequences such as social isolation and ostracized on the one hand and economic deprivation and loss of property on the other which is not easy to overcome and may seriously undermine the life chances of the victims and their families.

- VIII. **Social and economic consequences of witch hunting on Victims/Survivors:** One of the assumptions of this study was that, apart from verbal and physical abuse, witch hunting often entails serious social and economic consequences for its victims. This has been sufficiently born out in our case studies. Although, there are different degrees of and ways in which a victim suffers from these consequences, they have been broadly classified into five categories as listed in the graph below.

Graph 1.8. Social and Economic Consequences of Witch Hunting on Victims/Survivors



Analysis:

As it is obvious from the graph, the victims almost invariably face social stigma, isolation as a consequence of witch hunting. This may take the form of them having to live in complete isolation, not being invited to social gatherings and community events, people turning away or hiding their children on seeing them, being stared at and taunted, being treated as suspicious, and afraid of not being able to get one’s children married. This also brings to a discussion of the serious economic consequences which the victims and their families suffered a loss of livelihood or property.

Inference:

This can take many forms such as not being allowed to or able to cultivate one’s own land, lack of cooperation from the fellow-villagers in one’s economic pursuits, not being hired to do work on other people’s fields, being denied access to share in the property, loss of livestock and poultry, inability to continue other income generation activities such as liquor making, selling bangles, cooking, working in the brick kilns, being denied work under MGNREGA schemes, etc. Yet another social and economic consequence of witch hunting is that the victims and their families may be asked to either take oaths or perform rituals to prove their innocence or pay hefty fines which have the potential of further impoverishing and indebting them. Thus, in one case the victim was made to pay a fine of Rs 25,000.

CONCLUSION

Witch hunting appears to be a form of violence which afflict middle aged married women from the lower economic strata who have little formal education but who are spread across a cross-section of castes and communities.

- Victims and perpetrators are often closely related to each other and inter-caste and inter-class dynamics is not always present in this form of violence. Immediate family members are however often collateral victims.
- While belief systems seem to help trigger the violence, material factors are almost omnipresent in cases of witch hunting.
- The consequences of witch hunting are wide ranging and are not always spectacular and gruesome. Often, they take the form of serious social and economic deprivations.
- A high degree of complicity of the community and apathy of the state is discernible in cases of witch hunting.

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ANNEXURE

Legal prohibition of witch-hunting in Jharkhand

“The Prevention of Witch (DAAIN) Practices Act 2001 Jharkhand” was adopted from Bihar and this Act aims to deliver effective measures to prevent the witch practices and have a provision to punishment in the state. In this Act, 8 sections are included. Section 1 and section 2 refers the short title, extent and commencement of the state government in the official gazette and definition of the term such as witch, identifier, and ojha (witch doctor). According to Jharkhand’s Witchcraft Prevention Act, 2001, section 3 to section 6 of this act refers the punishments. For instance, the punishment for identifying a woman as witch is imprisonment for up to three months and/or a fine of Rs.1000. Similarly, causing harm to anyone in the name of witchcraft can lead to ‘imprisonment for up to six months and/or a fine of Rs. 2000’. Ojhas found practicing sorcery can be jailed for up to a year and/or fined Rs. 2000. Section 6 states that all of these laws are ‘cognizable and non-bailable’ offences. Section 8 of this Act refers the power to the government to make the rules when there is a requirement. It is good that Jharkhand has its own act to address witch hunt prohibition, but we can say that it has not reached fully of its objective because lack of provisions for punishment, on effective implementation of law and order and providing justice, protection and security to the victims. Since, 2001 about 523 women were killed due to branding them as a witch (NCRB, 2016). Act also not talks about the rehabilitation and compensation for the victims which I think is the serious gap to give justice to women and establishing effective and sustainable environment to victims for living. The punishment provided in this the Act should be increased because the existing punishment is very low. In most of the cases, only the person who accused women as a witch has been caught while the other responsible person such as Ojha,(witch doctor, guni, bhagat) who play an important role in branding women as witch generally scot free. Therefore, specific provision should be made to take hold the accuser as well. Clearly, “sections 3, 4, 5 and 6 comprising the penal provisions of the Act are inadequate for deterring or punishing those responsible for branding and persecuting women as witches. Fines range from Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 2,000 and prison terms range from 3 months to 1 year, depending on the nature of the crime”. The penal provisions of the Act do not adequately punish the instigators of these crimes or prevent others from engaging in these crimes. All the punishment, in the present enactment of witch-hunting, is so minimum that it does not have any positive effect because usually culprits go un-convicted either because of lack of witnesses or the reason may be because many people because sometimes almost the whole village or locality is involved in this, but the main reason may be due to light punishment. Though, it is considered as non- bail able & cognizable offence, but these are not followed so strictly. Another important reason for failure of this Act is that people were not aware of the existing law and whom should be approached after violence or branding of witches has taken place. Also, victims were not able to file case against witch hunt accusation because either they don’t have the awareness about the legal provisions or either threatened by the community if they do so. “A basic problem of implementing laws

against witch hunts is that since the crime is usually committed by a group of people, it's difficult to pinpoint blame. Also, if the police take action, the victim cannot go back to the community which has stigmatized her”.