



ଓଡ଼ିଶା ରାଜ୍ୟ ମହିଳା ଆୟୋଗ
Odisha State Commission for Women
Women have the right to live with dignity



act:onaid
ActionAid Association (India)

Witch-Hunting in Odisha



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Women & Child Development and
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D.O. No. /MWCDM

BHUBANESWAR

Date 07.12.2021....

MESSAGE

I am glad to know that Odisha State Commission for Women in collaboration with Action Aid Association is going to publish a report i.e. Study on Prevention of Witch Hunting in Odisha.

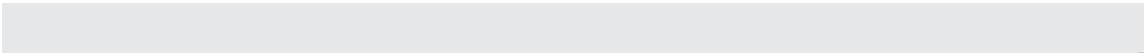
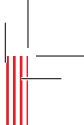
Despite living in a modern and advanced 21st century, some cases of Witch Hunting are still heard in some pockets of the country, which narrates the untold misery of the victims. Illiteracy, lack of awareness gender inequality are some of the root causes behind this heinous practice.

Women and Child Development Department in Odisha is creating awareness in villages and rural areas on the evils of witch-hunting through its vast network of Aanganwadi workers and Women Self Help Groups. Still there is a lot to be done to eradicate this menace and bring a societal change.

I am happy that Odisha State Commission for women has taken up this commendable initiative and publishing a report on the prevention of Witch Hunting in Odisha which will be a great source of research study for all stake holders.

I wish the publication all success.


(Tukuni Sahu)






ଓଡ଼ିଶା ମିନତି ବେହେରା
Dr. Minati Behera (MA,LLB,Ph.D)



ଅଧ୍ୟକ୍ଷା
ଓଡ଼ିଶା ରାଜ୍ୟ ମହିଳା ଆୟୋଗ
CHAIRPERSON
ODISHA STATE COMMISSION FOR WOMEN

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Date : 07.12.21

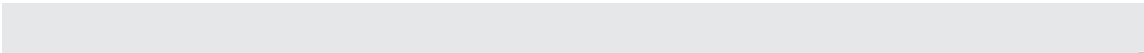
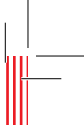
MESSAGE

I am immensely happy to learn that ActionAid Association is publishing the report "Witch Hunting in Odisha" that was entrusted by Odisha State Commission for Women (OSCW). The study has covered the districts of Odisha where the prevalence of the cases of witch branding and the related violence is more. Thus, it collates the evidence of the various forms of human rights violation due to witch branding. We are hopeful that the findings of the study would be helpful for us and other government departments, institutions and civil society organisation in their efforts to combat the practices of witch branding. Also, the study has taken up the attempt to find out the implementation gaps of the existing law i.e. The Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act; 2013 with an aim to suggest further measures for its strengthening.

I would like to congratulate ActionAid Association for bringing out this study report and thank the members involved in this study.

Many good wishes.

Minati Behera.
Chairperson,
Odisha State Commission for Women





Saamyendra K. Priyadarsi, IPS
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
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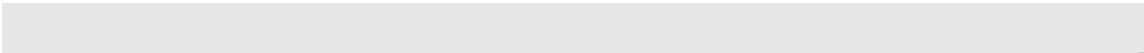
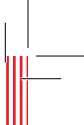
I am delighted to know that Action Aid Association is publishing a report on "Witch Hunting in Odisha" with the support from Odisha State Women Commission (OSCW). This research is very relevant in the context of violation of human rights leading to persecution and violence.

Witch hunting is an age-old form of human rights violations practiced in many parts of Odisha despite the enactment of the 'Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act; 2013'. There is a need of collective efforts of the government, civil society organisation as well as communities to address this issue of witch hunting. The study that has been conducted in 13 districts of Odisha in forms of cases studies and feedback from the key informants would be of great help in understanding the issues as well as working out possible solutions to combat the persecution of witch hunting and further violence. The study has come up with suggestive measures and strategies for various stakeholders.

I hope, this would be immensely helpful in combating this worse form of human rights violation.

I take the opportunity to congratulate ActionAid Association and Odisha State Commission for Women for this report and extend heartiest thanks to the people involved in this.


(Saamyendra Kumar Priyadarsi)
Commissioner of Police,
Bhubaneswar-Cuttack



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FOREWORD

The practice of witch-branding and witch-hunts is horrific, yet it tragically continues to be part of our contemporary world. Many women and children, and some men continue to be branded, castigated, exiled to a life of isolation, or even killed, without adequate protection from the state and society.

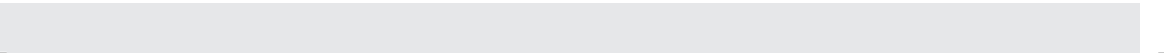



History tells us that in Europe between the 15th to the 17th centuries, an estimated 40,000-60,000 women, children and men accused of witchcraft were lynched and killed, in processes that were sanctioned by the Church and the State. In that era of bigotry and fear, there were booklets published on how to identify witches, regular witch trials conducted and executions carried out. While that may have become a chapter in history, these abhorrent practices still prevail in our world. While correct figures may never be available, a few thousand, mostly women, still get murdered every year.



According to India's National Crime Records Bureau data, more than 2,500 people, mostly women, have been killed in India between the 2000-2016 on being accused of witchcraft, putting the number to more 150 deaths annually. Similarly, in Nepal in the year 2018-19, their police had 51 victims of witchcraft, nearly all elderly women and widows. A WHO report in 2002 states that in Tanzania nearly 500 elderly women were killed annually after being accused of witchcraft. Modern day witch hunts and killings are not only confined to South Asia and parts of Africa, but are prevalent across the globe.

It is not only a question of death for those condemned; those who escape death face a condemnation of their futures. Once suspected and accused



of witchcraft, they live in perpetual fear and lifelong anxiety. They and their families are often subject of several human rights violations. The numbers of those who live in fear of being called a witch, are never counted by our record keeping systems.

There is a strong gendered dimension to witch hunts, given that a large majority of those killed in this patriarchal assertion are women, and amongst them older women, single women and those who dare to assert themselves.

Early results from an ongoing ActionAid Association field study carried out selected districts of Assam, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya and Odisha, tell us that among the primary reasons for branding people witches were suspicions of causing illness, unconventional religious practices, land conflicts, presence of strangers in the village, and jealousy for sudden family fortunes. Importantly, assertion by women, is also noted to be one of the reasons.

The present study “Witch-Hunting in Odisha: A compilation of case studies” prepared with the State Commission for Women, Government of Odisha, presents evidence of this practice and its associated mindsets and beliefs in the form of case studies from across seven districts of Odisha. The study has prioritised including the districts which has high prevalence of witch-branding. 83% of the total witch-hunting and witch-branding cases in Odisha are concentrated in Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Keonjhar, Gajapati and Ganjam districts. Therefore, we have collected data from the above districts. Besides, we have collected case studies, stakeholders’ interviews and FGDs from some other districts like Nabarangpur, Baleswar, Nayagarh, Koraput, and Kandhamal which also have their share of witch-branding and witch-hunting cases. The chosen districts possess socio-ethnic diversity and have the highest number of registered cases of witch-hunting. Thus 102 case studies have been collected from 12 districts of Odisha.

The study found that the major causes of witch-branding is closely linked to the health of children and other villagers, land grabbing, mental health issues and crop failure. More than 30% cases led to death of the victim and 70% resulted in the victim and their family leaving the area. Single women who were widowed or separated were found to be the most vulnerable groups to witch-branding related crimes. Whereas, the children of the victims continued to face the brunt of the stigma and were denied their fundamental rights. Only 69% of the cases saw police intervention, investigation and arrest.

I do hope this study will help us understand the appropriate policy actions needed to address the issue of witch-branding, protect people, especially women, who are vulnerable and ensure justice to the victims of witch-branding.

What is also needed is popular education campaigns building on advancing rationality and scientific temper, and a momentum to eradicate the evil of witch-branding. The celebration and public recognition of human rights defenders would be a very welcome step. Chhutni Mahato was conferred the Padma Shri this year, for her role in rescuing over a hundred women branded as witches. The singular efforts of Chhutni Mahto, strongly tells the nation of the need for rescue and protection of those who are accused and endangered by the practice of witch branding. Prevention of community trials is a key step for ending regressive social practices which are in collective mindsets. Gram Panchayats can play a leadership role in bringing such disputes to the courts, and they need to be directed to do and made responsible for non-compliance. In recognition of the gendered dimension of the practice of witch-branding, popular education campaigns celebrating the diverse roles of women in society might over some sustained period go a long way in humanising the image of women in all her aspects, and making any attempt at witch-branding the historically folly that it is.

My sincere thanks to Dr Minati Behera, the Chairperson of the Odisha State Commission of Women, for her proactive steps towards addressing the issues of witch-branding and her association with this study.

I also thank Debabrat Patra, Associate Director, ActionAid Association and all colleagues working in Odisha for their effort and support in bringing out this study.

My sincere thanks to the study team, respondents and people involved in this study for their support and contribution.

Sandeep Chachra


Executive Director

ActionAid Association




PREFACE

Every year, a 16-day activism campaign is observed from 25th November to 10th December, marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the World Human Rights Day respectively. It is a tragic irony to believe that amidst all the 'women' across the world, who bear the major brunt of violence – one in three of them are raped, assaulted, or subjected to physical and mental violence every day. The global theme for the campaign this year says, 'Orange the World: End Violence against Women Now', wherein it is not only the time to demonstrate solidarity through words, but also acknowledge and galvanize actions to end extreme forms of violence against women and girls, that exist in our society.



Dating back to the pre-historic era and now, the factors have gradually changed over time. Now it is often confined to the oppressed and vulnerable sections of society, who in the name of social cleansing, serve to control the life and property of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Single Women, Old-aged people, and similar groups. The primary causes of such inhumane practices include - unequal and unjust socio-economic systems and gender inequality, along with inadequate healthcare, lack of law enforcement and widespread illiteracy. As a result, women bear the major thrust of all exploitation and brutality, particularly those belonging to Dalit and tribal communities.



A total of 12 states in India witnessed witch-branding and about 2300 witch hunting murders were committed nation-wide between 1999 and 2013. Even after the enactment of the Witch Hunting Act of Odisha in 2013, a sum of 99, 83 and 58 cases were reported in the years 2017, 2016 and 2015 respectively. In case of Jharkhand, the Witch-Hunting





Law has been in force since 2001, however the state still tops the list of witch-hunting deaths due from 2013 to 2016. Besides hundreds of men (negligible number), 523 women, were lynched on the suspicion of practicing witchcraft from 2001 to 2016 in the state, but unfortunately, many cases have gone unreported and escaped the public glare.

In this study supported by Odisha State Women Commission, ActionAid Association collected 100 cases of witch-hunting and witch branding from all over the state wherein, 27% of witch-branding cases have occurred due to health issues in children, 43.5% were due to health issues of an adult family member, 24.5% misfortune or land grabbing and 5% of the cases were due to crop failure. Citing a case from a tribal dominated village of Saharpur, Banspal block, Keonjhar district, Odisha, both husband and wife were beheaded for the wife being suspected of possessing supernatural healing abilities. Villagers occasionally claim that “Jema’s actions overturn and inflict harm on others. Her bizarre, superstitious practices are utilized to achieve privilege in the village and instill fear among the people.” According to some villagers, the couple was badly assaulted, and the mob beheaded both with sharp edged weapons. After six years, nine of the perpetrators including one woman were released from the jail while three of them remain behind the bars. People of village are still oblivious of the law and methods to deter witch-hunting incidents. No action has been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to ensure such practices are eliminated from the village. All these incidents point to serious lapses in dealing with witch-hunting cases. Not a single witch doctor which abets the crime has been punished. In Banspal block of Keonjhar, 9 witch hunting cases was seen in the recent past. Similarly, in Kaptipada block of Mayurbhanj, 8 witch hunting cases were recorded. Clearly some blocks of tribal dominated districts like Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar are more vulnerable.

As part of the effort to address the issue of witch branding ActionAid Association has been working on the issue of witch hunting nationally (MP, Rajasthan, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Jharkhand, and so



on) and internationally (African countries like Ghana). In Odisha ActionAid Association has been closely working with its partners in 10 districts of Odisha. In this process we have reached out to the most vulnerable communities in terms awareness building and engaging further with social institution and leaders. We have been engaged in building awareness of the community through partnership in different vulnerable districts. Folk media has been used as effective medium in reaching to people and engaging further to bring clarity on the issue and develop rationalist thoughts. This effort has become a part of our work to address women's rights violation in the areas where we have long term presence for grounding of our rights-based work with the most marginalized communities.




We have been engaging with the leaders of the social institutions to build this discourse within their community and society. ActionAid with its partners have joined with different tribal groups like the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) to build their awareness and support them further to ensure justice to the victims. Also, we have had strategic engagement on the issue of witch branding with different CSOs and Government departments. We have been constantly engaging with different organization how to monitor the implementation of the existing laws and develop mechanisms to address the issues. Also, we had put efforts in holding consultation towards developing schemes as provisioned in the existing law. Since the manifestation of the witch branding is rooted on patriarchy, we have been engaged in building feminist perspective among the women members in the community. In this process of our engagement, the agency of women emerged at grass root level understanding their rights and ability challenge patriarchy and violence on women as human rights violation. It has been found that single women are the most vulnerable to witch branding. So, we have deeper engagement in building the leadership of the single women and facilitating them further in building a collective of single women. Also, the women members have been oriented on their rights and facilitated further towards claiming their rights over land, livelihood, and entitlement of Governments. We have been constantly engaging with the media in bring out the issues of women's rights violence due to witch branding.

The case of witch branding has been brought to the media and along with this we have joined and facilitated discussion in media to build public discourse. We have facilitated submission of a petitions to State Women's Commission to form a committee towards addressing such issues like witch branding as women's rights violation and build public opinion on this to suggest further for policy change.

The loopholes in the law and order are evident from the fact that, in most of the cases, the witch hunting laws are not invoked, rather only the relevant IPC clauses are cited. There are no such state-wide awareness programmes to fight and eradicate inhuman practice emerging from irrational and superstitious beliefs. Current laws do not provide an effective way to help victims recover from the consequences of witch-hunting, which include forced displacement, expulsion from the village, social and economic boycotting among many others.

The governments and civil society groups need to gear up for sustained campaign against this deplorable practice till we wipe away this from the country. The witch hunting prevalent districts need to be significantly addressed and both law enforcement and awareness drives engaging traditional leaders, women groups, PRIs, ASHA, and frontline workers must be ensured in these areas. Building rationalistic thoughts and scientific temper should be a part of curriculum at different levels of education. Model action like serving justice to the victims and proper rehabilitation of survivors as well as their families should be considered in the cases to set examples for various stakeholders.

We must look forth to building up a National Law for criminalizing witch-hunting practitioners and mob-violence against targeted families. The authorities must develop guidelines for ideal coordination between the current state laws and the Indian Penal Code that prosecutes the suspects. Transcending a minimalistic view, states need to build up on different strategies to address the underlying issues of witchcraft. A state act against witch hunting is not enough, we much have an operational state rules



to implement the act in right spirit. A task force and special officers at different levels of the states, must be formed and a convergence action plan must be worked upon. The ICDS and ICPS structure with systemic capacity building support should be used to address cases related to violence during witch-hunts. The National and State Human Rights and Women Commission should regularly monitor the actions by the state and district administration to ensure that the practice is gradually eliminated across the nation. Last but not the least, it is women themselves and their collectives who should come forward and challenge such inhuman practices.

This report with a set of recommendations suggests for intervention at different level like community, district and state by government and civil society organisations towards combating the inhuman practice of witch branding and related violence. I hope that the findings from the report would be useful for the government including the statutory bodies, policy makers, implementing agencies and civil society organisations and communities in strategizing plan of action towards addressing the issue of witch branding.

The support of Odisha State Commission has been very significant in producing this report. We sincerely extend our thanks to the Honorable Chairperson, Dr Minati Behera for her support, inputs, and guidance throughout the study. Also, our thanks to all the honorable members of the OSWC for their support and inputs. Also, we received ample support and motivation from the team members of OSWC. We sincerely thank them all for their support.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the esteemed team of ActionAid including Ghasiram Panda; Programme Manager; B N Durga, M & E Manager for coordinating this study in terms of providing orientation to the filed team, coordination for timely collection of data, and facilitating consultations at state level with different stakeholders towards obtaining feedbacks and suggestions. Also, I thank all the team members of Regional

Office for their support and inputs to this study.

Also, we acknowledge the sincere support of Adyasha Mishra in editing of this report. We extend our appreciation towards the contributions of interns from Xavier University viz. Evangelina Patro, and Milinda Mishra in providing their continuous support in preparation of the report.

The District Coordinators of ActionAid Association under Ending Child Marriage Project who are based at district level have played an important role in coordination for the field work for the study. We sincerely acknowledge their support in this. Also, our sincere thanks to all the field animator who helped us in collection of data from survivors, victims, and key informants from the districts under the study.

Also, we sincerely acknowledge the support of senior journalist Priya Ranjan Sahu for his valuable inputs. We thankfully acknowledge the support of the senior journalist Bighneswar Sahu for his support to this study through sharing the database on the media reports of the last ten years and further support in collection of case studies from the field.

I thankfully acknowledge the support of ActionAid colleagues at country office, Joseph Mathai, Senior Manager, Communication Unit and M V Rajeevan for extending required support in publication of this document.

Finally, this report wouldn't have been a success without the active and meaningful participation from the community and most specifically of the survivors and victims who have witnessed the inhuman practice of witch branding and further violence on them. We are truly thankful to the people who participated in the process and shared their views and experience

Debabrat Patra

National Humanitarian Lead &
Associate Director
ActionAid Association



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



In northern Ghana, hundreds of women, accused of witchcraft by relatives or members of their community, have been living in ‘witch camps’ after fleeing or being banished from their homes. The camps, which have been home to around 800 women and 500 children, offer poor living conditions, and little hope for a normal life. These women have fled after they had faced discrimination, threats and even mob justice after being accused of witchcraft. They had been blamed for ‘crimes’ involving sickness, droughts, fires, cursing a neighbour or even just appearing in one’s dream. Those who managed to escape and reach the witch camps were the lucky ones. Several women were murdered after being branded as ‘witches’. In 2010, the case of a 72-year-old woman who was set on fire and killed made headlines around the world.

Some elderly women have lived in the camps for as long as 40 years – abandoned by their families and trapped in the camps until they died. Their only companions are young girls, often granddaughters or family members, who are sent with these women as ‘attendants’. Most of these girls have never gone to school or have dropped out. When they reach the age when they can leave the camps, they usually cannot because they are tainted by the ‘witch’. The stigmatisation and persecution of witches follows similar tropes across the world.

The persecution of witches has a long global history. Modern witch hunts are prevalent in economically and socially disadvantaged communities across the world and target the most vulnerable members of these societies. They often occur in the presence of one’s own family members who participate, in the name of social cleansing. Sub-Saharan Africa has seen not only women, but also children being victims of witch hunts over the past three centuries. The practice of attributing all kinds of misfortunes including famines, wars, sightings of supernatural entities and more to the

presence of witches has killed several women and children in the process. Nepal is another such country where witch-hunting is widely carried out with lower-caste women primarily being the targets. The violence resulting from this horrendous crime has been exacerbated by lack of education, awareness, the existence of a patriarchal society, superstitious beliefs, and caste system. Today, Saudi Arabia continues to be the only Asian nation where witchcraft is a crime punishable by death.

Witch branding is the stigmatisation of specific groups of individuals, including for the most part, widowed women, childless women, old couples and lower caste women. In addition to this, many are targeted because of local politics. In rural and tribal areas of India, it is witnessed that any spread or occurrence of diseases or famines that causes deaths of humans and animals is attributed to the work of a witch. It then triggers violence against the most vulnerable individuals in the community. Witch branding was believed to be a product of superstition. Scholarship on the issue also shows that it has a gendered dimension. This act of branding women as witches is also a punitive measure against women's refusal to abdicate their rights or a claim to socio-economic and cultural power. It has been observed that most of these cases are against single women. Widows, unmarried, and divorced or separated women are more vulnerable to witch-branding since they are not bound to patriarchal protection.

The root causes of this cruel practice are found in unequal socio-economic systems and gender inequality, along with inadequate healthcare and widespread illiteracy. As a result, women bear higher brunt of exploitation and brutality, particularly those who belong to Dalit and tribal communities. While there are cases of men being attacked in witchcraft related crimes, the numbers are negligible in comparison to women. The family of a "witch" is further boycotted by villagers in addition to abuses heaped on them. In the family itself, female members viewed to be witches are strongly discriminated against.

The practice of witch-hunting is most common across these 12 states of India – Jharkhand, Bihar, Haryana, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh,

Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

The following report is an extensive documentation of 102 case studies of witch-branding, analysed using interviews with key informants and stakeholders. It provides qualitative evidence-based research on witch-hunting activities in select districts of Odisha and works toward an understanding of the root cause of such a heinous practice and its effects on the lives of the inhabitants, especially women. Moreover, it provides an analysis of the implementation and execution of the present legislation – Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013 – that aims to prohibit and penalise such activities in the state. The report presents findings of these in-depth interviews with the victims, accused, family members, investigators and district authorities to advocate for proper awareness as well as to assist the survivors.

In several states of the country, including Odisha, the archaic and inhuman practice of witch-hunting goes unabated. The statistics draw a chilling picture. 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. 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. From a national perspective, in

cases related to witch-hunting, Odisha has the dubious distinction of being ranked second after Jharkhand¹. Odisha has a total of 30 districts. The tribal dominated districts like Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Ganjam, Sundargarh, Gajapati, Rayagada, Malkangiri and Koraput have a predominantly high number of witch-hunting cases. In other districts with better development indicators too, such forms of discrimination against women exist. As high as 83% of the total witch-hunting and witch-branding cases in Odisha are concentrated in Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Keonjhar, Gajapati and Ganjam districts.

Laws for Prevention of Witch-branding

Looking at the context and seriousness of violence against women, the Government of Odisha enacted the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013. The law was formally published in the Odisha Gazette by the Department of Law on 25 February 2014 with the assent of the Governor of Odisha.

The above Act defines “witch-hunting” as any act of omission, commission or conduct on the part of any person,

- (i) identifying, accusing, or defaming a woman as a witch, or
- (ii) harassing, harming, or injuring such women whether mentally or physically or damaging her property.

The act makes it clear that no person shall commit witch-hunting or exercise or practise witchcraft with intent to cause harm or injury to another person. The act has instated specific penalties for witch-hunting, witchcraft, and witch doctors. As per the law whoever commits witch-hunting, abets, or provokes it, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which may extend up to three years and with fine, but which shall not be less than ₹.1,000. Also, the law has provisions that whoever forces any woman—

1. Debabrata Patra. “Condemned, Discriminated, Violated: Horrific Tales Of Witch-Hunting In Odisha”, Outlook, 9th March 2021 <<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-condemned-discriminated-violated-horrific-tales-of-witch-hunting-in-odisha/376620>>

branding her as a witch— to drink or eat any inedible substance or any other obnoxious substance or parade her with painted face or body or commits any similar act, which is derogatory to human dignity or displace her from her house, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which shall not be less than one year but may extend to five years and with fine.

As part of the penalty for witchcraft, the law includes that whoever practises witchcraft or other similar practices with intent to cause harm or injury to any woman shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term, which shall not be less than one year, but which may extend to three years or with fine, which shall not be less than ₹.5,000 or with both.

The law has the provision that whoever performs any practice as a witch doctor knowingly that such practices shall cause harm or injury to the person upon whom such practices are being performed, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which shall not be less than one year but may extend to three years.

There is no significant achievement of efforts on the ground to clamp down on witch-hunting in the state even as the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013 became enforceable in February 2014. Some of the gaps in implementation of the Act are mentioned below in brief.

Gaps in the Laws

- » The laws already in force are insufficient as they focus on punishment mechanisms but do not respond to the need of eradicating the irrational and evil superstitious beliefs.
- » The ways of reporting cases are limited. The needs of the victims and survivors are not tended to.
- » The Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act was not at all invoked in any of the cases, but IPC sections were invoked. In some cases, the victims did not get a FIR copy.

- » In many cases, the accused (usually powerful males of the village) are left unpunished because the attacks are portrayed as a result of mob fury and unnamed assailants.
- » Present laws do not provide an effective way to help victims recover from the consequences of witch-hunting, which include forced displacement, expulsion from the village, social and economic boycotting.

While gaps exist, with the intervention and interest of the district administrations, victims have got justice and are rehabilitated properly indicating the importance of this legislation.

Case Law Findings

Tula Devi and others v. Jharkhand state (2006 (3) JCR 222 Jhr)

Around 10 people armed with sticks stormed the complainant's house in this case, threatened and attacked her. For the past two years, they used to address her as a dayan and pressured her to leave the village. Her husband tried to save her, but they attacked him as well. This provoked mental anguish in the woman. There was also a partition suit and the woman was accused of being a witch to put pressure on them. Nevertheless, the court dismissed the case due to the absence of an eyewitness.

Madhu Munda v. Bihar state (2003 (3) JCR 156 Jhr)

Some individuals dragged a mother out of her house. It was confirmed that she was missing. A FIR was filed and she was found eight days later. She said that she had been pushed into a ditch where she had fallen unconscious. She went to her brother's house after she regained consciousness. The defendant was also acquitted in this case because of the witness's unreliable evidence.

West Bengal state v. Kali Singh and others

The Calcutta high court observed that in cases of witch-hunting, judicial execution does not help eliminate the evil practice. The practice and belief

are embedded in the psyche of men. The court gave the death penalty to seven men convicted of killing three women rumoured to be witches. The court also held the state irresponsible in fulfilling its obligation to provide education in every corner of the nation.

Research Methodology

The research focused on both primary information and secondary data sources. The primary data included information obtained from focus group discussions (FGDs), observation, case study analysis, and interviewing the key informants/ stakeholders which was processed and analysed to compile the case studies elaborated in the key findings.

Secondary information included newspaper reports, research publications, NCRB data, information collected by various published sources and government departments. We also gathered information from the key informants.

Purposive sampling was used to select the victims in each of the villages from the districts, Ganjam, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagada, Kandhamal, Gajapati, Nayagarh, Nabarangpur & Baleswar. Keeping in mind the sensitive nature of the cases, we have taken immense care while collecting data from the victim(s). Some of these cases are recent and ongoing with accusers still being held in police custody and thus, we have taken necessary precautions to avoid conflict.

Location and Geography

Odisha, situated in the eastern part of India, is located between 17.780N and 22.730N and 81.37E and 87.53E covers an area of 155,707 square kilometres. It has a population of 41,974,218. The literacy rate of the state is 73.45% and has a sex ratio of 979 females per 1000 males.

As high as 83% of the total witch-hunting and witch-branding cases in Odisha are concentrated in Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Keonjhar, Gajapati and Ganjam districts. Besides, we have collected case

studies, stakeholders' interviews and FGDs from some other districts like Nabarangpur and Baleswar, which also have their share of witch-branding and witch-hunting cases. The chosen districts are socio-ethnically diverse and have the highest number of registered cases of witchcraft. Thus 102 case studies have been collected from 12 districts of Odisha.

Broad Objective

The main objective of the study is to highlight the cases of violation of women's rights due to witch-branding and identifying various underlying factors contributing to such horrendous crimes as well as to suggest a way forward to address these issues.

Specific Objective

1. To conduct qualitative evidence-based research on witch-hunting activities in the abovementioned districts of Odisha.
2. To understand the root cause of such a heinous practice and its effects on the lives of the inhabitants, especially women.
3. To discern the implementation and execution of the present legislation – Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013 – that aims to prohibit and penalise such activities in the state.
4. To disseminate the findings from in-depth interviews with the victims, accused, family members, investigators and district authorities in order to advocate proper awareness as well as to assist the survivors.

Research Tools

- » Observation – Qualitative research technique where researchers observe participants, villages, and ongoing behaviour in a natural situation.
- » Focus Group Discussion – This method was used to delve deep into issues around witch-hunting and the steps that can be taken to control it. Participants in the focus groups included villagers who were either supportive of the crime or against it. To avoid conflict, both the groups

were not mixed. We had prepared a list of questions in advance for the focused group discussions. Despite all precautions, there were conflicts in some of the discussions.

- » Case study – A case study is a research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real life context. It is an established research design that is used extensively in a wide variety of disciplines, particularly in social sciences.
- » Interview of key informants/ stakeholders – Stakeholder analysis (stakeholder mapping) is a way of determining who among the stakeholders can have the most positive or negative influence on an effort, who is likely to be most affected by it, and how one should work with stakeholders at different levels of interest and influence. Interview schedules, which included open ended questions, were asked to different stakeholders.
- » Secondary information (media reports of the last three years, articles and books, government data, especially NCRB), secondary research including materials published in research reports and similar documents. These documents were made available by public libraries, websites, and data obtained from surveys.

Limitations

The findings of this study came with many limitations. There was limited access to information. The local population that had witnessed the incident first-hand were not readily available to give a detailed description of the events. Moreover, people lacked an unbiased stand in describing the event, which caused hindrance in collecting a proper description of the event from a neutral perspective. Therefore, there was a lack of reliable data in some instances.

The people of the village are not always willing to open up or share the stories of witch-hunting to outsiders, due to deep-seated superstitious beliefs and internal village politics.

Ethics

- » Confidentiality, security: Sensitive correspondence is protected, such as publication papers or grants, survivor statements, commercial secrets, and records of patients.
- » Responsible publishing: The study is to advance research and scholarship not just to promote one's profession. Wasteful and duplicative disclosure is avoided.
- » Sensitivity: Sentiments of the victims were kept in mind and the interview was conducted with utmost care and respect. Keeping in mind the gravity of the situation, due care was taken.



Definitions

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. But 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. In a FGD in a village in Mayurbhanj in Odisha (18 October 2020) the ojhas are defined as, “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.”

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.”

Based on tensions related to land and property or jealousies, such a person would be an unsupported single old woman. 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.

Despite the lack of any evidence to suggest that a person is in possession of these supernatural powers 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. Witch-hunting is the deplorable tradition where women believed to cause harm are classified by ‘ojhas’ (witch doctors/ tantriks/ sorcerers) or groups of individuals as witches. They are subsequently hounded, exiled, flogged, abused, thrashed, tonsured, paraded naked through the village, forced to eat human excrement, and finally, in many cases, killed.

Review of Literature

This part of the research study includes the review of available literature, books, articles and research reports.

Govind Kelkar & Dev Nathan: Witch Hunts-Culture, Patriarchy & Structural Transformation (2021): The book encompasses 110 case studies of witch persecutions gathered by the authors and filed researchers between 2014

& 2016 from five Indian states of Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Rajasthan and Telengana. Also, the book includes findings of the analysis of the court cases related witch persecution by the communities.

The study has overall conclusion that almost between 95 to 100 percent of those persecuted as witches, were women. In addition, men were only involved as secondary as secondary victims, as husbands of the primary accused, their wives. In 50 out of 56 cases, the accusers were close relatives, while in 6 cases, they were other villagers, including, in one case, the village priest. The study depicts instances of both physical torture and killing in witch persecution, not just one or the other. It also mentions that witch accusation may be a result of jealousy, and also, the attempt to capture women's land and other property. The study has included cases, wherein after the death of the victims, their families and children are still ostracised and are referred to as a family of witches. When their children fall sick, no one helps them out. Also, there is no assistance from government, nor do they get any money from relatives. The village assemblies are often full of belief in witchcraft and carry out persecution of witches. However, not all witch accusations end in continued persecution of the accused. There have also been examples of successful resistance by the accused and their supporters, whether family members or the NGOs. The study evidently indicates that one of the key features of gender systems in most indigenous societies is the witch hunts of women, those women who in some ways attempt at transgressing the social norms, asserting their rights over land and property, or in the ways they or their households do better than others in the village. The fear of women being denounced as witches not only is embedded in their personal agency but also has made its mark on social, economic, and decision-making domains of formal and informal institutional structures. However, the study has also cases where indigenous women, in the societies have not been silent spectators of power and resources in male hand. There is a range of implicit and explicit ways in which they have manifested their individual and collective agency to claim their rights in the community. These women have fought for their rights over resources i.e. land and house, ritual, knowledge and decision

making in the community institutions. The study has captured different trajectories in the creation of patriarchy. In one there is an exclusion of women from the higher, ritual sphere of knowledge, an exclusion that is sustained through persecuting them as witches for attempting to break the taboo. In another trajectory the very knowledge that women possess of the ritual sphere is transformed from having been beneficial to society to being the source of evil. Witch persecution and hunting can take on the shape of both promoting accumulation or opposing accumulation. There are different moral economics or even culture, in conflict over here and witch persecution can play both brutal levelling and accumulating roles.

Witch Hunting in Odisha-Violation of Women's Rights (A Compilation of Case Studies), ActionAid Association: This study report published by ActionAid Association is a compilation of 24 case studies from Ganjam, Gajapati, Mayurbhanj, Sundergarh, Keonjhar, Malkangiri, Koraput & Rayagada. In this process of study, the survivors along with the community leaders, PRI members, women leaders, lawyers, social activist, people of NGOs were interviewed. The study reveals that the majority of victims of witch-branding were women above 30 years at the time of occurrence of the incidence. Land grabbing has been identified as one of the major reasons of branding a women as witch. Gate Munda from Kalho Hundula village under Joda Police Station of Keonjhar District was branded as witch and she was killed by her neighbor Nidhi Munda for the purpose of grabbing her land. Also, Hemla Malma, a 55 years single woman of Koraput district was branded as witch and she was killed further by her nephew Kushan as she asked for the money in lieu of land. In the same way Balli Murum aged about 55 years of Mayurbhanj district was beaten up badly accused as witch. And she was forced to sell her land to the black magician as she was ordered by the villagers to visit Gaya and give a feast to the villagers. Also, it is found from the case studies of Ganjam District that people from other district like Nayagarh perform the role of witch doctor in a bid to earn handsome amounts of money. But in most of the cases of Ganjam district, people from Nayagarh have performed the role of witch doctor to identify the witch and the villagers have collected good amount of money from each household and paid to the witch doctor.

Among the survivor whose case study was collected, despite the case against the offenders and arrests made, survivor continue to face stigma and live in fear and exclusion. Triveni Chanda was accused as witch, beaten up badly and forced to eat human excreta. Her house was looted, and all her assets, gold, silver, money, and many more household things taken from her house. Triveni finally she went to her father's house. She became a social outcast with even her own relatives reluctant to talk to her. The couple is now homeless and without any income, they are now forced to work as a labourer. No action was taken by police against the villagers. So Triveni filed a case ICC 9/2011 U/S-200 CrPC on 1st October 2011 against the villagers. As a result, the police have arrested one witch hunter, and another accused person. However, things remain the same for Triveni and her family: her daughter has had to stop her education; they are forced to live in a rented house outside the village; they are unable to cultivate their own land.

The study recommends to build awareness on campaign mode as preventive action by the state government, undertake a review on the effective implementation of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013; develop schemes to rehabilitate the survivors, monitoring of witch-branding cases by Odisha Human Rights Commission as cases of human rights violation, undertake special drive in high prevalence district by the district administration needs to monitor the issues mobilising the community leaders and PRI members, inclusion of rationalist idea, thoughts in school curriculum, periodic review of the existing law by Odisha State Commission for Women

Witch Hunting in Assam: Practices, Causes, Legal Issues and Challenges, Jehirul Islam and Afruzara Ahmed (2017): It explores the causes of witch-hunting in Assam. From 2006 to 2018, over 1,700 women died in Assam due to rape, dowry, and witch-hunting. In most of these cases, women were branded as witches by villagers, forced to leave the village and live in an isolated place. Modernisation could not reach those sections of the society who indulged in such heinous crimes. The authors believe that the actual number of witch-hunting cases is four times more than what has

been recorded officially. They believe that the law must be changed to make witch-hunting a criminal offence.

The practices of witch-hunting are increasing by the day as per the reports of various NGOs and social activists. At present, these practices have led to other directions, such as gaining popularity and several economic and political reasons. There are several reasons for witch-hunting and witch-branding. Most prominent and dangerous issues are the traditional beliefs attached to it. People are reluctant to easily give up their traditional belief system. Such heinous crimes exist due to lack of proper laws and poor execution of existing laws. This social menace is different from other similar offences. Special laws are required to cure this social menace and all stakeholders must join hands to tackle the issue of witch-hunting. It is necessary that the state and central governments must take note of the issue and mobilise sensitising people in this regard.

Witch Hunting: Alive and Kicking. Dr. Rakesh K Singh (2010): It says witch-hunting is a medieval practice in India. The more helpless and marginalised the people, the more vulnerable they are to manipulations by those who use superstition, power, and religion. In many rural communities with limited or no access to heredity, witch hunters often use the services of ojhas to further their cause. Often witch hunt serves as a powerful tool in the hands of upper caste men who want to persecute assertive Dalit and Adivasi women directly challenging caste hegemony or subverting local power equations. "In situations where a woman is a widow or a single woman, there is no shortage of people eyeing her land," writes the author. The cruel irony is that their hopelessness gets exploited, and their desperation is encouraged.

In 2008, 175 cases of witchcraft-related murders were reported from several states of India. Jharkhand had the dubious distinction of reporting 52 witchcraft-related deaths. These are mostly conservative and underreported estimates. The real situation must therefore be much worse, writes Ravi Agrawal.

Women's rights groups have been raising public awareness about this problem in India. There are at least 12 states in India that are recognised as the breeding grounds for witch hunts. Three studies have addressed witch hunts in India and provided data relevant to its surges and fluctuations over time. There have been witch killings and police interventions among tribal communities from the 1950s through early 1980s.

More than 2,500 women have been killed in India in the past 15 years after being accused of practising witchcraft.

Witch-hunting in India? Do We Need Special Laws? Madhu Mehra, Anuja Agrawal (2016): The authors discuss a study on witch-hunting conducted by the Partners for Law in Development (PLD) in select areas of Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. The objective of the study was to generate evidence regarding contemporary trends of violence and victimisation in these states. The view is that witch hunt is a unique problem that requires interventions in the form of special laws. In August 2015, the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill was passed, treating it as a gender specific offence. The three states, which are the focus of this study, already had special laws dealing with 'witchcraft' and 'witch' related offences prior to this study. Several other states have enacted or are in the process of debating similar laws, and similar measures are increasingly being contemplated in other parts of the country. The study was initiated by the PLD and conducted in select districts and blocks.

Criminalisation and punishing those involved in witch-hunting is the most appropriate way to end superstition, harmful practices and provide redress to victims. The Maharashtra Act and the Karnataka Bill promote disbelief in unscientific medicine. These assumptions do not address the needs of the victims/ survivors associated with such violence. The only signs of such violence in NCRB are murder cases recorded as "motivated by witchcraft". The authors said, "What is urgently required are studies, which generate evidence about both social and legal aspects of the witch-hunting phenomenon". The authors said that there was no large-scale authoritative

data on witch-hunting in the Indian context (PLD 2013). The study was conducted in three states where special laws on witch-hunting had been passed, to create such an evidence base through which engagement with policies and related debates could be undertaken.

Of the 88 victims mentioned in the FIRs, 75 were female and 13 were male. In all, the police records and the reported judgments indicated 86% primary targets of witch-hunting to be women. Majority of the victims in the case studies belong to the age group of 40 to 60 years and are middle-aged and married women who are most vulnerable to witch-hunting. Land, property, jealousy, sexual advances, and other common sources of tension between social intimates are found in many cases. The instigator(s) of the violence are generally related to the victims through kinship, community or neighbourhood ties. The use of “supernatural” powers is invariably present in cases of witch-hunting. The violence used to target women fully ensconced in their marital homes appears to be a prevalent form of violence. In many cases, the tensions and conflicts exist prior to the entry of the ojha. Counter-narratives in every case make for a more complex understanding of witch-hunting than what the framework of ‘superstition’ suggests. The study was published in the journal, *Sociological Dimensions*.

In terms of factors and contexts that trigger witch-hunting, the study shows it to be one among many ways of settling scores. The motives of witch-hunting are not static or limited to superstition and belief in the occult. Violence and humiliation as a public spectacle are not limited to witch-hunting alone either. There is an increasing evidence of public retribution in cases of sexual transgression, intercommunity relationships, and honour crimes. Moreover, there is a pressing need for naming distinct offences like parading, tonsuring, and blackening the face, so that such acts are not trivialised as “simple hurt” and only evaluated in terms of the physical scars they leave. The study shows that the two forms of violence may coincide in some instances, even though we did not come across many such cases in this study. It raises the issue of whether special laws on witch hunt are useful and effective responses to the practice.

Blinded by Superstition: A Case Study on Witch Hunting, Maroof Khan (2017): The report talks about an innocent woman who lost her life after being accused of indulging in witchcraft. She was mercilessly dragged out of her house with her hands and neck tied, and kerosene was poured on her. A community meeting was called to demystify the event that took place. The poor frail lady begged for her life, but her pleas fell to deaf ears. Nature was a mute witness to men lighting a matchstick and setting her on fire, burning her alive in front of her rented house.

Witch-hunting in India involves branding of people as witches and the murder of those branded 'witches'. Victims are beaten, burned, forced to eat human excrement, and even raped. The victims are often ostracised and put to death in a brutal manner. In places like Jharkhand, elderly women live in fear of being tagged as 'witches' if their neighbours become ill or their livestock die unexpectedly. The cause of death could be an illness or lack of healthcare – all because people believe in superstition more than science. The practice has continued with increasing numbers of victims being killed. The Kharia women are excluded from religious festivities and rituals because tribal people fear that menstrual blood attracts evil spirits. These women are left out of rituals due to the fear against their sexuality, says Sashank S. Sinha in a research paper.

The Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act of 1999 was enacted in Bihar and was adopted subsequently by Jharkhand. The Act was to protect women from inhumane treatment and to give victims an opportunity for legal recourse.

In conclusion, we can say that witch hunts are based on false beliefs and deep-rooted mistrust.

A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law, Partners for Law in Development-PLD (2013): The report strives to explore and address the root causes behind such witch-branding and understanding what constitutes appropriate redress and recovery for those whose lives are marked by such targeting. The research has generated valuable data and

evidence that brings to light the contemporary picture and consequences of witch-hunting along with its interface with the law. The report is based on three sources of investigation: case studies on the survivors' lives, official records (such as police records) from block levels and registered cases on witch-hunting, and reported judgments from the high courts and the Supreme Court of India that pertain to the cases of witch-hunting.

It also sheds light on the working laws related to witch-hunting in three states, on the execution of the laws and witch-hunting with local context.

This study is an outcome of the need to eradicate such practices in the backward regions in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh. It was carried out through action research with the help of partner organisations. The data collected through all the three sources indicate that witch-hunting primarily targets women. The men who are targeted are largely secondary victims, who suffer collateral violence. Most of the targeted victims are married women in the age group between 40 and 60, who are found to be the most vulnerable to witch-hunting. It emerges that a very large segment of the perpetrators are related to the victims through marital ties. This suggests that witch-hunting also finds its roots within family disputes and stresses.

Victims usually hail from lower castes and communities and largely from the weaker socio-economic strata. It is a common pattern that the accused is generally related to the victim through kinship, community or neighbourhood ties. It is usually men of these societies who are instigators of witch-hunting incidents, but evidence of women being the same is also significant. Police records indicate the gendered nature of witch-hunting, reflecting forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Violence is inflicted not just to hurt the victim, but also to degrade and humiliate her through cruel acts, such as forced consumption of excreta and drinking of urine. It is noticed that most of the cases are mob violence involving more than one accused person making it a public form of violence. Interestingly, the appeals in court judgments are not about physical violence, but about murder. About 56 of the 59 cases involved murder. All 59 judgments of the

appellate court are appeals against convictions by the accused. It means that the state has not appealed against acquittal in any single case of witch-hunting.

The Indian Penal Code is frequently used to deal with offences of witch-hunting. Witchcraft laws in Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh criminalise preliminary acts such as “identifying any person as a witch”. Name calling, abusing the victim and nuisance caused by obscene songs are treated as ‘simple hurt’. Not only that, stoning, tonsuring, blackening of face, forced consumption of excreta are also treated as ‘simple hurt’. The study discerns the laws, examines the provisions that are often used, execution of the same on ground levels and scrutinises whether they provide redress that is proportionate to the nature and type of victimisation in the three states where the research was carried out.

Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: A Review of the Evidence, Jill Schnoebelen (2009): The research paper talks about accused witches who have been executed by hanging, drowning, and burning at the stake throughout history. Both men and women are at the risk of such accusations. Over the past decade children too are increasingly falling victim to such allegations.

This paper examines the link between witchcraft accusations and displacement. Accusations may cause displacement through forced exile or personal decisions to flee from the threat of harm. In contexts where witchcraft beliefs were held pre-flight, allegations may surface throughout the refugee cycle during flight, while in a camp or urban refugee setting, during repatriation or once resettled. Claims and counterclaims about activities of witches and sorcerers tend to exist in the background of community affairs in societies where such ideas are held. They flourish in shadows, fed by gossip and rumours, and emerge into public debate or develop into accusations only in times of specific tension.

This brings us to the discussion about the legal aspect of protection of refugees based on the claims of witchcraft accusations at the United

Nations Human Rights Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) workplace interactions at Kuala Lumpur and Canada. The Immigration and Refugee Board is noted with a brief reference to cases in which people claim to be the target of witchcraft by another.

Three reasons why accusation of witchcraft occurs:

- » Aimed at outsiders
- » Overcrowding or lack of mobility
- » Extreme conditions

Witchcraft beliefs are violent towards women. Moreover, traditional justice mechanisms may punish women or girls for offences that are not illegal under national or international law. In Sierra Leone, chiefs are not authorised to adjudicate on witchcraft cases, for which there is no crime in national Sierra Leonean law. However, many chiefs have illegally carried out such functions beyond their competency.

There are various problems including community unwillingness to name the perpetrators and the local policemen's belief of the accused persons' guilt. However, people are likely to actively oppose the witch murderers being tried as they believe that murdering witches actually facilitates community welfare. Any action taken by governments or aid agencies with a view to attempting to achieve legislating a solution must retain potential impacts, including forcing action.



Keonjhar

Keonjhar is one of Odisha's 30 districts having a predominantly tribal population. The administrative headquarters of the district is in Keonjhar town, which also has a municipality. The district is one of the five Scheduled Areas of Odisha. The Scheduled Tribes constitute 44.5% of the total population of the district while the Scheduled Castes constitute 11.62%. The concentration of Scheduled Tribes is the highest in the Keonjhar subdivision and lowest in the Anandapur subdivision of the district.

Case Study 1

Nephew murders his aunt over alleged use of witchcraft to harm his children

Year: 2020

An alarming incident took place at Kalanda village under Banspal block, which is about 67 km away from the district headquarters. Kalanda has 199 households with a total population of 883 – 385 males and 498 females. The village has a primary school and a community health centre (CHC) for education and healthcare services, respectively. At least 80% of the population of the village belong to the Scheduled Tribes, 13% to Other Backward Class (OBC) and 7% to Scheduled Castes. For their livelihoods, the villagers depend on forestry, daily wage, agriculture and animal rearing. Their agricultural practices also include '*podu*' cultivation that involves a cyclical clearance of the forest by burning certain patches to grow crops. Literacy in the village is low and exposure to the outer world is negligible.

Srikanta Dehury, a 49-year-old tribal man, lived in the village with his mother, wife, and two children – son, Sambhu Dehury (18) and daughter,

Jyotsnarani Dehury (21). He earned his livelihood from animal rearing, daily wage and agriculture. According to the villagers, the family was content having been blessed with two children. However, the daughter was reportedly suffering from chronic fever since childhood, which could not be cured even after several attempts at treatment. Besides, there had also been instances of the son suffering from fits of insanity. A fellow villager told Srikanta that his children might be sick due to the influence of a witch and suggested that he should get them diagnosed by an '*ojha*' (witch doctor). The *ojha*, after diagnosis, indicated that Raibari, the 38-year-old unmarried sister of Srikanta's father, was the reason behind the sickness of both the children. Srikanta warned Raibari to stop using malicious practices on his family. However, the health of his children kept deteriorating each the day. Concurrently, Srikanta met with an accident while riding his motorcycle and eventually had to undergo treatment. This took a toll on his mental health and he started showing symptoms of mental illness.

One day, when Srikanta was out in the field grazing animals, Raibari arrived and both of them had a row regarding their family matters. Srikanta firmly believed that Raibari was behind all the miseries that his family was enduring and that her goal was to occupy Srikanta's share of land. In a fit of anger, he is alleged to have attacked Raibari and killed her, the details of the murder were not clear due to lack of eyewitnesses. Soon after, Srikanta headed back home. The next day, Raibari was reported missing, and Srikanta was arrested by the police. He did not get any support from his community or family.

His daughter has now recovered from her chronic illness and is continuing her studies. She is also the only bread earner of the family. Nevertheless, his son's ill-fated condition remains the same. The family has been struggling to get Srikanta out of jail.

Raibari lived with Srikanta's uncle, Karuna Dehury in another house in the village. She was earning her livelihood through daily wage labour and intensive agricultural activities. Villagers seemed to view the reclusive

Raibari with suspicion and thought she was involved in 'mischievous' activities. They would constantly warn her against it. Her alleged acts and complaints from the villagers led to crystallisation of Srikanta's suspicion of her being involved in witchcraft. The incident was purely a family matter, which later changed into a witch-branding event due to the prevailing superstition among the villagers. As Raibari was unmarried, no legal actions have been taken on her behalf. On the other hand, Srikanta is now in jail and his family is financially incapable to fight his case in the court.

Observations:

- » Black magic and blind faith in witchcraft prevails in the village. The village *ojha*, Mangulu Dehury continues with his practice. However, his influence has decreased among the villagers over the years. People now visit hospitals and are more aware of medical science than going to *ojhas* to find cures. But, Mangulu's influence has been noticed in nearby villages.
- » Since the case of Srikanta is based on their family matter, the community action is silent here.
- » Insufficient infrastructure and awareness are the root cause of witch-hunting.
- » People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent witch-hunting events.
- » People said that no such incidents occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » No actions have been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to create awareness against the practice in the village.

Case Study 2

A couple is decapitated over suspicion that they possessed supernatural powers

Year: 2016

Saharpur village under Banspal block is about 37 km from the district headquarters. The village has 175 households having a population of 980. It has a school and a primary health centre (PHC). The block headquarters supports the infrastructure of a police station, a weekly market and another small market complex.

Around 89% of the population in Saharpur belong to Scheduled Tribes, 8% to OBC and 3% to Scheduled Castes. People manage their sustenance through forestry, daily wage and agricultural cultivation. Animal rearing and 'podu' cultivation also supplement their livelihoods.

Jema Dehury and her husband Rajan Dehury belonging to a scheduled tribe community and lived at the outskirts of Saharpur for a long time with their son and three daughters. She and her husband worked as daily wage labourers and often visited nearby villages for work. Villagers believed that Jema possessed supernatural healing abilities. They came to her for help when their children fell sick due to undiagnosed diseases. She was believed to perform mass pujas in front of the ghouls by chanting mantras for their recovery. Eventually, villagers believed, she acquired metaphysical power by practising witchcraft. Occasionally, they thought, her actions overturned and inflicted harm on others and her bizarre and superstitious practices were utilised to achieve privilege in the village and instill fear among the people.

Women accused Jema of being a *Chuini* (A witch who sucks the blood through thread or straw). They said that 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 talked to someone about them. People became so terrified of her that they hid themselves in her presence. The community urged her to halt her pujas/ mantras as they suspected the practices victimised the villagers. She did not pay any heed and proceeded with her practices. Since these activities enabled her to earn, her spouse also supported her. According to villagers, they suffered a lot due to her practices. This led to serious conflict between Jema and the villagers.

One evening in November 2016, as the village was celebrating the festival of Laxmi Puja, 11 villagers including a woman marched to Jema's house. They caught hold of her and beat her with sticks. Fortunately, her son and daughters were able to escape from the house and ran out to the forest to save their lives. Jema and Rajan were dragged out of the house and taken to the middle of the village. Both pleaded to be left alone and vowed to leave the village. But the attackers did not pay any heed to their pleas. In the end, the mob beheaded both of them with sharp edged weapons. The horrific incident occurred within minutes. The villagers then tossed their carcasses in the jungle to eliminate evidence. Someone from the village later reported the matter to the police, who recovered the bodies and arrested all the accused persons on the same night.

After six years, nine of them including the woman, Padmabati Penthei, were released from the jail while three of them still remain behind the bars. After the murder of Jema and Rajan, their children left the village out of fear and now reside with their uncle in Kusmita village. They are incapable of cultivating their own land. Today, they are continuing their studies and attempting to lead normal lives.

This practice is a manifestation that has ruined people's dignity, temperament, life, and property. The nine accused persons who were acquitted after remaining in jail for six years now work as daily wage labourers and transit outside the village for work to earn their livelihood. After their release from the jail, they are attempting to lead normal lives.

Observations:

- » Superstitions and blind beliefs are still prevalent in the village. But, the percentage of people believing in them has reduced.
- » Poor conditions, insufficient healthcare services and lack of awareness are the root causes of the existence of witch-hunting.
- » People are oblivious of the law and methods to deter witch-hunting incidents.

- » People explained that no such incidents occurred during the pandemic situation of COVID-19.
- » No action has been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to ensure such practices are removed from the village.

Case Study 3

An ASHA worker is humiliated for allegedly causing a woman's infertility

Year: 2013

Dominated by tribals, Singhpur village is situated in the middle of the Banspal block. It is about 57 km and 27 km away from the district and the block headquarters respectively. The village has 289 households with a population of 844 individuals, including 442 males and 402 females. It has a primary school. People depend on the CHC of Kalanda village as well as a PHC of the block headquarters for healthcare services. A police station is located at Nayakot, which is 10 km away from Singhpur. Collection of forest products, agri-business, and animal rearing are the primary livelihood sources of the villagers. 'Podu' cultivation is also a traditional practice followed by the villagers to fortify their family expenditures.

Boita Naik, 38, has been working as an accredited social health activist (ASHA) in Singhpur since 2013. Herself an Adivasi, she lives in the village with her husband and son, both of whom work as daily wage labourers. They also earn their livelihood from collection of non-timber forest products (NTFP), agriculture and rearing animals.

One day, her son and husband heard a noise while ploughing in their backyard. Her husband rushed inside and found another villager, Kalakar Dehury dragging Boita out of the house. Kalakar, his wife and some other villagers had come to his house armed with wooden planks. They were angrily calling Boita '*dahani*' (witch) and blaming her for hurting Kalakar's baby.

Enmity between Boita and Kalakar's family started when his six months' pregnant wife wanted an abortion and sought Boita's help. The ASHA obviously expressed her inability to help when the woman was at an advanced stage of pregnancy. Kalakar's wife got her foetus aborted at a local facility, which lacked professional expertise. It led to the deterioration of her reproductive health and Kalakar apprehended that she could not conceive anymore. He was disheartened and blamed Boita for his wife's suffering. He thought that Boita was a witch and she had cast spells on his wife. Later, he reached Boita's house with a group of villagers and started blaming her for practising witchcraft. The villagers blackened her face and made her parade through the village. Boita's husband rushed to inform the police, who were able to rescue her from the mob in time and arrested the attackers.

When the attackers were released after some time, the village committee called a meeting where they and Boita's family sorted out their differences. Now, Kalakar is striving to lead a normal life. Occasionally, he goes out of the village in search of work. His wife has been blessed with a child. Both earn their living as wage labourers. They also have a meagre property in the village. The whole episode indicates how women are more susceptible victims in tribal areas. Family disputes and caste-related conflicts are also some driving factors for such ghastly violence.

Observations (FGD at Singhpur ICDS Hall):

- » Myth, folklore, and blind belief are still prevalent in the village. But, the percentage of believers has reduced as compared to before.
- » Poor conditions, insufficient healthcare services and lack of awareness are the root cause of the existence of witch-hunting.
- » People are oblivious of the laws and the method to deter witch-hunting incidents.
- » People explained that no such incidents occurred during the pandemic situation of COVID-19.

- » No action has been taken by any agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell to dissuade the villagers from superstition.
- » It is obvious that the impoverished and defenceless easily fall prey to witchcraft/ sorcery related turmoil.
- » In such deplorable conditions, the only hope is for an optimistic change to be brought for a better tomorrow.

Case Study 4

A Gunia and his wife are decapitated in alleged practise of witchcraft

Year: 2013

Keonjhar is one of the most backward districts of Odisha and is dominated by tribal population. Banspal, located atop a hill, is one of the most inaccessible blocks of the district. Nearly 87% of the population of the block belong to the tribal, marginalised and other backward castes. Bhaliadiha is a hamlet of Luhakala, one of the most backward villages of Kadakala gram panchayat (GP) of Banspal block. It is about 62 km away from the district headquarters and 43 km from block headquarters. The village has 65 households with a population of 310. The location of the Bhaliadiha is in a geographically critical area. The undulated hills, dense valleys and presence of wild animals obstruct the development in the village. The geographical condition of the area makes it difficult for officials to reach out to the village. Agriculture is the main source of income for the people, which is meagre considering the lack of resources. Practice of traditional methods in agriculture has resulted in low production year after year. Every year people lose crops due to irregular and erratic rainfall.

Some people are also engaged in other income generating activities like small livestock farming, ginger cultivation and vegetable cultivation but due to financial problems and inadequate skills, they are unable to upgrade themselves. People depend on the CHC of Nayakote village and PHC of the block headquarters for getting health service. The nearest police

station is at Nayakote, 10 km away from the village. Around 30% of the population have been excluded from the poverty alleviation programmes of the government as they do not have Aadhar cards. There is an absence of hygienic sources of drinking water. People collect their water from dirty water bodies, which have very unsanitary conditions and that results in epidemics of many water-borne diseases.

Swapna Dehury, 45, lived in the village with his wife, Pulmani Dehury, 34, and son Ramesh Dehury, 13. They belonged to a scheduled tribe community. He earned his livelihood as a daily wage labourer in mining and forest areas. He also possessed a small agricultural land where he grew crops in the rainy season. Sometime back, Swapna engaged himself in pujas/ mantras and advised others about their good and evil deeds in the form of karma. Soon, he became a popular Gunia (occultist) in nearby villages. This practice supplemented their family income too.

Dhenu Padhan, 51, another villager lived with his wife and children. He also belonged to the same scheduled tribe community. He worked as a daily labourer and sometimes went out of his village in search of jobs. He was always worried about his son who was critically ill due to an unknown fever that had remained incurable even after several years.

A tragic double murder case due to superstitious beliefs ruined both the families. Teachers, ward members and villagers shared their views and opinions in the discussion relating to the double murder that occurred in Bhaliadiha in March 2013 due to blind faith and witchcraft.

An age-old practice, Krushna Guru Puja was being performed in the village. The puja was believed to eliminate issues prevailing in the village and find solutions for the same. According to the belief, on the day of Krushna Guru Puja someone got possessed by a spiritual power (usually a Goddess) and he/ she indicated the name of the *dahani* involved in any evil practices. Dhenu suspected Swapna to be the cause for his son's illness. He also suspected Pulmani's hand in it. On the day of the tragic incident, Dhenu

organised a Krushna Guru Puja to deduce the reason for his son's illness. As luck would have it, the possessed goddess spelt Swapna's name. Dhenu was made to believe that both Swapna and Pulmani were the cause for his son's misfortune. Enraged, he rushed to Swapna's house and started thrashing Swapna with a wooden cane. Luckily, their son, Ramesh was not home at the time. When Pulmani tried to intervene she also had to face consequences. The couple begged for mercy but it had no effect on Dhenu who slashed Pulmani's throat with a sharp weapon. Swapna became unconscious in shock but that did not stop Dhenu, who mercilessly beheaded him. After killing the couple, Dhenu fled into the forest.

Swapna's relative Banamali informed the police who recovered the bodies and arrested Dhenu on the same day. Following trial, he was convicted and handed over rigorous imprisonment of 14 years.

Some individual views:

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

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

According to Samal Munda, a teacher, Swapna and Pulmani never practised witchcraft. For some bizarre and mysterious reason, the villagers suspected them to be witches. It was merely because of superstition and folklore around witchcraft.

Observations:

- » Witchcraft is a belief strongly entrenched among the tribal communities, especially in vulnerable areas such as Bhaliadiha.

- » Women, being the weaker section, are easily humiliated by men. Not only in the mentioned village but also in many others, the grievance of such social evils exists. But people are apprehensive to take these affairs to the limelight.
- » Lack of awareness, ignorance and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system. But the percentage of believers has been decreasing after improved health access to villages.
- » It has come to light that during the pandemic situation no such incident occurred in Bhaliadiha.

Case Study 5

Woman's head is smashed by her uncle over supposed witching to harm his child

Year: 2000

Simnapatali is one of the hamlets of Sudanga village of Kadakala GP of Banspal block in Keonjhar. The habitation there is scattered and isolated. Nearly 93% of the population belong to tribal and marginalised categories while the rest are from OBC. Simnapatali, one of the district's more vulnerable villages having a high population of people below poverty line, is about 61 km away from the district headquarters and 29 km from block headquarters. The village, surrounded by hills and forests, has 35 households with a total population of 321. A primary school and an anganwadi centre at Sudanga cater to the education and health of the children of the hamlet. However, girl children are treated as liabilities and are not encouraged to go for education. Inadequate institutional facilities like health, education and administrative barriers seriously impede villagers' participation in the development sector. Agriculture and wage labour are the major sources of livelihoods for the villagers.

At least 10% of the people in the village, especially Munda tribal households, have been excluded from the poverty alleviation programme

of the government as they do not have Aadhar cards. Without a source of proper drinking water, people collect their water from *chua* (a small water body) and from *Gedughigi Nala*, which is nearby. However, these sources are in rather very unhygienic condition, which makes the people prone to water-borne diseases.

Bana Munda, 32, lived with his wife, and his three children in the village. He earned his livelihood from animal rearing, daily wage labour jobs and agriculture. He also owned a piece of agricultural land in the heart of the village. He had an otherwise peaceful life. But, his son had been suffering from an unknown fever since childhood and the family could not find a cure even after several treatments. Due to his financial inability, he could not take his son to the city for proper treatment.

As days passed, his son's condition worsened. In 2000, a fellow villager insinuated that the reason behind his son's prolonged illness might be black magic. He further advised him to go to the village *ojha* and find out who was behind his son's sickness. When Bana went to the *ojha*, the latter started chanting mantras and told Bana that his own niece (younger brother's daughter) Gunjari Munda (22) was behind his son's illness. A furious Bana repeatedly warned Gunjari to stop the alleged black magic practices that harmed his son. However, when the health of his son got worse by the day, Bana started assuming that Gunjari and his brother were conspiring to acquire his landed property after killing his son through black magic.

A quarrel started between them. In a fit of rage, one day, Bana smashed Gunjari's head killing her on the spot. He then threw her body in a field and left the scene. Not finding Gunjari anywhere, her father and relatives informed the police, who recovered her body from the field. Bana was arrested and sent to jail. Nobody from the community or his relatives supported him.

Bana was convicted in court and sentenced to 13 years in jail. Once he escaped from the jail and hid in the forest for two years before being

arrested again and sent back to jail. He was released after the completion of his jail term. Now he stays with his family but away from his property. The condition of his son is also said to be better now.

Some individual views:

According to Sukutu Giri (52), the practice of black magic existed, but Gunjari was innocent. Somebody instigated Bana to kill her.

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

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

Observations:

- » Witchcraft as a traditional belief still exists in the tribal communities.
- » People pay a visit to the apparent witches/ojhas for enquiries regarding the vulnerability of their land, health, agriculture, and cattle. Not only this village, but also many others live under the shadow of this belief.
- » The inhabitants are afraid of taking these affairs to the limelight. Sometimes, such matters are discussed only within their own community. Victims are then excluded from their homes, lands, sustenance, and other rights. These decisions have led to the violation of their human rights. Yet, these matters do not come under the jurisdiction of courts.
- » The awareness regarding the law is very rare. Ignorance and illiteracy are the root cause of this belief system. But the percentage of believers is decreasing after the villagers' access to healthcare services.
- » No such incident has taken place during the pandemic.

- » The civil society helps spread awareness in these areas about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act.

Case Study 6

A raulia and his wife killed over rumoured usage of black magic

Year: 2015

Gajapur village is located 24 km away from the block headquarters. The village has 92 households with a total population of 445, including 210 males and 235 females. Gajapur is located 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 liabilities and are not encouraged to go to school. Inadequate institutional facilities like health, education and administrative barriers seriously impede villagers' participation in the key development of the place. Not a single person of the village has completed his/ her higher education and has taken up a job either inside or outside the block or the district. Lack of proper knowledge on scientific techniques of cultivation, less exposure to technologies and skill-up-gradation process, lack of marketing ideas and low bargaining capacity have turned agriculture into a low-income sector in the area. Hence, wage labour is the major source of livelihood for most of the people in the village.

At least 20% of the population have no access to Aadhar cards, especially the Munda tribal households. As a result, they have been excluded from poverty alleviation programmes of the government. A tube well is the main source of drinking water in the village. Inability to meet the minimum food requirement has ultimately led to poor health conditions and exposed the villagers to various diseases.

Kalu Naik, 49, lived with his wife, Tara Naik, 38, and three children in the village. He earned his livelihood from forestry, daily wage labour and a small piece of agricultural land. Kalu was known as a *raulia* (wizard) as he

worshipped a sal tree in the forest and chanted mantras to cast spells on others to understand their problems and come up with possible solutions. People believed strongly in his supposed supernatural powers and often came to him for answers.

Bhatta Naik, 51, another villager, had a small piece of agricultural land and a few livestock including buffaloes and cows. Despite that, he worked as a labourer and occasionally went out in search of work. He had frequent exposure to areas outside the village. Thus, he was often worried about his cattle and crops during his absence. He was anxious about the death of his cattle and seedless crops. He was desperate to find an answer.

In 2015, during Ashtami festival, Bhatta went to Kalu's house. He dragged Kalu and his wife, Tara out and slashed their heads with a sharp axe, killing them on the spot. Nobody knew why it happened. Many speculated that Tara was a witch. They blamed her for the death of Bhatta's cattle and the destruction of his crops. Many outsiders prompted that Tara and her husband both practised black magic and called upon the devil to bring him misfortunes.

Villagers reported the incident to the police of Nayakote police station. The police recovered the bodies and arrested the accused. Bhatta was convicted for the murder of the husband and wife, and sent to jail.

Some Individual views:

According to Laxmi Dehury (42), Kalu and Tara were innocent. Due to biases and other instigations, Bhatta killed them. Alcohol and a toxic mindset were also the cause of this crime.

According to Suni Naik (45), Kalu's wife Tara was the real culprit. She practised witchcraft and cast evil spells to destroy Bhatta's crops and cattle. They were interested in grabbing his land. She agreed with Bhatta's reasoning.

According to Kami Dehury (35), they never practised black magic but the villagers suspected them to be witches. They instigated Bhatta due to superstition.

According to Radha Dehury (39), the couple was innocent. Superstition and instigation led to the unfortunate incident.

Observations:

- » Witchcraft as a tradition still exists in the tribal communities.
- » People consult supposed witches regarding the vulnerable situation of 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 of speaking about it.
- » Sometimes these matters only come to light when it is discussed in their own community.
- » Victims are excluded from their home, land, sustenance, and other rights. These decisions have led to the violation of their human rights. But still, such matters do not come under the jurisdiction of courts.
- » Awareness about the laws is rare. Ignorance and illiteracy are the root cause of this belief system. But the percentage of believers is decreasing after improvement in healthcare access.
- » No such incident has taken place during the pandemic.

Case Study 7

A widow is by her sons for allegedly witching them

Year: 2020

Kishan Sahi is a hamlet of Pitapiti gram panchayat (GP) under Harichandanpur block. It comes under the Harichandanpur police station and is located 34 km away from the district headquarters and 6 km away from the block

headquarters. Kishan Sahi, Tangarpasi and Dhobasahi hamlets come under the anganwadi centre at Mahanta Sahi.

Kishan Sahi has 109 households with a total population of 457 – 218 males and 239 females. People of this village mostly belong to the tribal community. They migrate in search of livelihood. Wage labour and part-time farming are the most common occupations in the village. The village has a compact habitation for each caste. Besides a primary school, the village also has a high school. People prefer to go to the block headquarters and the district headquarters to receive adequate health services.

Lochan Kishan, a daily wage labourer, lived with his wife, Bulari Kishan in his paternal village of Kishan Sahi along with his two sons, Rajan Kishan and Brundaban Kishan. Lochan had an untimely death leaving his wife alone to raise their children. She struggled a lot to survive and to provide a decent life to her children. Now, both of her children are happily married. Rajan is aged 27 and Brundaban, 25. Their wives also work as wage labourers to supplement their family income. Even at the age of 57, Bulari is still working to earn. After her sons' marriage, she lives alone.

In 2020, her younger son, Brundaban fell sick and was taken to the hospital at the block for treatment. Later, he was referred to the district headquarters hospital at Keonjhar. When his health did not improve, his wife was worried.

Meanwhile, one of their neighbours told her that someone might be casting spells on him. Rajan also said that he sometimes observed his mother behaving abnormally. Both the brothers suspected their mother to be a witch. Brundaban came to believe that she cast evil spells on him and that was the reason for his 'incurable' ailment. In October 2020, Rajan and Brundaban, along with their family members, attacked Bulari when she was going to sleep. They dragged her out of the house and brutally beat her with wooden sticks, severely injuring her. They accused their own mother of indulging in witchcraft and held her responsible for Brundaban's health condition. Bulari claimed to be innocent and pleaded with them to let

her go but it was all in vain. She however narrowly escaped from there and went to the police station. She lodged a complaint against both of her sons.

The police came to the spot with Bulari and arrested both Rajan and Brundaban on the basis of her complaint. Later, the community people got to know about the incident and nobody supported them for their ruthlessness and mistreatment of their own mother. After the intervention of police and community people, everything is normal now. Bulari lives in the same house and Brundaban's health has improved after medical treatment. Rajan repents assaulting his mother.

Individual sharing:

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

According to Rajan Kishan, the son of Bulari Kishan, his mother was innocent. He regrets suspecting her without any reason. He now repents his actions.

According to Jala Naik (37) Bulari never practised black magic. No one however knows who provoked both brothers to suspect their mother as a witch. The incident was unexpected.

Observations (FGD):

- » Champabati Naik (ward member), Pravat Sahu (villager) and Dharani Sethy (teacher) shared their views. According to them, customary practices and a backward belief system cause such evil crimes. Without any exposure to the outer world, the people live in isolation.
- » Lack of education and awareness resulted in the incident of witch-branding. Not only here but in other inaccessible villages, the grief of this blind belief system persists.

- » Sometimes innocent ones are victimised and excluded from their fundamental rights.
- » According to the members present, awareness of the prevailing act is low.
- » Lack of knowledge and illiteracy are also the key contributing factors. There is a need for intervention to create more awareness.

Case Study 8

A man beheaded by a few minors over suspicious use of black magic on children

Year: 2016

Sukdola is a remote village dominated by Bhuyan and Munda tribes. A few households belong to OBC and general castes. Sukdola is located about 46 km away from the district headquarters and 14 km away from the Bansapal block headquarters. Under the Nayakote police station, the village has 180 households with a population of 933 including 455 males and 478 females. Geographically, the village is situated amidst hills and forest beside arable homestead land for agriculture and vegetation. People of the hamlet are either small farmers or daily wage labourers. Most of them are below the poverty line. The habitation in this area is scattered and isolated. A primary school and an anganwadi centre are there to provide healthcare and education in the village. For better treatment, people prefer to go to the block and district headquarters. A few have frequent exposure to places outside the village or access to public service providers like teachers and panchayat workers.

Ratna Naik, 42, lived with his three sons and wife at the outskirts of the village. He was hard working and healthy. They led a peaceful life until an unfortunate incident destroyed their lives. One of the relatives of a villager, Mitrabhanu Dehury, had fallen sick. They took the 7-year-old boy to the village *ojha* instead of taking him to the hospital. The *ojha* told the

boy's relatives that Ratna might have cast black magic spell on the boy. Mitrabhanu, who is just 14-year-old, discussed the matter with his friends and all assumed that Ratna was practising black magic and as a result, the boy's fever could not be cured. Enraged, they wanted to punish Ratna. In January 2016, during a marriage ceremony, Mitrabhanu and his friend, Pradeep Thakur, 15, invited Ratna for a drink.

After the drinking, Ratna did not return home. One of Ratna's younger brothers, Dinabandhu Naik, a primary school teacher, searched for him along with other villagers but could not find him anywhere. Finally, they reported the matter to the police. After an extensive search, the police discovered Ratna's body from a cave in the forest after 12 days. His head was found severed from the body, apparently due to a strike from a sharp axe. Police also seized the weapon used for the murder from the forest.

The police arrested Mitrabhanu and Pradeep on the charge of the murder. During the investigations, the teenagers admitted to killing Ratna. They were sent to the juvenile home in Rourkela as they were minors.

Individual sharing:

According to Debananda Thakur (43), an eminent person from the village, Ratna was not a witch. His family was innocent. His brothers and relatives were well educated too. Due to heavy drinking on the unfateful night, the personal quarrel took an ugly form leading to Ratna's murder. On the other hand, without proper healthcare services, the boy was wrongly treated by the village quack and, after one and a half years, he died. It shocked Ratna's family as well as the families of Pradeep and Mitrabhanu.

Observations and findings from FGD:

- » According to Swapna Naik, 44, the elder brother of Ratna, superstition around witchcraft is deep rooted among the villagers and no step has been taken to raise awareness among the people against such beliefs.

- » Ward member, Budhan Senpati said that witch-hunting is more prominent in socially and educationally excluded parts of the society.
- » Kailash Padhan argued that panchayat leaders had been negotiating and discussing such emerging issues that lead to violence.
- » People consider witch-hunting to be a social threat, especially to those identified as witches. It damages their reputation and lifestyle.
- » Sometimes the police do not find out the motive except that the victim was suspected to be a witch.
- » In tribal culture, age-old tradition and liquor addiction is responsible for this social evil.
- » According to the present members, no such incident took place in their village during the pandemic.
- » There is a law to safeguard the people, but they are unaware of it.
- » Present members suggested taking rigorous action to educate the excluded villages to eliminate this superstitious system.

Case Study 9

A family tortured and killed by villagers suspecting them of witching their health

Year: 2017

Rangamatia is a hamlet of Phulajhar village of Banspal block. It is one of the most populated tribal villages with a higher number of people below the poverty line who earn their livelihood from farming and non-farm agricultural activities. Habitation is scattered and isolated. Nearly 79% of the population belong to the Scheduled Tribes. Other households belong to OBC and general castes. It is a mining affected area. Ardent Steel and Sree Metallic operate in Dudhposi village which is adjacent to Phuljhar. The village is about 37 km away from the district headquarters and 24 km from the block headquarters. Presently, the village has 128 households

with a population of 701 – 344 males and 357 females. Besides a primary school, the village also has a high school. People depend on the block as well as the district headquarters for healthcare services. Lack of proper knowledge on scientific techniques of cultivation, less exposure to technology, skill up-gradation process, lack of marketing ideas and low bargaining capacity have rendered agriculture as a low-income sector in the area. Hence, wage labour in mining and employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act are their major sources of livelihood, besides animal rearing. The poverty alleviation programmes of the government exclude 12% of the population as they do not have Aadhar cards. Tube wells and the government's water supply project are the source of drinking water for the villagers.

The witchcraft related violence occurring in the village involves the family of Bamia Pradhan, aged 55. Bamia lived with his wife, Gangi Pradhan, aged 50, and five children including two sons and three daughters in the village. He earned his livelihood from mining and forestry as a daily wage labourer and also from his small patch of rain-fed agricultural land. As Bamia and Gangi often engaged themselves in *pujas*, community people suspected them to be practising witchcraft. People were especially doubtful of Gangi's supposed supernatural involvement. For Bamia and Gangi, their ceremonial activities were just another source of income to their family.

In the village, Kaira Sinku also lived with his family and relatives. Kaira was suffering from a recurring fever. His relatives tried to provide him with adequate treatment, but his condition kept worsening. His nephew, Laxman Sinku took him to Cuttack for better treatment. But he could not be admitted in the hospital as doctors said he was at his last stage and there was no hope of him getting cured. They advised Laxman to take him back home. Kaira died soon after he was brought back to the village. Braja Sinku, one of his relatives, suspected Bamai and Gangi for Kaira's death. He conspired with a few other villagers to attack Bamia's family.

In 2017, Mangal Munda, Satari Munda and some other villagers went to Bamia's house at night, dragged him and Gangi out and severed their heads

with a sharp axe. Both died on the spot. When their eldest son opposed them, they attacked him with a bow and arrow. They also dragged their daughter, Risa Pradhan (23) and brutally beat her up. The attackers fled the scene after she lost consciousness. The couple's gravely injured eldest son was admitted in the hospital and recovered after six months. Risa 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 brutal attack but cleverly distanced himself from the crime. The police arrested Mangal and Satari, who were convicted in the court and sentenced to 14 years in jail.

Some individual views:

According to Kuntala Naik (35) all these are blind beliefs. The family suffered a lot, specifically the surviving girl, who has not yet recovered from the trauma.

According to Sujan Munda (35) they never practised black magic. The villagers suspected them to be witches. Some unscrupulous people created a vicious atmosphere against them.

According to ward member Sunakar Hasda (29), the reactions of Kaira's relatives were legitimate. Bamia was a branded witch. Besides Bamia, his wife and their eldest son were also practising witchcraft.

Observations and findings from FGD:

- » It is obvious that witchcraft as a tradition still exists not only among the tribal communities but also in OBC communities.
- » People used to go to ojhas to enquire about their sufferings related to health, land, agriculture and cattle rearing. People have no other source to enquire about solutions, so they end up going to ojhas. But, they do not want this to be brought to light.
- » Sometimes, matters are discussed and resolved within their respective communities. Victims are denied from their home, 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 the percentage of people believing in it is decreasing after the improvement in healthcare access to villages.
- » Villagers also informed that no such incident had occurred during the pandemic.

Case Study 10

A young man murdered over death of a child by alleged witchcraft

Year: 2019

Sukdola village of Jatra GP under Banspal block has a mix of different cultures. Rugudisahi is a hamlet and ward of Sukdola. The area comes under Nayakote police station. Bhuyan and Munda tribal people comprise most of the population of the Rugudisahi, which also has a few OBC households. It has 46 households having 352 persons –171 males and 108 females. Geographically, hills and forest surround the village along with a little arable agricultural land. People are engaged in animal rearing, vegetable cultivation and wage labour to supplement their family income. Here, most villagers are under the poverty line and their habitation is scattered and isolated. The primary school and anganwadi centre in the village provide education and healthcare to the children.

Bhadra Padhan, a 23-year-old young man, was murdered in Rugudisahi in 2019 on the suspicion of being a practitioner of black magic. Bhadra was the eldest of two sons and a daughter of his parents. Though he was uneducated, he still had a better exposure to outer societies and cultures. As per their customary practice, he sometimes did pujas offering gratitude to their traditional deities in the forest and at home. The area had a tradition of inter-village feast celebration. Every summer, one village/ hamlet invites another to enjoy a feast in another village/ hamlet.

Trouble started for Bhadra when a girl fell ill and died even after being taken to hospital for multiple treatments. Thereupon, an old woman behaved abnormally and said that someone took the girl's life using black magic. In June 2019, the feast celebration was organised and Rugudisahi hosted Thakursahi village. That year the women self-help group (SHG) members were tasked with all the responsibilities. They finished the celebrations before evening and bid farewell to the villagers. But, Bhadra did not return home. Next day, people found his severed head hanging from a pole at the outskirts of the village. A village meeting was called and the sarpanch informed the police about the incident. Following a search, police found his headless body in an abandoned field.

Two villagers, Jayaru Naik, 19, and Ganeswar Naik, 14, were arrested on charge of murdering Bhadra. Police also seized a sharpened axe from the forest. Jayaru is now in Keonjhar jail. Ganeswar, being a minor, has been sent to the juvenile home at Rourkela. The villagers say that the duo reportedly killed Bhadra, on the day of the feast, after the old woman 'identified' him as the person who had cast black magic on the girl who died.

Individual sharing:

According to Kalu Dehury (45), Bhadra was not a *gunia*. His family was innocent. The woman who 'identified' Bhadra must have had some personal grudges against him.

According to Padmini Mahanta (39), a villager, Bhadra was innocent. That girl died due to untimely and adequate healthcare. She had never seen any doubtful activities done by Bhadra. She did not know who spread the misinformation about Bhadra and she was taken aback by his death.

Observations and findings from FGD:

- » According to ward member Deleswar Naik, 34, villager Pradeep Padhan, 41, CDS worker, Budhan Senapati, and teacher, Kailash Pradhan, liquor is the root cause of all sorts of violence.

- » Many people not only in Sukdola but also nearby villages believe in black magic. They have a strong faith in village *ojhas* and witchcraft.
- » People have no idea about laws like the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act. Due to multiple misunderstandings and lack of awareness, many innocent lives are offended, stripped of their fundamental rights and even killed in cold blood.
- » We have also come to know from the villagers that no such incidents have happened during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » Members present suggested that intensive actions should be initiated to eradicate such superstitions completely.

Case Study 11

A *raulia* forced to migrate multiple times over her rumoured involvement in witchcraft

Year: 2009

Rukmini Padhan, 49, lives in Khunbandh village of Tentalaposi GP under Harichandanpur block of the district along with his son Jayan Padhan and a grandson. She came to take shelter in the village after being driven out from elsewhere on the suspicion of being a witch. Jayan is the sole bread earner of the family. He earns his livelihood from his small agricultural land and as a daily wage labourer.

Around 28 km away from the district headquarters, Khunbandh has a mixed population. Agriculture is the main source of income for the people, but it is dependent on monsoon. Some people are engaged in other income generating activities like small livestock farming. People depend on the CHC of Janghira village and also the PHC at the block, which is 24 km away from the village, for healthcare services. The police station is at Harichandanpur. The village has a primary school as well as a secondary school.

Before coming to Khunbandh, Rukmini lived with her husband, son and three daughters at Mangalpur, a village under Banspal block. That village was geographically inaccessible and populated by the Bhuyan tribal group.

Mangalpur has a tradition of Krushna Guru puja. Often, Rukmini engaged herself with puja and cast spells to understand people's problems and come up with possible solutions. Gradually, she came to be known as a raulia in the village. People believed in her abilities and thus consulted her for solutions to their problems.

Tura Pradhan, 42, of Mangalpur worked as a wage labour and sometimes went outside in search of work. He had a small piece of agricultural land and a buffalo. Once, upon returning home after a long work trip, he found his buffalo moribund. His crop had also faltered. He was worried and desperate to find the cause and solution for it. Somebody told him Rukmini's black magic might be behind it.

In 2009, Tura and some other villagers went to Rukmini's house and started beating her. They dragged her out and tried to hit her head with a sharp axe. Her husband opposed them and the commotion attracted other villagers to the spot. Nobody knew what provoked Tura and his relatives, who paraded Rukmini around the village. Tura asked her to leave the village and threatened to kill her entire family if she dared to return to Mangalpur.

After leaving Mangalpur, Rukmini went to stay at Dumuria village, inhabited mostly by Juanga Adivasis, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). Rukmini again started her pujas there. In the meantime, her husband passed away leaving her alone with her children. In Dumuria too misfortune dogged Rukmini. The only daughter of a villager, Siba Juanga, suffered from fever. When she did not recover for a long time, Siba suspected Rukmini to be the root cause of his daughter's illness. He accused her of being a witch. Many outsiders told him about Rukmini's background in Mangalpur and convinced him that Rukmini practised witchcraft and black magic. They said that she was trying to kill his daughter. One day, Siba called a village

meeting and accused Rukmini of harming his daughter. They decided to punish her. Fortunately, Dhusa Gadua, an eminent person of Khuntbandh village, was there for his work. He rescued Rukmini from the villagers and gave her shelter at Khunbandh village.

Some individual views:

According to Bainsi Juanga (52), of Mangalpur, Rukmini was innocent. Due to her being from another village and other instigations, the villagers had plans to punish her brutally. She did puja but did not harm others.

According to Jema Pradhan (35) of Dumuria, Rukmini was the real culprit. She practised sorcery. She did black magic to destroy people's agriculture and cattle and wanted to kill Siba's daughter. She accepted Siba's reaction at Dumuria village.

According to Dhusa Gadua (65) of Khunbandh, they never practised black magic. Villagers suspected them to be a witch. They were just rumours.

According to Jayan Pradhan (39), son of Rukmini, his mother was completely innocent. Superstitions and gossip resulted in this unbelievable incident. God saved them for their terrible fate.

Observations and findings from FGD:

- » People still believe in their superstitious values and traditions. The Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013 is unknown to many. If they were aware of it, Rukmini would not have been assaulted and humiliated. But, many villagers still fall victim to these social evils.
- » Many times, people decide upon these matters within their own community. Victims are stripped of their homes, land, food, and other rights. These decisions lead to the violation of their basic human rights.
- » Most of these matters do not come under the jurisdiction of the law. Awareness about the law is rare.

- » Ignorance and illiteracy are the root causes of this belief system.
- » We also came to know from the villagers that no such incident occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case Study 12

A woman's hand lacerated by a villager suspecting her of witching his daughter-in-law

Year: 2019

Madinipur is a village of Jamjodi GP under Harichandanpur block. The village is about 34 km away from the district headquarters and 10 km away from the block headquarters. It has 36 households with a total of 202 persons – 107 males and 95 females. Most of the families of Madinipur are OBCs and a few are tribals.

The village has a high number of people below the poverty line. Wage labour is the main source of livelihood for the villagers though some earning comes also from farming and non-farm agricultural activities. The habitation here is scattered and isolated. There is a primary school and an anganwadi centre to cater to child healthcare and education. The government's poverty alleviation programmes exclude 5% of the population due to the absence of their Aadhar cards. Tube well is the main source of drinking water. The failure to meet the minimum food requirement leads to poor health and increased exposure to various diseases.

Padmabati Mahanta, aged 45, lives with her 49-years-old husband, Kantamani Mahanta, a son and a daughter in a thatched house in the village. Both Padmabati and Kantamani are graduates but the latter is the sole bread earner for the family. He teaches at a private school near the village. Besides, they also have a small agricultural land and a few cattle. The son and daughter study outside the village. Kantamani lives in the school premise, which is about 11 km away from their village.

One of their neighbours, Chanchala Mahanta, aged 35, was quite friendly with Padmabati. She had some mental health conditions that needed treatment. Her father-in-law, Shiba Mahanta, was always worried about his daughter-in-law's illness. Shiba knew that Chanchala and Padmabati were close and the former often visited the latter's house in her free time.

A villager told Shiba that Padmabati practised witchcraft and was planning to murder his daughter-in-law. Shiba was doubtful of Padmabati being a witch and asked Chanchala not to be friends with her. But Chanchala did not bother about the warning and continued to meet Padmabati. Then, Shiba went on to threaten Padmabati to stay away from his daughter-in-law. But, she too did not pay any heed to it. As days passed, however, Chanchala's mental condition worsened.

One day in April 2019, Shiba found Chanchala talking to Padmabati while bringing water from the tube well. He could not tolerate Padmabati's friendliness towards his daughter-in-law. He picked an axe, rushed towards them, caught hold of Padmabati's right arm and slashed it. He was trying to sever her head with the axe when people gathered around and stopped him. It was clear that Shiba would have killed her but she narrowly escaped with a bleeding arm due to the intervention of the villagers.

Shiba was arrested after villagers called the police. Nobody supported Shiba for his aggressive behaviour. After some time, Chanchala passed away without receiving adequate treatment for her mental condition. Shiba was later found to be guilty of his crimes. After being released on bail, he is trying to lead a normal life but the criminal case against him continues.

Individual sharing:

According to Jadumani Mahanta (51), Padmabati and her family were innocent. They were unaware of who instigated Shiba.

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

According to Kantamani Mahanta (49), husband of Padmabati, he never saw any doubtful activities by Padmabati till today. She is simple and innocent. It is not known why Padmabati was branded as a witch. Further investigations could reveal the intentions behind it.

Observations and findings from FGD:

- » According to Kunda Kishan (28), a ward member, Golap Mahanta, an ICDS worker and Arjun Sahoo, a teacher, not only Madinipur but many other villages are also victims of this social evil. They gave an example of Pitapiti village, which is only 3 km away from theirs.
- » People were afraid of the police taking notice of such incidents.
- » It is a matter of ignorance and lack of awareness.
- » They indicated that even as a teacher, Kantamani was unaware of the laws like the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act. According to them, many innocents were victimised and stripped off their homes, food and other rights.
- » Age-old tradition and blind faith in their belief system are responsible for these social evils.
- » According to the villagers, no such incident took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » They suggest more actions must be initiated to eliminate this social stigma.

Stakeholders' Interviews: Keonjhar

S P. Keonjhar

Mitrabhanu Mohapatra, the superintendent of police, Keonjhar, is respected for being an honest, sincere and efficient police officer. His down to earth approach has made him popular among the people in the district. Discussing the witch-hunting practices that prevail in Keonjhar district, he explained that the people of Keonjhar still believed deeply in it. In the name of witchcraft, numerous murders by beheading have taken place in

the district. People have reported many cases of murders and attacks and efforts have been made to give appropriate punishment to culprits. There have been times when these communities have forced the victim to eat human excreta and have ostracised them from society. People have not registered many 'minor' offences in the police station.

There is always a tug of war between the laws and traditional belief systems. In some cases, customs and traditions outrun the law. When a child throws tantrums, we generally tell them a fictitious story based on witches or '*dayan*' to deter the child. A child, therefore, learns about a witch from their childhood. It is now deeply rooted in our beliefs and becomes a product of evil.

Laws do exist to prevent witch-hunting in the state. Due to lack of awareness about law at community level, people still believe in these evil practices. We should run programmes at the community level with the involvement of locals; only then any plan would be fruitful. With this in mind, we should localise our strategies.

Ojhas are abettors in these incidents. Not a single *ojha* has been punished due to the lack of evidence. During the pandemic, witch-hunting cases have been even more normalised. The current legal stance is insufficient to deal with witch-hunting cases. Normally, single or widowed tribal women are branded as witches. Community-level awareness is essential to curb this evil practice. The state must promote scientific outlook and development among the people.

DSP (Crime)

Suresh Patra is the DSP (crime) in Keonjhar district. When he was asked about the incidents, he replied that tribal people believe in the *ojha* instead of the hospital. It has been a traditional practice for ages. When anyone suffers from any disease, they turn to an *ojha*. When Jay Narayan Pankaj was the SP of Keonjhar, he had launched many awareness campaigns with the help of local police stations. Without the engagement of civil society

and media houses, the message is not carried to the grassroots levels. Moreover, these awareness activities are restricted to town areas only. Exemplary punishment is essential and an intensive awareness programme is also crucial to change such types of practices.

We have the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act in our state, yet educated people continue to believe in *ojha*. We must change their beliefs first. The *ojha* does not have any qualification but takes advantage of the gullibility of common people. These *ojhas* earn a decent amount of money by practising their so-called craft. They should receive an equal amount of punishment like the primary culprit.

Particularly in the rural areas, women groups support these traditions rather some women burden the victim by branding them as witches in the community. We must promote scientific temper among the people for them to understand the unnecessary practices of witch-hunting and witch-branding. A coordinated effort is required to change the attitude of people.

Local NGO

We held discussions with Bhakta Baschhal Mohanty, a social activist and head of one of the local NGOs, SANYOG, regarding his long experience in tracking witch-hunting and witch-branding, prevalent in Keonjhar. It is observed to be more widespread and deeply rooted in tribal dominated areas. He personally does not believe in such evil pursuits. He further stated that it is an outright blind faith that has established fear in the hearts of the people without any scientific reason.

It was further discussed that in Keonjhar, a tribal widow who lives alone is often designated as a 'dahani' or witch in her locality. Most of the time, it is done to take away her property. If a child or a member of the community suffers from any illness, then the woman becomes an easy target to blame. Eventually, anger begins to spread in the community, then they take drastic steps against her. They beat her up, force her to ingest human excreta and ostracise her from society. In some cases, many alleged witches are even

beheaded. In extreme cases, their entire families are sacrificed for 'greater good'. Lately, if any individual suffers from a disorder, they are first taken to the *ojha*, 'disary' or 'dehury' of the village. Locally in Keonjhar, people refer to an *ojha* as *disary* or *dehury*. The belief system of the locality against that woman becomes strong when the *ojha* declares her as a witch.

The Odisha government framed a law in 2013 to prevent witch-hunting in society. However, due to the lack of awareness, this superstitious activity continues to exist. There has been no coordinated effort to spread awareness either. Witch hunting is rampant due to the ill-intention of the traditional leaders or the *Kula Samaj*. It is, therefore, the duty of the district welfare officer (DWO) and the welfare extension officer (WEO) of the blocks to take up the responsibility of spreading awareness. Widespread awareness of law is vital to deter witch-hunting practices in our society.

Anganwadi worker

Sabitri Patra of Manohar ICDS sector under Harichandanpur block shared her experiences. She lives among the communities of people who believe in the practices of witch-hunting. She also speculates that such practices are credible for some cases yet not for all. She said that witch-hunting cases are more prominent in the poor and downtrodden communities like Adivasis and Dalits. One can discover instances in the Mahanta communities as well though they are among the advanced groups in terms of culture and tradition in the district.

Twenty years back, witch-hunting and branding were widespread in almost all the pockets of Keonjhar district but now they have declined to some extent. If people suffer from illness, they go to the local *ojha* for traditional treatment rather than to a doctor. If the patient continues to suffer then people believe that the suffering is due to a witch's spell. It is a psychological perception that whatever unfavourable incident occurs in the locality, it is the evil work of a witch. Inherently, people find a hapless person, mostly a woman, and start ill-treating her and her family. Although laws have already been formulated to prevent witch-hunting, due to lack of implementation

and harsher punishment, the practice continues to be extensive. Adequate awareness of the law is required to stop this malaise.

Academician

Dr Niladri Bihari Mishra is a well known academician and researcher of tribal culture as well as language. When witch-hunting practices of the Keonjhar district were discussed, he said that they have existed for the past 500 years. During those times, individuals worshipped nature and believed in the existence of supernaturalities like ghosts and ghouls. To protect oneself and one's family, they learnt the time-honoured knowledge of satisfying those unearthly existences. Occasionally they killed animals like buffaloes, hens and even humans to appease the evil power to protect themselves and their kin. Over the years, blind faith in ghosts transformed into the human form of a witch or dahani in the community. It has instilled fear in their hearts through generations. Since the time of aristocracy and monarchy, the witch-hunting system has existed in society. Such beliefs have reduced to a great extent with the availability of modern medical facilities. Yet the *ojha*, *disary* or *dehuri* continues to play a significant role in many villages.

The Odisha Government framed legislation against witch-hunting in 2013. But people dwelling in the tribal regions are oblivious of the law. They continue to believe in the practice of witch-hunting. Education is the greatest weapon to fight such ignorance. Constant work has been done in the past 40 years to eliminate this practice from the tribal communities. Moreover, Dr. Nidari observed that households, which were educated and had decent connections to townships did not believe in witches. Illiterate individuals who have had no formal schooling still depend on *ojhas* in times of sickness. Even after being released from jail, the culprit continues to depend on *ojhas* and harbour ill-intentions towards the widow considered being a witch.

The practices of witch-hunting can be rooted out of our society when every member would be conscious of their actions and is educated. Tribals are

orthodox and shy away from modernity. Therefore, education and massive awareness of the law is essential to change the attitude of people.

Lawyer

Dusmanta Kumar Jena is a respected lawyer proficient in the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013. He has had grassroots level experiences in dealing with such types of cases. During the discussion, he pointed out that a witch, locally known as *dahani* or *dayan*, was believed to have superhuman and evil powers causing harm to a person or his property. His first opposition included the sexist definition of a witch where a man was not a part of the latter. The law has been drafted with adequate provisions for penalty and punishment. However, the severity of the same is not increased when a person commits the crime repeatedly. The cases of witch-hunting only attract the attention of the police and the courts when the crime committed is grave. Otherwise, almost all the cases are disposed off locally.

When a community brands a woman as a witch, she must bring it to the attention of lawmakers immediately. This would secure her dignity, the right to life and property. If this isn't done, the woman will lose to the organised crime of society. In many villages, it is not just the woman who is targeted but her family also suffers a grievous fate. Thus, exemplary punishment is highly required to check the spread of such practices.

The role of an abettor is just as significant. They should receive an equal quantum of punishment. Witch hunting cases are reducing by the day due to the advancement of science and technology. Moreover, we expect massive awareness camps about laws to help curb cases. We must employ coordinated efforts for the message to reach the inaccessible pockets of the state where illiteracy and superstitious beliefs are prominent. Furthermore, quality and equitable education in the densely populated tribal pockets is essential. The reformation will eventually come to be when more people are educated.

Mayurbhanj

Mayurbhanj is the largest of all 30 districts of Odisha. It has its district headquarters at Baripada. Other major towns include Rairangpur, Karanjia and Udala. As of 2011, it is the third most populous district of Odisha after Ganjam and Cuttack. The tribal population of the state is 8.15 million, which constitute 22.13% of the population and comprise more than half the population of Mayurbhanj.

Case Study 1

Woman is murdered for alleged use of witchcraft on a fellow villager's son

Year: 2014

The state government's efforts to end witchcraft related violence has not yet yielded desired results in Mayurbhanj. Attacks on women over the suspected practice of witchcraft are on the rise in remote tribal inhabited pockets of the district.

Jambani village is a part of Badasimulia revenue village of Jadida gram panchayat (GP) under Kaptipada block of the district. It has 109 households dominated by Adivasis. There are 352 males as compared to 358 females. The village has a total of 97 children, aged 0-6.

On 28 August 2014, a 42-year-old woman, Sumi Singh was brutally murdered in broad daylight in Jambani on suspicions of being a witch. The person responsible for her murder was Bajju Singh of the same village. Bajju's son, Tirsi Singh was suffering from terminal fever. Instead of going to the hospital, Bajju opted for local hands-on treatments that were not effective at all. Presuming witchcraft influence as the reason behind his son's illness, Bajju took him to a gunia who confirmed his fear. Bajju recollected that Sumi had once suggested to him that he take his son to the hospital for better treatment as his health condition was deteriorating. Bajju took her

well-intentioned advice otherwise and suspected her to be a witch who intended to harm his son. He was also alleged to be an alcoholic.

Under the influence of alcohol, he attacked and murdered Sumi when she was working alone in a field. Her husband, Mangal Singh later found her body in the field while searching for her and reported the matter to the police. After an investigation, the police arrested Bajju and he was sent to jail. However, he was released from jail after three years due to lack of evidence. He now resides in the same village with his family. He does not repent murdering Sumi and continues to believe that he saved his son's life by killing her.

On the other hand, Sumi's husband, Mangal, was affected by tuberculosis. The local anganwadi worker, Madhabi Singh and an accredited social health activist (ASHA) helped him immensely with his treatment. Fortunately, he is doing well now. The daughter of Mangal and Sumi was five-year-old when Sumi was murdered. When her father was affected with tuberculosis, there was no one to provide for her and she repeatedly fell ill. She was taken to the Kaptipada hospital and later to Baripada district headquarters hospital with the help of the anganwadi workers and NGO activists. Unfortunately, she succumbed to her illness and passed away.

Sumi was the second wife of Mangal. She was from Mahulpunga village, 15 km away from Jambani. Three other women from the same village had gotten married into families in Jambani. According to them, Sumi had no connection with activities related to witchcraft. The cook of the local school and a self-help group (SHG) member, Sankari Singh ruled out the possibility of Sumi Singh being a witch. They believed that she was murdered and there existed no such thing as a witch; it was mere superstition. The witch doctor influenced the male members of the tribal community and brought up such allegations against women, they said.

After the death of Sumi, Mangal Singh remarried but he still lives in fear thinking Bajju might harm them again. While collecting information and

interacting with the people, it was observed that they have an opinion that the district administration should take steps to do away with these superstitious beliefs.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and often the blame is put on a vulnerable person, mostly a woman when there is a health issue.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people continue to visit gunia or ojha for their treatments.
- » The District Collector had started a drive for awareness generation. He had proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to keep a close watch on such cases. However, the proposal never materialised after his transfer from the district.
- » Many villagers think that the administration has not taken enough steps to inform people about the law.

Case Study 2

Woman forced to pay compensation for allegedly using witchcraft

Year: 2019

The incident occurred at Sanajupala village of Chakradharpur GP under the Kaptipada block of Mayurbhanj. Near the Simlipal National Sanctuary, Sanajupala has 97 households, consisting of 262 males, 251 females and 113 children, aged 0-6. Located about 35 km away from the block headquarters, the village is comparatively under-developed in terms of health, education, and other development indicators. It lacked any connectivity to the outside world until recently. The only road that connects it to the nearest town was built five years ago. As a result, people visited gunias during health emergencies due to their deep-rooted superstitious beliefs. The habit persists even after the introduction of connectivity.

Sambari Tudu, aged 43, wife of Sabala Tudu, is an inhabitant of the village. The villagers believed that every year since the past ten years, during the 'Punei' festival, primarily observed by the Santhal tribe, Dasi – a goddess of Santhals – possessed Sambari's body. On several occasions, villagers found Sambari wandering about 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 roused suspicion in the minds of fellow villagers of her being a witch. In 2019, some youngsters of the village attacked and injured her. The villagers held a meeting where they decided that she would receive punishment for practicing witchcraft with a fine of ₹2,500. They suspected that Sambari might harm their families. She was eventually boycotted and continues to be treated as a witch.

Sambari hails from a poor family that primarily depends on agriculture, collection of non-timber forest produces (NTFP) and daily wage labour. She has a son and a daughter who are studying in the village school. For the collection of relevant data, the ActionAid team interacted with some villagers, including Hira Soren, Basanti Soren, Chandray Soren, and Mahadev Soren. However, they were reluctant to provide unbiased information about the events that occurred.

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

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and often targets vulnerable people on the basis of it when there is a health issue.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people here continue to visit the *ojha* for treatments.
- » The district administration's drive for awareness generation started by a former collector has come to a halt. His proposal to form a rapid

response team at the block to monitor witch-hunting/ branding cases has not been implemented at the ground level.

- » Many villagers think that the administration hasn't taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 3

A widow barred from her socio-economic rights over witchcraft allegations

Year: 2014

Suba Bhendaria, aged 54, is a widow living in the Salachua Colony hamlet, a part of Salachua revenue village of Salachua GP under the Kaptipada block. Her husband, Sukura Munda passed away recently. She has two daughters. The elder daughter is married and lives with her in-laws. The younger unmarried daughter is 19-year-old and lives with her mother.

Salachua Colony has 98 households most of whom belong to the Scheduled Tribe community. The population of the village comprises 110 males, 124 females and 140 children, aged 0-6. Besides the tribals, the village also has people from Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Class (OBC) and general castes. The belief system around witches, witchcraft, sorcery, black magic and witch doctor still persists in the village.

Suba has been perceived as a witch by people in the village for a long time, much before her husband's death. Her activities have always been under the radar. Villagers claimed to have seen Suba talking to herself, many a time. People started speculating that she was a witch. When anybody suffered from fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, dysentery, or other diseases, they claimed that it was due to Suba's witchcraft. If she happened to visit a family when they ate, many members would complain about digestive problems. Due to such speculations, her neighbours stopped interacting with her. As Suba belongs to a marginalised family, her primary means of livelihood was daily wage labour. When she was branded as a witch, villagers stayed away from her and isolated her. Nobody was

willing to hire her, thus worsening her condition. The isolation and constant verbal accusations have affected her mental health.

What is worse, frontline service providers like ASHA Manasi Majhi, anganwadi worker Tanuja Sahu and SHG members of the same hamlet such as Debajani Biswal, Tapaswini Madhei, Minati Aruk, Sampati Biswal and Sukanti Biswal also believed that Suba was a witch. Moreover, other reputed people like the sarpanch of the GP, Sandu Sing, ward member, Sarbani Biswal and community head, Balia Jena also had similar thoughts.

As a result, Suba is now in a neglected and distressed condition. She is not getting benefits from government plans and schemes. Based on the social activist's version of the story, the development actors, and the panchayati raj institution (PRI) representatives do not associate with Suba. Their superstitious belief in witchcraft blinds them. Her family lives in a broken tile-roofed house with mud walling and without any doors. Although the family fulfills all the criteria for the government housing schemes like *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna* and *Biju Pucca Ghar Yojana*, she has not been considered for a house. Suba being a widow is also entitled to a widow pension but she is not a beneficiary of the scheme. Suba's daughter is also debarred from socialising with others. The people in the locality look down on her as she is the daughter of a supposed witch. As the sole bread earner of her family, Suba finds herself in a vicious cycle of socio-economic discrimination and human rights violation. She needs immediate help and support to get out of extreme poverty.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and targets a vulnerable person, mainly a woman, when there is a health issue.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people here continue to visit the ojha for their treatments.
- » The administration had started a drive for awareness generation. A former collector had proposed to form a response team at the block

to track such cases. The plan never materialised after his transfer from the district.

- » Many of the villagers think that the administration hasn't taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 4

An ASHA and her mother forced to leave the village over witchcraft allegations

Year: 2017

The poor and marginalised women of our society are abused, tortured and their rights are violated in the name of punishment for practising 'witchcraft'. At times they are thrown out of their homes and are ostracised for the alleged dark magic practices.

Such an unfortunate incident took place in the Bidyadhar Nagar village of Salachua GP under Kaptipada block of the Mayurbhanj district. An elderly woman, Tulsi Bindhani, a survivor of witch-hunting, was forced to leave the village due to constant harassment and threats from the villagers. Due to such harassment, her daughter, Bhanumati Nag, who works as an ASHA in Bidyadhar Nagar, also had to leave her home. Bhanumati lived with her husband, Raju Nag and and her three children – a 14-year-old son and two daughters aged 11 and 5 respectively. Due to prolonged illness, Bhanumati's husband passed away in 2015. As Bhanumati was living alone at her home as a widow, she called her mother, Tulsi, to look after her children. She came to her daughter's place and lived there for two years taking care of her grandchildren.

In 2017, Sangita Soy, a neighbour, went for a family planning operation after Bhanumati's persuasion. Soon after the operation, she fell sick for two weeks and did not recover for long. Being a neighbour, Tulsi occasionally visited Sangita's residence. She got to know from one of the family members about Sangita's illness and suggested some treatment that

might be helpful. Tulsi's late husband Bhaskara Bindhani was said to be a practitioner of black magic. Thus they suspected that Tulsi might also be into witchcraft.

Another woman of the village, Roy Soy's wife, also fell ill. They suspected that Tulsi was a witch who was behind Roy Soy's wife's illness. Due to this suspicion, the husbands of both the women ganged up and tortured the 70-year-old Tulsi. They severely 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 auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) asked Bhanumati about her lack of interest in her duties. Bhanumati narrated her plight to the ANM. The ANM informed the medical officer of Kaptipada community health centre (CHC). The officer conducted a meeting in the village and tried to convince the people about the superstitions. They proposed villagers to look for better treatment for Sangita and the other woman. However, the meeting did not have the desired impact on the villagers. Instead, they threatened Bhanumati and her mother for informing the medical people. They warned them to shut their mouth and stay away from the police. The medical team planned to lodge a police case, but the villagers did not let it happen.

Later, with the initiatives of Nauru Soy and Gaira Soy, the headmen of the village, a meeting was held in the GP in the presence of sarpanch Sandu Singh, ANM and the medical team. In the meeting, the villagers argued and, at last, decided that Tulsi should leave the village and not go for a police case. Eventually, Tulsi left the village.

Now Tulsi stays with her son in his village. After Tulsi, Bhanumati also left the place and now stays at another hamlet of the same village, 3 km away. She lives with her brother-in-law and his family members.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and often points fingers at vulnerable people when there is a health issue.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people here continue to visit the ojha for their treatments.
- » A former collector had started a drive for awareness generation. He had also proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to keep a close watch on such cases. However, after his transfer from the district, the activities have slowed down.
- » Many of the villagers think that the administration has not taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 5

Woman socially and economically ostracized over allegedly witching people's health

Year: 2017

Sanjonpura is a village of the Chakradharpur GP under the Kaptipada block situated near the Simlipal Tiger Reserve. It is 35 km away from the block headquarters and 55 km away from Baripada, the district headquarter of Mayurbhanj. The village consists of 97 households with 262 males, 251 females and 113 children. The majority of the villagers belong to the Santhal tribe.

Agri-business and daily wage work are the prime sources of livelihood of the families residing in the village. An anganwadi centre and a primary school are there in the village, but it lacks proper healthcare and educational provisions. A pucca road was constructed in the village five years back. It is connected to Udala in Kaptipada that is 35 km away from the block headquarters. Even in this modern era, the villagers opt to go to a *gunia*

and sacrifice animals to cure ailments instead of paying a visit to a doctor or going to the hospital.

Pama Murmu was a resident of Sanjonpura. Her husband, Tapa Murmu had died four years before the incident. She now stays in another village after being driven out from Sanjonpura on the charge of being a witch.

Pama was rumoured to be a 'carrier' of the soul of Dasi, a local deity, during religious occasions or marriages. However, in around a decade, people started speculating that it was a part of her witchcraft activities. If anybody from the village suffered from fever, dysentery or any other health problems, they deduced that it was due to Pama's witchcraft. Some young people of the village believed that when the *gunia* treated his patients, he saw the portrait of Pama. Thus, the *gunia* often deduced that she was the reason behind his patient's illness.

Gradually, the villagers of Sanjonpura became extremely displeased with Pama Murmu. They ostracised her and none of the villagers kept contact with her assuming that she would harm their families with her black magic. Due to the social boycott by the villagers, Pama was forced to leave Sanjonpur in 2017 and shifted to another village, Itagarh of J.S. Jamudia GP, around 2 km away, with her two sons and two daughters. She has not been included in any government schemes like the *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana* for construction of a house or *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* for construction of a toilet despite her destituteness. Nobody from the village including the ward member, ASHA or anganwadi worker came to her aid. All of them suspect her to be a witch. Nevertheless, no such proof has been established by any person of the village against Pama.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and often points fingers at it when there is a health issue.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people here continue to visit the *ojha* for their treatments.

- » The majority of the victims are women, especially widows
- » A former collector had started a drive for awareness generation and proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to monitor such cases. However, the drive has slowed down and the proposal never materialised after his transfer from the district.
- » The administration has not taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case study 6

Couple gave birth in an orchard after being forced to migrate due to witchcraft allegations

Year: 2016-17

The life of Parbati Murmu and her husband, Chaitan Murmu became cursed due to the superstition of witch-branding. For three years, her family was ostracised by the villagers and forced to live like outsiders. Even when she gave birth to a baby, she had to do it under a tree in an unclaimed mango orchard. After an Odia newspaper published the news, the health administration rescued and admitted them to the district headquarters hospital in Baripada.

Parbati and Chaitan are the inhabitants of Jualikata village of Shyamashundarapur GP of Bangiriposhi block. Parbati herself told the centre administrator of Sakhi-One Stop Centre that her own family members branded her as a witch in 2015-16 and threw her out of the house. The couple had to roam around villages for shelter till their pathetic situation attracted the media's attention. After the intervention by One Stop Centre, her life became better to some extent.

She said, "My husband and I were staying in our house. One day, the uncles of my husband – Orap Murmu, Dabli Murmu and Bhima Murmu – beat me up after suspecting me to be a witch. They drove us out of the house."

They protested their uncles' action and sought the help of other villagers and consequently a meeting was held to discuss the matter. However, the villagers supported her in-laws and ordered the couple to leave the village. As it was then impossible to stay in the village, they decided to leave and went to her sister-in-law's house. She gave them shelter. "But after a few months, our nephew, Ratei Hansda asked us to leave over similar suspicions," Parbati said.

Then, they went to Kanchiasole village and stayed there for some days in a rented house, but the house owner over there also asked them to leave after sometime. They went to their uncle's house in Jambadi village but left the place again and stayed at Takatpur village for some time. It was getting difficult for them to make ends meet; hence they moved to Kolkata in search of work. After returning from Kolkata, they stayed at their uncle's house where Parbati got pregnant. Meanwhile, her uncle got the news of her being a 'witch' from other relatives. He was furious and ordered them to leave the village.

With no options left, the couple went to the forest to save their lives and stayed there. Their life was far from normal there due to the curse of witch-branding. The forest personnel displaced them twice. By the time her date of delivery approached, they arrived at the weekly market complex of Chuapani and settled there. Yet again people drove them away. Finally, they went to a mango orchard near Chuapani village where she gave birth to a baby boy on 23 October 2019. After six days of the delivery, a villager, Sukra Singh found them in distressing condition and gave them food and shelter.

She also shared her story with a reporter of the Odia daily newspaper, Prameya. After the publication of the news, a medical team arrived and took them to the Bangiriposhi community health centre and then to the PRM Medical College and Hospital. While Parbati was at the hospital, she appealed to the Sakhi-One Stop Centre of Mayurbhanj for assistance. The OSC of Mayurbhanj intervened in the case and informed the police. They held a meeting at their village and convinced the villagers to let them stay.

Most of the frontline workers and people's representatives like ward members, anganwadi workers, ASHAs and the sarpanch did not support Parbati. Instead, they sided with the culprits. To root out such incidents, there is an urgent need for massive awareness drives in the district and implementation of the law.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches. The blame is often put on a vulnerable group when there is a health issue.
- » People continue to visit the gunia for their treatment rather than going to hospital.
- » The majority of the victims are women. The majority of the villagers side with the culprits. The case comes to limelight only when taken up by the media.
- » The administration had started a drive for awareness generation. A former collector had proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to monitor such cases. However, the proposal never materialised.
- » The administration has not taken enough steps to create awareness among people regarding the law.

Case Study 7

Man stoned to death for allegedly witching a fellow villager's son

Year: 2018

In 2018, during Biswakarma Puja celebration a football match was going on at Bidyadhar Nagar, a hamlet of Pathanipaka village of Salachua GP under Kaptipada block. As the match continued, an altercation between two villagers – Surendra Patra and Jama Sijui – began. Soon it escalated to a fight and the two men threatened to kill each other. The next day, Jama was found dead and Surendra, his neighbour, became the prime suspect of the murder.

The police arrested Surendra along with two others – his neighbour Nidhi Hembrum and another person. They revealed that Jama was stoned to death by them. Though some issues related to playing cards were the spark to the violent incident, the background was connected with allegations of witchcraft.

Jama's mother, Pangila Sijui was rumoured to be practising witchcraft and black magic. She had died two years prior to the incident. Surendra always suspected that Jama also practised the same and was behind his son's ill-health. Therefore, there was continuous hostility and enmity between the two.

The police lodged a case and all the three accused persons are now under trial in the Udala jail. Jama's wife, Rupa Sijui and his three children now stay in another village, Katuri Grama under the same block. However, hardly anyone in the village is concerned about Jama's murder. Most of the villagers remain convinced that Jama was a practitioner of black magic. They have more sympathy for Surendra and his accomplices. Villagers, in fact, are hesitant to talk about the topic to the outsiders.

It is suspected that Jama's mother had also been murdered but at the time it was cited as a natural death.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and whenever there is a health issue, the reason is attributed to it.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people continue to visit *ojha* for their treatments.
- » The Mayurbhanj district administration had started a drive for awareness generation and a former collector had proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to keep a watch on witchcraft cases. However, the proposal never materialised.

- » The administration has not taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 8

Widow murdered by nephew for allegedly causing his father's death by witchcraft

Year: 2018

Basa Murmu was a widow from Thakurasahi hamlet of Badasimulia revenue village of Jadida gram panchayat under Kaptipada block. In 2018, she was murdered on the allegations of being a witch.

Before her death, she was living in the village with her six children. Her two elder sons are married. The rest – daughters, Sakhi Murmu (17), Dhani Murmu (15), Rupai Murmu (12) and son Hadia Murmu (10) – are leading a miserable life after her death. The eldest son, Padan Murmu is the only earning member of the family.

Basa's husband, Chabi Murmu had an elder brother, Kaila Murmu, and a younger brother, Rabi Murmu. In 2018, around three weeks before Basa's murder, Kalia suffered from fever and died without receiving proper healthcare. Kalia's son, Siba thought that a witch had caused his father's death. He suspected his widowed aunt, Basa, to be the witch. As per Basa's eldest son, the enmity between Kalia's family and Basa's family had started two years earlier regarding the purchase of a piece of land. Basa had objected to Kalia buying that land. They often quarrelled and it was the reason why Siba accused his aunt of witchcraft and eventually plotted to murder her.

On the day of Rakhi Purnima in 2018, Siba attacked Basa when she was returning from the market with groceries. A police case was filed and Siba spent two years in jail before being released on bail. He is now living in the same village. The case is pending in the court. Some villagers believed

that not only Siba his uncle, was also involved in Basa's murder. However, Siba claimed that he killed his aunt alone and denied the involvement of anyone else in the murder.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches. In case of health ailments, the blame is often put the the most vulnerable people of the community/
- » People still continue to visit the ojha for their treatments.
- 3. Majority of the victims are women, especially widows.
- » The Mayurbhanj district administration had started a drive for awareness generation. It was an initiative by a former collector who had proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to monitor such cases. However, the proposal never materialised after his transfer from the district.
- » The administration has not taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 9

Man's body found burnt after being stoned to death over witchcraft speculations

Year: 2014

A terrifying murder related to witch hunt took place on 5 February 2014 in Rajatnagar village of Ranipokhari GP of Kaptipada block. The police arrested the accused people and they underwent a trial in the district court. It was found that Bhanja Mohakud, who stayed at Rajatnagar in his father-in-law's house, had enmity with Laduram Deogam of the same village because the former suspected that the latter was practising witchcraft and trying to harm him and his family. Six months before the murder, he had quarrelled with Laduram in this regard.

Three days before the murder, both got drunk on '*handia*' (country liquor) and fought with each other. Later, when Laduram went to the forest, Bhanja followed him and crushed Laduram's head with a rock. Laduram died on the spot. After killing him, Bhanja took the help of three other villagers including Naga Sing, Sudam Deogam and Sahu Deogam to burn his body in the forest. After Sande Sing Deogam, the elder son of Laduram, did not find his father anywhere, he lodged a complaint at the Sarat police station. The police found the victim's half-burnt body and sent it for post-mortem. They also arrested the accused following an enquiry.

Bhanja had already been accused of another murder earlier. After being back from jail, he settled in Rajatnagar. The villagers said that Laduram's murder was part of a witch hunt. They did not support Bhanja for killing Laduram. Nevertheless, they have preconceived mindsets and believe in the concept of witchcraft, witch-hunting, sorcery, and black magic.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches.
- » Rather than going to the hospital, people continue to visit the ojha for the treatments.
- » A former collector was instrumental in starting a drive for awareness generation but it fizzled out after he left the district. He had proposed to form a rapid response team at the block for monitoring such cases. However, the proposal never took off.
- » The administration has not taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 10

A victimised family rescued from an ojha after a month

Year: 2017

Kalia Sahi is a village in Pingu gram panchayat under Kaptipada block.

There are 120 Santhal households in the village. Champa Soren, widow of Chhatra Soren, lives in the village with her three sons Ram Soren, Mangal Soren and Bhala Soren.

Champa consulted an *ojha* from Balidar village of Majhigadia gram panchayat to treat her mentally ill son, Mangal. The witch doctor, Chhotray Murmu, asked the family to leave their son with him for a month for treatment. In the process, Mangal was exploited in various ways. The *ojha* did not provide him with sufficient food and made Mangal work incessantly to build his house. Moreover, Mangal was also taken to a cremation ground for odd practices and was locked up without outside contact.

The family was asked to pay ₹5,000, a hen and a goat for the treatment of their mentally ill son. The treatment was to be done through the chanting of mantras and offering prayers to deities. However, there was no change in Mangal's condition. On 12 March 2017, Champa went to Chhotray Murmu's home along with other family members and stayed the night. The next day, Chhotray conducted a puja in front of the photographs of the Goddesses, Tarini and Durga, and warned that a witch in the form of a human was living in their family. He said that the next person to get injured would be the said witch.

During the puja, the *ojha* lit a fire in front of the family. One of his accomplices pushed Champa towards the fire, as a result, she burnt her face and right palm. Chhotray declared that Champa herself was the witch. Another person claiming to be a *baba* tried to convince the family that they should diffuse the situation there, otherwise their son would face a worse fate. The gullible family was held captive there for days. After a few days, one of the family members sneaked out of the house and managed to call a relative. Fortunately, few of their relatives and neighbours arrived on the spot and rescued them from the *ojha*. All of them were immediately admitted to the sub-divisional hospital in Udala. There was no improvement in Mangal's mental health either.

Soon, the family filed an FIR at the Kaptipada police station. The *ojha* is now absconding (till the filing of the case study). The police have learnt that he is a serial offender and has committed several crimes in the name of treatment. Upon discussing with villagers, we found that a 16-year girl from another village went to the *ojha* with her father to cure an extra flesh growth on her leg. The *ojha* asked her father to leave her in his care for 10 days. When the father returned after 10 days, the girl informed him that he had raped her. However, they had not filed a complaint about the matter.

Observations:

- » The existence of witches is a vital part of the community's belief system that allows targeting the vulnerable women as witches whenever there is a health issue.
- » Rather than visiting the hospital, people here continue to visit *ojha* for their treatments.
- » Many *ojhas* who exploit people go scot free and are not convicted under the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013. It is unfortunate to know that these cases are not filed under FIR charges. That may be the reason why there are no laws like *habeas corpus*. These *ojhas*, after committing heinous crimes, are set free in society with a chance to commit more such offences. Even if they are punished, the charges are minimal with no follow up on the case.
- » A former collector had started a drive for awareness generation and proposed to form a rapid response team at the block to closely monitor such cases. However, the proposal had failed to materialise.
- » The administration has not taken enough steps to make people aware of the law.

Case Study 11

Woman beheaded by nephew for allegedly killing his daughter by witchcraft

Year: 2020

Kirikichia village comes under Khunta police station of Mayurbhanj. The village consists of two wards and a population of 228. On 15 June 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, an old woman, Champa Singh, was brutally killed by her nephew. The 22-year-old, Budhram Singh had surrendered before the police after murdering his aunt.

Villagers said that Budhram's four-year-old daughter was sick. Initially, he took her to a village *ojha* instead of going to the hospital. When he finally went to a hospital, her condition had become very serious. The little girl died at the hospital during treatment. However, he believed that his daughter had died due to his aunt Champa's witchcraft.

On the fateful day, Budhram went to Champa's house and beheaded her with his axe. He wrapped up the severed head along with the axe and headed towards the police station. He was arrested by the police on the way. A villager said that some people saw the murder, but no one had tried to intervene when the old woman was attacked. Now, Budhram is in jail and the case is under trial.

When we went to the village to enquire, people were reluctant to discuss the incident. After much effort, one villager came forward. However, he requested us to keep his name secret. We did not get much information about whether there was any scuffle over the land between the two families. Everybody in the village believes in witchcraft. Thus, nobody dares to take any steps against witch-branding.

Observations:

- » The community continues to believe in the existence of witches and when someone gets sick fingers are pointed at a presumed witch.
- » People continue to visit *ojhas* for their treatments and rarely visit hospitals.

- » Majority of the victims are women, especially widows.
- » A drive for awareness generation was started by the district administration a few years back but it has slowed down. A proposal by a former collector to form a rapid response team at the block to monitor witch-hunting and witch-branding was not able to materialise.
- » The administration has not taken enough steps to inform the villagers of the law.

Stakeholders' Interview: Mayurbhanj

Rajashree Marandi, sarpanch, Badakhaladi GP, Kaptipada

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

Lack of education, social customs and ignorance are the root causes of witch-branding in this area.

When is someone likely to be branded as a witch?

In tribal areas, where epidemics are rampant and take lives without proper health care facilities, then the doubted ones are branded as witches.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No idea about the legal action, but no community action is taken to support the supposed witch.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

Ojhas are the leaders of the community. Legally, no power is vested with the *ojhas*. They have the power to portray the suspected individual as a witch, and the community blindly believes them.

As reports indicate, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase and persecution of women as witches? How can the practice of witch-branding, persecution

and killing be stopped?

Awareness, legal action, proper health services and vigilance can stop such practices.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

No idea

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services and government agencies?

Whenever it comes to my knowledge, I make myself physically present in the locality, interact with the community and take the help of medical services. Government agencies and NGOs have rarely concerned themselves with these matters.

Badal Hembram, local teacher

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The situation with regards to witch-hunting and prosecution is acute. 2-3 cases come up every year. Even today, we see murders committed in the name of witch hunts.

When is someone likely to be branded as a witch?

This is a result of blind faith and age old superstitious beliefs. Whenever a person falls ill for several days, or weeks or months and no improvement is noticed, then they begin to suspect that someone is casting black magic or witchcraft on them. This thought is very common among tribals and uneducated individuals. They easily hold an elderly woman/widow responsible for their illness.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No, a big no.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

Ojhas are those individuals who are supposed to have magical power or healing capacities vested in them for the protection of the community. People believe that ojhas can save them from dark magic. Many times, these ojhas are responsible for branding someone a witch..

As reports indicate, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?

I do not think that it has increased during this pandemic. It has been at an all time high.

How can the practice of witch-branding and persecution of and killing be stopped?

I think it cannot be uprooted easily because blind belief and superstitions have been permanently set in people's blood and brains. A long term awareness programme may work but even it cannot guarantee immediate success.

Please let me know your ideas on how this practice can end, legally and socially.

Forming village-wise, GP level, and block level committees to work against such blind belief is necessary. The administration must be more vigilant to protect people. NGOs may work at the grassroots level to find out such cases (primary) and collect data from people who are prosecuted. They can find out if anyone is tortured for witch-branding. Exemplary actions should be taken by the administration.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I think it is not sufficient

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services, and government agencies?

No.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I am just raising awareness in villages and among the children regarding this issue.

Police IIC, Kaptipada

What is the situation with regards to witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The present situation with regards to witch-branding is a whopping number. Around 95% of the cases are hidden by the villagers and only 5% of the cases are registered.

Who is more likely to be branded a witch – man or woman?

Both man and woman can be branded as witches.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded as a witch?

Yes, there exist provisions under the IPC and Odisha Prevention of Witching Hunting Act, 2013. However, it can be applied only when the cases come to the knowledge of the police.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

Ojhas are generally priests who capitalise on the fear of god/goddess for their benefit.

As the reports indicate, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?

No such cases have been registered.

How can this practice of witch-branding and persecution as well as murdering be stopped?

By improving healthcare facilities at the grassroots level and through massive awareness programmes.

Please let me know your ideas on how this practice can end, legally and socially.

By improving healthcare facilities at the grassroots level with a specialised team of doctors.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

Yes

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services, government agencies?

It is pertinent to collaborate with community and women groups for eradication of such superstitions by raising awareness, identification of the patient and providing them with better care.

Dr. S.K. Patra, PHEO, Kaptipada, local doctor

What is the situation with regards to witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The practice of witch-branding is highly prevalent in this area. Lack of awareness and gullible ignorance are major contributing factors.

When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?

Both men and women above the age of 50 years are likely to be branded as witches.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

Legal action is taken on the reported case. However, immediate information about the incident does not reach the concerned authority.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

Ojha is locally called *dehury* and *disary*. People of the locality keep good faith in them since they are easily accessible when there is a health emergency.

As reports indicate, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?

The tribal community has faith in worship when any family member suffers from fever. Their worship has protected them from the incoming diseases. With the increase in health problems due to the novel COVID-19, people sought their village *ojhas* and targeted witches.

How can this practice of witch-branding and persecution of and killing be stopped?

Community awareness and training of stakeholders on the law are the key to the prohibition of witch-branding.

Please let me know your ideas on how this practice can end, legally and socially.

This practice can be stopped by spreading community awareness and training the stakeholders on the legal provision that prohibits witch-branding.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

The community leaders, influential people from the community, members of Gaon Kalyan Samiti (GKS) and SHGs and NGOs, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) need to be oriented on the law. They can play a vital role in influencing the community by creating awareness of the legal provisions.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services and government agencies?

The collaboration with the community to tackle and bring down the incidence happens through convergence with various departments.

How did you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

Through convergence effort.

Details of FGDs in Mayurbhanj

FGD 1. Place Sarat, GP: Sarat, Block: Kaptipada

No of Persons: 7, Topic: Witch hunting

An FGD was conducted at Sarat GP of Kaptipada block on 4 December 2020. Zilla parishad member, Sasmita Singh Purti, Dewanbahali GP sarpanch, Monalisa Singh, panchayat samiti member, Diugi Boipai, and other PRI members were present in the meeting. After welcoming all the participants, we discussed several aspects of witch-branding, black magic and related crimes. We also took their suggestions on how to curb these evil practices. While conducting the FGD, we discussed some semi-structured questions as mentioned below.

Findings from the FGD:

- » Blind faith in black magic and witchcraft prevails in the village. Such was also the mindset among the PRI members present in the meeting. Illiteracy, ignorance and liquor abuse are the major reasons for violence in witch-hunting cases.
- » People reach out to *ojhas* for their medical emergencies. A marginal percentage of people who do not believe *ojhas* do not go against them due to fear. The influence of the *ojha* is still present in the village though not all villagers believe in them. The engagement of ASHAs and availability of health services have decreased the importance of *ojhas* to some extent.
- » In every village, we see at least 2-3 incidents of witch-hunting every year. Out of those cases, very few cases come to the limelight. Only when the crime committed is heinous, these cases are reported to the police.
- » 70% of the people go to the *ojhas* rather than going to hospitals. They go to the hospital as a last resort. However, visits to the hospital are gradually increasing.
- » Health problems, superstitions, lack of information, the influence of *ojhas* are the main reasons for witch-hunting in the area. People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent these events.
- » People explained that no such incidents occurred during the pandemic. However, many villagers believe that COVID-19 did not affect their villages due to their worship of the village deity.
- » No actions have been taken by any agency, health department, police or legal aid cell to dissuade these practices from the village.
- » While discussing the role of PRI members, they expressed their inability to intervene in the cases. However, if any agency or government department initiates campaigns, they will support the cause.

FGD 2, Place: Nachhipur, GP: Badakhalidi, Block: Kaptipada**No. of persons: 11, Topic: Witch hunting**

We conducted the FGD during the Village Health and Nutrition Day (VHND) session at Nachhipur village of Badakhhaladi GP on 6 December 2020. Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), Anupama Sejadada, health worker, Bishnu Charan Dehuri, anganwadi worker, Anusaya Sethi and ASHA, Jasoda Dehuri were present in the meeting along with other women from the village. The discussion was regarding witch-hunting in the village.

Findings from the FGD:

- » As repeated programmes are conducted on health, people are gradually getting aware. However, blind belief in black magic and witchcraft still prevails in the village.
- » *Dehury*, Sridhar Naik practices black magic. The people of the village and other villages have faith in him and seek his help in their health, financial and even marital problems. He has immense influence in the village.
- » No witch-hunting cases have been witnessed in the village in the last two to three years.
- » 70% of the people still go to the *ojhas* rather than going to hospitals. However, visits to hospitals are increasing gradually.
- » During health problems, 70-80 % of villagers visit Sridhar for treatment, in the form of *pujas*.
- » People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent witch-hunting crimes.
- » People explained that no such incidents occurred during COVID-19 pandemic. Even some villagers told that COVID-19 did not affect their village due to worshipping of the village deity.
- » NGO Arambha Plan conducted awareness programmes in the village against witch-hunting crimes.

- » The district administration has provided training to the anganwadi workers of the village in 2016 on witch-hunting.

FGD 3, Place: Rajatnagar, GP: Ranipokhari, Block: Kaptipada

No. of persons: 13 adolescent girls, Topic: Witch hunting

An FGD was done amongst adolescent girls on the issue of witch-branding in a meeting of Kishori Mandal on 11 December 2020 in Rajatnagar village. The following were the findings from the latter:

Findings from the FGD:

- » They did not have much idea about witch-hunting. However, they had heard of witches, believed in them and were fearful of them.
- » A case was lodged at the police against a sorcerer. The accused person was put in jail for about two years. Another similar case of witch-hunting was reported by the people but FIR was not registered.
- » Almost all the villagers went to the nearest village, Vishnugaon of Dewanbahali GP, to an *ojha* for help. They go to hospitals in the last stages of illness. However, visits to hospitals are increasing gradually due to increased communication, improvement of the road and phone network.
- » NGO Arambha Plan conducted awareness programmes in the village against witch-hunting and crime. But it had very little impact on the villagers.
- » People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent witch-hunting events.

FGD 4, Village: Mahisasuri, GP: Badakhaladi, Block: Kaptipada

No. of persons: 11, Topic: Witch hunting

An FGD was conducted in Mahisasuri village of Badakhaladi GP under Kaptipada block on 12 December 2020. Members of SHGs and a few

adolescent girls were present in the meeting. After welcoming all the participants, we discussed various aspects of witch-branding, black magic and related crimes. We also took their suggestions on how to keep a check on these practices. While conducting the FGD, we discussed some semi-structured questions as mentioned below.

Findings from the FGD:

- » Black magic and blind faith in witchcraft prevail in the village.
- » An old man practised black magic in the village though the majority of villagers do not believe in him. However, they do believe in other *ojhas*. The group opted not to discuss this matter openly.
- » No witch hunt related crimes have been witnessed in the village.
- » People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent witch-hunting events.
- » People explained that no such incidents had occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » NGO Arambha Plan conducted awareness programmes in the village against witch-hunting. But it had a little impact on the villagers.

FGD 5, Place: Kukudgadi, GP: Salachua, Block: Kaptipada

No. of persons: 12, Topic: Witch hunting

An FGD was conducted on 15 December 2020 at Kukudagadi village of Salchua GP regarding awareness on witch-branding, witch-hunting and blind beliefs in the community. However, many agreed to believe in it as it was a traditional practice. Local leader, Asha Supati Khalpalia and community volunteer, Sachindra Khalpalia said that they also believed in witches.

Findings from the FGD:

- » Black magic and blind faith in witchcraft prevail in the village.
- » The influence of *ojha* is still present in the village though lesser than before.

- » 70% of the people still go to *ojhas* rather than going to hospitals. They go to hospitals as a last resort.
- » People are unaware of the law and have no means to prevent witch-hunting events.
- » People explained that no such incidents had occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » No agency, health department, police, or legal aid cell had taken actions to dissuade the practice from the village.

FGD 6, Place: CHC Kaptipada, Block: Kaptipada

No. of persons: 05, Topic: Witch hunting

The FGD at Kaptipada community health centre on witch-branding was held on 4 January 2021. PHEO, Dr Santosh Kumar Patra, health supervisors, Sanatan Mahapatra and Chandrkanti Padhi and health workers, Sumanta Kumar Jena and Birenda Behera were present at the meeting and discussed witch-branding.

Findings from the FGD:

- » Black magic and blind faith in witchcraft prevail in the village.
- » The influence of *ojha* is still present in the village though lesser than before.
- » People are now visiting hospitals and are aware of medical sciences rather than going to *ojhas* to find cures. But the influence of *ojha* is still felt in the village and nearby villages.
- » No incident of witch-hunting had occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » The group said that there was a need for a massive awareness drive to enhance people's awareness on the implications of witch-branding in society.

- » People are still not aware of the laws against witch-hunting. The police should be more proactive to popularise the laws related to witch-branding. More numbers of '*jan sampark shivirs*' (public contact camps) should be organised by the police.
- » Training and capacity building of frontline workers like anganwadi workers, ASHA and school teachers should be conducted on a regular basis.

Ganjam

Ganjam has a total area of 8,070 square kilometres. The district is divided into three sub-divisions – Chhatrapur, Berhampur, and Bhanjanagar with its district headquarters at Chhatrapur. Industry and agriculture support its economy. It is well known for its foodgrain production and export. The agricultural sector supplies about 75% of its total workforce. The district has almost 20% Scheduled Caste population and 3.5% Scheduled Tribe population.

Case Study 1

Villagers guided by a goddess to tonsure and pull out teeth of alleged witches

Year: 2017

Ulapur is a remote village of Chikiti assembly constituency under K. Nuagaon police station of Ganjam district. It is about 18 km away from Digapahandi railway junction and 54 km from Berhampur. The total population of the village is 831 with 197 households. Women constitute 53.8% of the population. The literacy rate of the village is 52.7% and the female literacy rate is 23%.

A series of incidents that took place in Ulapur in 2017 caused a stir across Ganjam. On 21 January 2017, villagers of Ulapur approached a tantric after the death of a child. The tantric told the villagers to follow the order of an

unnamed girl who he claimed was a 'goddess'. On the basis of the 'order' by the girl, some villagers tonsured four men and two young women. They also pulled out the victims' teeth as they were presumed to be responsible for the child's death. Chikiti police arrested the village's ward members Ram Behera, Prashant Naik and Tarini Nalak.

Similarly, on the 16 May 2017, another unmarried woman Lata was claimed to be a 'goddess' and following her instructions, Shapani Behera, Mohan Sahu, Sukant Behera, Keith Behera, Amar Behera, Kak Behera, Jhunu Behera, Sushma Behera and two others were tonsured and had their teeth uprooted by some villagers. Furthermore, a young woman and four more men went through the same ordeal. They were threatened to stay away from the police. The Chikiti police outpost is merely 5 km away from the scene of the incident, but the police were completely unaware of the crimes being committed in the village. However, two survivors managed to escape and lodged a complaint with the police.

Later that day, a police force led by Chikiti sub-divisional police officer, Bijay Kumar Nayak reached the village and enquired the victims' families regarding the incidents. Three of the accused were arrested under various sections of the IPC. An armed police force was deployed in the village to monitor more incidents.

Persecution status:

- » After the media published the cases, a victim's family members, Dandapani Behera and Kartik Behera, approached a lawyer of Patrapur. Three accused persons were arrested and booked under Section 341/294/325/307/342/355/506/34 of IPC.
- » The police have booked it under the IPC instead of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013. It shows that even the police are less aware of the witch-hunting laws.

Observations:

- » The community is more supportive of the culprits than the victim. It reflects the sense of belief of the community towards deplorable witch-hunting practices.
- » Three of the accused were released on bail after only three years of imprisonment.
- » A gunia was called from Sanakhemundi, 30 km away from the village. He was paid ₹80,000 to identify the witch. While police arrested three people, the other accused involved in the case fled to Surat as per the police report. However, no further action was taken to arrest them.
- » The gunias play an important role in deepening people's belief in the existence of witches. Many people believe that they have the power to detect the witch and protect the people from its ill-effect.

Case Study 2

Two men burnt to death in a witch hunt conspired by the village headman

Year: 2017

Chudangapur is a tribal dominated village that comes under Mohana block of Ganjam. The Sabar tribe constitutes the majority of the population. Pana and Damba are the two Scheduled Caste communities residing in the village. There is no hospital in and around the village. However, there is an Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) in the village.

An elderly man, Patira Gamanga of Chudangapur died of an unknown disease. Village headman, Simon Raita with a few others accused two other villagers, Ganga Sabara and Ranjit Bastray of practising witchcraft and threatened to kill them. Frightened, Ganga approached the police requesting protection. However, the police did not take any action. Simon and the others threatened Ganga again for having the audacity to inform the police. They demanded ₹5 lakh from him as compensation to avoid

being killed. On 9 August 2017, some villagers burnt Ganga Sabara and Ranjit Bastray to death after mercilessly beating them. The police arrested seven accused, aged between 20 and 40 for their involvement in the crime.

Persecution status:

- » Few Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members were involved in this murder case.
- » The police arrested six people, Simon Raita, Jayanta Gomanga, Sudhir Raita, Rabindra Raita, Rajib Badaraita and Bali Paika under Section 341/294/302/34 of IPC.
- » The accused are now jailed.

Observations:

- » The sole intention behind this case of witch hunt was to take hold of land property. The village headman mobilised the solidarity of tribal communities in the witch hunt. Moreover, villagers were motivated by the conspiracy of the village headman. They collected money and kept it ready for legal procedures, if required.
- » A person in power often uses witch-branding as an instrument to grab land and mobilise the support of the people.
- » Superstitious people without rational thought become easy prey to such conspiracies.

Case Study 3

11 people tonsured, teeth broken and force fed excreta after being identified as witches

Year: 2017

Superstition and blind faith are so deep-rooted in Ganjam that instances of humiliation by tonsuring, breaking teeth and force-feeding excreta are rampant. Police usually reach the crime scene after the occurrence

of the crime. Although perpetrators are arrested, survivors do not get adequate justice.

Such an incident took place in the Ulapur village under Chikiti block. In this case, nobody personally identified another as a witch. It was the alleged 'goddess' who identified the witch. According to the village, the goddess was known to enter the body of Lata Behera, an unmarried woman. She supposedly enlightened them about the cause of misfortunes in the village and stated that a *tantric* was behind it. The villagers had gathered to hear the words of the goddess. The next morning a few men barged into the *tantric's* house and dragged him out. They also caught hold of eight men and two women, and took them to the nearest Hanuman Math.

The victims including Mohan Sahu, Subash Behera, Keith Behera, Amar Behera, Ka Behera, Dandapani Behera, Jhun Behera and Sushma Behera complained to the police that they were tonsured and their teeth were broken. They also complained of being forced to eat excreta. Dandapani also lodged a written complaint with the police. The police arrested the accused and booked them 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.

Observations:

- » The community is more supportive of the accused than the victim. It reflects the sense of blind belief of the community towards deplorable witch-hunting practices.
- » The *ojha* (or goddess, in this case) plays an important role in deepening people's belief in the existence of witches. Many people believe that they have the power to detect the witch and protect them from its ill-effects.
- » People are not aware about the existing witch-hunting laws of the state. There have been no steps taken by the administration to educate them either.

Case Study 4

Man detected to be a witch by *khatabidya*, beaten and force fed excreta

Year: 2019

A witch-hunting incident occurred in Mayanki village under Sorada block. Here, the practice of '*khatabidya*' – a process in which four men carry a cot that supposedly guides them towards the alleged witch – is quite prevalent. It was used on the witch hunt survivor from Mayanki village. After the death of a person in the village, some villagers suspected that witchcraft might have been responsible for it. They performed *khatabidya* to identify the supposed witch. And through *khatabidya* Mitu Swain was detected as a witchcraft practitioner. Mitu was beaten up and forced to eat excreta by those villagers. After getting the information, the police raided Mayanki and arrested 23 persons, including two women. They were sent to jail after the court rejected their bail. According to police sources, the reason behind the incident was a feud between the two cousins, Mitu and Babu Swain.

Babu Swain plotted the witchcraft practice story to get back at his cousin for his brother's death. Earlier, Babu's brother had died due to electrocution and he blamed Mitu as the perpetrator of the accident through witchcraft. Babu had attacked Mitu in his house at that time. But after the police intervened, the situation was brought under control. Both had even struck a compromise, according to the police. A rumour had spread through the village and Mitu was also accused by others of practising witchcraft when two other villagers, Saniya Swain and Uddhav Swain died. A few other instances of death also followed, which made their intuition stronger. Some villagers lodged a complaint against Mitu in the village committee following which a tantric was called to the village to use *khatabidya* to frame Mitu for alleged use of witchcraft.

Observations:

- » The community is more supportive of the culprits than the victim. It reflects the sense of belief of the community towards deplorable witch-hunting practices.
- » The ojha or tantric plays an important role in deepening people's belief in the existence of witches. People strongly believe that they detect the witch to protect them from the ill-effects of witchcraft.
- » Awareness about the existing witch-hunting laws of the state is negligible. Steps are yet to be taken by the administration to educate them.

Case Study 5

Man choked to death in witchcraft suspicions; the accused attacked by his son

Year: 2017

Ramgiri is a village under Sheragada block of Ganjam. It is about 22 km away from Digapahandi railway 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. Few of the villagers have also migrated to Surat in Gujarat for better work opportunities.

Feuds between two relatives led to heinous crimes committed in Ramgiri, which is just half a kilometre from Sheragada police station. Pana Gaud's grandson was suffering from diarrhoea. But, he suspected his uncle, Dandasi Gauda of casting spells on the boy due to their previous hostilities. On 28 August 2017, Pana and his three sons attacked the 45-year-old Dandasi and choked him to death. When Dandasi's sons heard about the murder of their father, they went to Pana's house and attacked him with an axe. He was admitted in hospital in a serious condition.

The police arrested Pana and his sons as well as Dandasi's sons. It was revealed that property dispute was the main cause of the hostilities between the cousins. The villagers are divided on the issue and refrain from speaking about the incident. Many villagers, however, believe in witches and witchcraft.

Observations:

- » Property dispute is the main reason behind this incidence of witch-branding. Witch branding was used as an instrument.
- » The family of the deceased are 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 a lack of awareness, people prefer going to an *ojha* for treatment instead of going to the hospital.
- » Older people become the easy targets of witch-branding.
- » Health issues amongst children are usually considered the handiwork of a witch. The number of *ojhas* in this area is more. These people have opted for this profession as a very good source of income.

Case Study 6

A man's mysterious death raises speculations of a witch hunt

Year: 2017

Benipadar village under Merapalli gram panchayat of Mohana block is dominated mostly by Scheduled Caste communities. Most of the households here are either marginal agricultural landholders or are landless. Daily wage work is the only source of income for all poor and landless households.

On 19 November 2017, Jagabandhu Malik of Benipada was allegedly murdered and set on fire in a forest by a group of people. Some local press

reporters went to the village and gathered information about Jagabandhu's alleged murder from anonymous villagers. According to them, some people had murdered him on the suspicion of him being a 'gunia' and using it for harming the village. Local police did not take any action on it because, as it said, no one had complained about it in the police station. Even Jagabandhu's family reportedly said that his death was caused by abdominal pain. They had also performed his funeral ceremony.

Belief in witchcraft and sorcery seemed to be very strong in Benipadar, a remote area. No one was bothered about Jagabandhu's death and none spoke about it. It was quite possible, according to anonymous villagers, that his family members were asked to keep mum on the issue. The mysterious death could not be highlighted properly and was unable to draw the attention of the administration or the police. The civil society groups in Ganjam too might not have got the information at the right time to rake it up. As a result, Jagabandhu's death remained a mystery.

Persecution status:

- » No one from the village filed a case or informed the police about the incident.
- » Despite rumours circulating, neither the police nor any authority took actions regarding the incident.
- » Due to the regular threats by the miscreants, the helpless villagers remain silent.
- » No one was arrested in this case. The police just filed this as a case of unnatural death and closed the file.

Observations:

- » The incident had shocked the entire village.
- » The absence of a written complaint became the plea for the police to be free from their responsibility.

- » Even the media failed to hold the administration accountable for ensuring justice to the deceased person's family.
- » Without outside support, the family members of the deceased lost their courage to raise their voice and fight for justice.
- » The silence of the community on these issues reflects their deep belief in witchcraft. People have silently accepted violence as an obvious result.

Case Study 7

A family accused of practicing witchcraft is held captive and tortured

Year: 2016

Goborlundi village under Badagada police station is 30 km away from the district headquarters. Most of the people in the village are Dalits. Most of them are landless except for a few marginal farmers. The villagers work either as agricultural labourers or construction workers to earn their livelihood.

There were some untimely deaths in the village and a family was suspected of practising witchcraft. The villagers held a village meeting and sentenced four members of the family to death. They kept the family members including Uchchab Naik, his wife, daughter and three sons in captivity. On 2 July 2016, the family members were beaten up. Uchchab, his wife, daughter and one son were force-fed excreta and their teeth were pulled out. Uchhab was asked to pay ₹4 lakh and four others ₹2 lakh each.

When Uchchab expressed his inability to pay such a big amount, the villagers started getting violent and tortured the family. In the middle of the night, the family escaped from captivity and lodged a complaint at the police station. The police arrested 34 people including four women for their involvement in torturing the family. The village headman was among those arrested. Many villagers fled the village in fear of being taken into custody.

Observations:

- » It becomes easy to mobilise people for witch-branding due to their staunch belief and fear of witchcraft.
- » Physical violence and financial penalties dehumanise the life of people and subject them to multiple vulnerabilities.
- » Also, sometimes the police find it very difficult to deal with a negative mob mentality.
- » The victim finds it very difficult to raise a voice where the entire village is involved in the conspiracy.

Case Study 8

Two men accused of practicing witchcraft, beaten and force fed excreta at a village meeting

Year: 2020

Two children of a family died due to unknown ailments in Jagdevpur village under Patrapur block. However, the reason behind the death was speculated to be witchcraft being practised by two villagers, Basudev Nayak and Banchha Nayak.

A village meeting was held and both Basudev and Banchha were summoned. The influential people convening the meeting did not pay any heed to the duo's explanation that they were innocent. The meeting decided that they were guilty of practising witchcraft and killing the children. The mob beat them mercilessly and broke their teeth. They were also forced to eat excreta in public.

The police later reached the village and started an inquiry. The victims, however, did not report the matter to the police. No one else also came forward to speak about the incident. As a result, there was a delay in the investigation. What's more, no formal complaint was registered. Apparently,

the influential group in the village had threatened the survivors and villagers to keep outsiders, including the police and administration officials, out of the scene.

Observations:

- » The community is more supportive of the accused than the victim. It reflects the sense of deep belief of the community towards deplorable witch-hunting practices.
- » The *ojha* plays an important role in deepening people's belief in the existence of witches. Many people believe that they have the power to detect the witch and protect the people from its ill effect.
- » People here are not aware of the existing witch-hunting laws of the state. There have been no steps taken by the administration to educate them either.

Case Study 9

Dalit family tortured and ordered to leave the village over witchcraft speculations

Year: 2017

In Gobarlandia village of the district, there was an outbreak of chickenpox and dysentery in children. The villagers blamed two Dalit women of the same family for causing it with their witchcraft practice. Sajni Nayak, one of the women, refuted all such accusations and a quarrel started in the village.

Some villagers then used 'nakhadarpana' – a process that uses fingernails as a mirror to see into the past or future of a person – to verify if the women were witches. However, the decision had already been made and nakhadarpana was just a pretext to further that idea.

In July 2017, the real torture started. A group of villagers stormed into the house of Sajni at Harijan Sahi and started accusing the family members of practising witchcraft to make children of the village fall sick.

The whole family, including Sajni, her 75-year-old father-in-law and two daughters-in-laws, were tied in the middle of the village and were forced to consume excreta. The villagers demanded ₹8 lakh as compensation for the assumed sin of practising witchcraft. When they refused, they were ordered to leave the village. Now Sajni and her son live in a slum in Bahadurpur. The family is completely dependent on the eldest son's earnings as a mason. Other male members of the family have left for Kerala to earn their livelihoods.

Observations:

- » The community is more supportive of the accused than the victim. It reflects the sense of belief of the community towards deplorable witch-hunting practices.
- » The witch doctor plays an important role in deepening people's belief in the existence of witches. Many people believe that they have the power to detect the witch and protect the people from its ill-effect.
- » People here are not aware about the existing witch-hunting laws of the state. There have been no steps taken by the administration to educate them either.

Case Study 10

Two dalit families are tormented and forced to migrate due to witchcraft allegations

Year: 2012

Phasi village comes under Kodala block. It is 3 km away from the block headquarters and 45 km away from the district headquarters in Chhatrapur. The village has a total population of 4,521 individuals (2,215 males and

2,306 females). There are a total 904 households in the village out of which 341 households belong to the Dalit community. Kodala is the nearest town to Phasi. The villagers depend upon agriculture and informal work in construction sites for their livelihood.

On 31 March 2012, two villagers, Sudam Nahak and Bhim Nahak were allegedly tied to a pole and had their teeth broken by some other villagers. They accused Sudam and Bhim of indulging in witchcraft.

After the incident, 16 members of the families of Sudam and Bhim managed to escape from the village. They lived in Khallikot for four years as they were afraid of going back to Phasi. Police registered a total of 12 cases against the perpetrators of the crime against the two families. Bhim and Sudam appealed to all concerned authorities including the district administration and Odisha Human Rights Commission, to help them return to the village. A peace committee meeting was held at the Khallikot block office premises at the behest of the Khallikot tehsildar. They did it to bring the two families back after receiving a report from Odisha Human Rights Commission. Many district administration and police officials attended the meeting. Villagers from Phasi and survivors' families also participated. The administration officials persuaded both sides to stay in the village in peace and harmony.

Observations:

- » Property dispute is the main reason behind this incidence of witch-branding. Witch branding was used as an instrument.
- » Witch branding is one of the worst forms of violence that prevents people from living a dignified and respectful life. Thus, the victim's family was forced to flee from the village.
- » Due to a lack of awareness, people prefer going to an *ojha* for treatment instead of going to the hospital.

- » Media, by covering and airing the sensational aspects of the cases, to some extent does spread awareness. However, when it comes to helping the victims get justice, it fails to do the same.
- » There is a lack of awareness in the community regarding witch-hunting laws.
- » The rehabilitation in this case is in trial after the victims reached out to the Odisha Human Rights Commission.

Case Study 11

Two men presumed to be witches force fed excreta and asked to pay a hefty fine

Year: 2020

Surendra Sethy, aged 45, and Shankar Behera, aged 48, live in Dadarkhol village under Buguda block. They belong to a Scheduled Caste community. It was discovered during their interview that they were forced to drink urine and consume excreta on the suspicion that they practised black magic and witchcraft. The villagers wanted to pull out their teeth but Surendra and Shankar requested that they remove it with the help of a dentist. There is a belief among the villagers that the chants of a witch are not effective when their teeth are broken. Furthermore, the survivors alleged that the reason for such a heinous crime against them was jealousy and presumptions that they were hurting fellow villagers. However, other than their immediate family members, most villagers believed that they were involved in witchcraft.

The survivors stated that branding them as witches was based on frivolous grounds. Surendra had been given a witchcraft book by his neighbour, Shankar around 10 years ago. So over the years most of the people in the village believed that he practised witchcraft. Even though Surendra was illiterate, the villagers forced him to accept that he was performing dark rituals by reading mantras from the book. Due to the villagers' acrimony,

Surendra's wife and children also faced many hardships. Shankar and his family were also subjected to similar kinds of atrocities.

The villagers let Surendra and Shankar go on the condition that he deposited a sum of ₹50,000 and would not report the matter to the police or any district administration official. Both the victims went to a dentist to remove their teeth but the latter refused to remove the healthy teeth and informed a social worker about their plight. The doctor convinced both Surendra and Shankar to go to the local police station to lodge an FIR against the villagers who assaulted them. The police, however, advised mitigating the situation with understanding among the local people.

According to a lawyer, both Surendra and Sankar deposited ₹50,000 to the villagers who had terrorised them. They also submitted an undertaking saying they would not practice witchcraft in future in their village. In spite of police interference, nobody was arrested. On the other hand, the families struggled a lot to pay off the debts they incurred to pay the fine imposed.

Observations:

- » Perpetrators usually aim to snatch land or other monetary resources from vulnerable people in the name of witch-hunting. Survivors lead a life of trauma, stigma, ostracisation and indignity.
- » Children of the deceased and survivors are deeply impacted by the events of witch-hunting, which often includes public humiliation and heinous crimes including murder. They face trauma for life and develop feelings of vengeance. Not only the children, but the family members too face social stigma.
- » Health issues related to children are often associated with witchcraft practices. Usually, a single woman or widow of the family is targeted and is eventually blamed for casting an evil eye. But at times, men are also accused of using witchcraft and punished by a kangaroo court of the village.

- » When someone falls sick, he is taken to a *gunia* first. Treatment at health centres usually is a second preference or not preferred at all.
- » *Gunias* are paid well for their services, which encourages them to turn it into a profession. Most people lack awareness of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013. As a result, the perpetrators do not fear the law.

Stakeholders' Interview: Ganjam

Visit to Dadarkhol village of Buguda block

CDPO, community leaders, ActionAid representatives and media persons were present in the meeting.

Dadarkhol has around 100 households out of which 60 belong to Gouda community, 25 to Keuta community and 12 to Dhoba community, which are counted among the backward classes. The majority of the population are below the poverty line. The adult population is mostly illiterate. People earn their livelihoods through agriculture and manual labour work. There is no healthcare facility available in the village but it has a primary school. Girl children have studied till Class 10. However, education is now being encouraged by the villagers. A person from the village is working in the district administration. Moreover, the villagers strictly oppose child marriage and makes sure that women and men reach the minimum age of 18 and 21 respectively before getting married.

About the survivors:

The survivors are Surendra Sethy, aged 45, his wife and Sankar Behera, aged 48. Belonging to a Scheduled Caste community, they are migrant labourers frequently travelling to Tamil Nadu in search of work. Surendra, who was asked to pay a fine of ₹50,000, has two sons and a daughter. Both sons have left for Tamil Nadu and the daughter is continuing her studies in the state. His wife was our subject of the interview and answered in detail about the atrocities committed against her family. Along with

her, a few villagers were also interviewed, answers to which were mostly cold and concocted. Additionally, we asked them about issues regarding government schemes and suggestions to improve them.

Questions to villagers:

How are medical emergencies treated in the village?

We go to the nearest medical centre in Buguda. But first, we try whatever home remedies are available. Sometimes the patient succumbs to ill-health. However, there has been no sudden death in recent years except for a child's death due to snakebite four years ago.

What is the position of witchcraft practice in the village?

There is no known witchcraft practice in Dadarkhol village. There have been no such instances and we do not believe in witches.

What do you have to say about the newspaper reports regarding witch-hunting in the village?

Rumours were spread in the village that a fellow villager possessed a ritualistic witchcraft book. A meeting was held, and all the villagers were inquired about the same. Surendra Shethy came forward and confessed that he had possessed a book, which was given to him by Sankar Behera 10 years ago. We suspected that he and his wife had been practising witchcraft all these years. Hence, there had been health issues in the village. So, we asked the three of them to get their teeth broken in a nearby clinic (as there is a belief that the mantras are not as effective when at least one tooth is broken). They ended up reporting the matter to the police. So, the police had come to the village and made us aware of the superstitions. Later, we had compromised and are now living in peace.

Did you pressurise them to confess? Were they threatened?

No. They voluntarily came forward and admitted.

Were they asked to pay any fine?

No. We compromised.

How do you identify witches?

A gunia staying in a nearby village guides us. He informs us about recent black magic usage that can threaten peace in the village.

Are there any other supernatural beliefs in the village?

None.

What are the government schemes or facilities that you are deprived of and would want in your village?

They are:

- » Ama Police Samiti is required in the village so that we can immediately file emergency cases.
- » Only a few have got Biju Swasthya cards in the village, whereas most of us are below the poverty line.
- » There are no cooking facilities available in Anganwadi Centre. A village kitchen is required.
- » We have applied for BPL ration (Annapurna Yojana), but we are not getting any response.

Questions to survivor (wife of Surendra Sethy):

Why were you in possession of the witchcraft book?

Someone gave it to my husband 10 years back and we had just kept it at home. Neither have we used it nor do we know anything about black magic as we both can't read or write.

Were you forced by the villagers to confess?

Yes. They forced us to accept that we practised black magic as possession of the book requires some tantra. They even threatened us that our non-acceptance would lead to complete ostracisation of our family. They refused to give us food and water. Moreover, they ordered that anybody who mingled with us would pay a penalty of ₹500.

Why did they target you?

Some fellow village men were falling ill. Allegedly, a few men went to a gunia. He said that someone in our village was practising black magic. At the same time, words spread in the village that my husband had a black magic book. We were threatened to accept that we practised it. It made it impossible for us to prove our innocence.

Did they force you to break your teeth?

In the beginning, they wanted to do it themselves, but we requested that we get our teeth uprooted from the nearby clinic. Nevertheless, the doctor refused to uproot healthy teeth and advised us to report the matter to the police.

Were you fined by the village men?

They demanded a fine of ₹50,000 and threatened to ostracise us if we did not do the same. We are very poor and have nowhere to go. So we gave in to their pressure to stay in the village. They even threatened us not to tell any outsider about this occurrence.

How did you manage to pay off the money?

We sold whatever land and jewellery we had. We have even taken loans from some relatives to pay off the fine. Our house is the only belonging we have at the moment.

Where are your husband and children now?

My husband has gone off to Tamil Nadu for labour work and so have my two sons. My daughter is in Class 8 and currently stays with me. They went so as to save some money to pay off the debts incurred due to the fine.

Why are you not reporting to the police about the fine?

We cannot because they will kick us out of the village and we do not have elsewhere to go. We are not literate to be independent. We will not get our money back either. So, we have decided to keep quiet and live peacefully.

Sundargarh

Sundargarh, having a total area of 9,712 square kilometres, is the second largest district of Odisha after Mayurbhanj, accounting for 6.23% of the state's total area. The town of Sundargarh houses the district headquarters while Rourkela is the largest city in the district. Although it is known as the industrial capital of the state, more than 50% of the population of the district still earn their livelihood from agriculture. More than 50% of the population are Scheduled Tribes while 10% are Scheduled Castes.

Case Study 1

Old woman killed by her son-in-law's brother suspecting her of practicing witchcraft

Year: 2020

Incidents involving villagers taking the law into their own hands and killing their relatives or co-villagers by branding them as practitioners of witchcraft and black magic are common in the Sundargarh. One such case came to light in Tikiraposh village under Gurundia block of the district. The village is about 10 km from the sub-divisional headquarters at Bonai, 15 km from the block headquarters, 60 km from Rourkela and 170 km from the district headquarters. The village has 166 families of which 352 are males and 331 are females. There are 116 children, aged 0-6. The total population is

683 out of which 503 are from Scheduled Tribes and 70 from Scheduled Castes. The village has a literacy rate of 62.26% – male literacy rate is 75.53% and female literacy rate is 49.12%. Agriculture, collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and wage work are the major sources of livelihood for the villagers.

In the name of witch-hunting, a heinous crime occurred in the village in 2020. Ratikanta Oram, aged 35, killed Bandhini Oran, aged 52, the mother-in-law of his elder brother, Sukhi Oram on the suspicion that she was a witch.

Ratikanta and Sukhi worked as truck drivers and were always absent from the home. Both lived together and their earnings remained with the elder brother, Sukhi. Both were married and their relatives often visited their houses. However, differences between the brothers started some time after their marriage. Ratikanta's children were down with severe fever and were not recovering. He asked Sukhi for some money from their joint account created from their earnings as drivers. But Sukhi refused to part with the money.

Ratikanta alleged that his children were sick because of witchcraft by Bandhini. He also believed she was the reason his own brother behaved coldly towards him. He warned Bandhini to keep away from the family. However, she continued to visit her son-in-law's house despite the warning. On 16 January 2020, Ratikanta attacked Bandhini with a sharp weapon and killed her on the spot. He fled the scene after murdering her. An FIR was lodged in the police station but Ratikanta is still absconding. His wife and three children are staying in her father's house. Meanwhile, Sukhi has also left the village and moved to a nearby village.

Observations:

- » Black magic and witchcraft related violences are often reported in this locality. However, many are hesitant to provide information in this regard.

- » It is a case of a family property dispute with no involvement of community people.
- » The families of the deceased as well as the accused are affected gravely due to this incident.
- » No new cases have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- » People did not see any awareness programmes being conducted by any agencies or government departments.
- » The residents of Tikiraposh are against the murder that took place. Nevertheless, they believe in the existence of witches and witchcraft that cause harm to the village.
- » People are not aware of the witch-hunting laws.

Case Study 2

Woman force fed cow dung and paraded naked by a mob over witchcraft speculations

Year: 2004

The local word for witch is '*dahani*'. It has powerful effects on the tribals who have deep rooted traditions and beliefs. Invariably, it is mostly women who are at the receiving end of the violence caused by such superstitious beliefs. A heinous crime related to witch-hunting occurred in the Tainsar village under Lathikata block of the district. The victim was Noni Ekka, now aged 56.

Tainsar village is 7 km away from Lathikata block and 94 km away from the district headquarters, As per Census 2011, the village has 659 households with a population of 2,960. Out of this, 1,458 are males and 1,502 females; 2,228 people are Scheduled Tribes and 141 are Scheduled Castes. This village has 445 children, aged 0-6. The literacy rate in Tainsar is 56.5% while female literacy is just 24.2%. Like other villages of the district, agriculture,

collection of non-timber forest products (NTFP) and wage works are the major sources of livelihood of the villagers.

Noni was a religious woman and often conducted pujas for the wellbeing of her family and relatives. However, many villagers suspected that she practised witchcraft. In May 2004, while she was going to her neighbour's house, Noni accidentally touched a girl named Sukhi Ekka who was sleeping nearby. Coincidentally, the girl fell sick and her parents blamed Noni for allegedly using witchcraft. She was, thus, branded as a witch. The villagers took it upon themselves to punish her. They tied her to a tree and made her eat cow dung and cow bone. She was beaten up and paraded naked. The villagers asked her to leave the village and never return. There was not a single person in the village who stood up for her. The villagers who had once welcomed her as a bride were rejoicing her humiliation with the beating of drums.

Noni was neither given an opportunity to present her case nor could she muster the courage to confront the villagers alone. A few hours later, wearing ragged clothes and wounds scarring her body, she reached the Kalunga police outpost. She narrated the incident before the police and asked them to register an FIR against the villagers. The police did not show any seriousness to her complaint but local media took up the incident, attracting the court's intervention. A case was registered and 13 villagers were arrested.

At that time, several officers, from the district collector to the then chairperson of the Odisha State Commission for Women promised Noni help. But no support came her way. She continues to stay in the village but her life is not normal anymore. The villagers, including her family members, look at her distrustfully. After the incident, her children were not allowed to attend the school and her husband was kept away from all village activities.

Observations:

- » Most of the villagers in the district believe in witchcraft, black magic and sorcery.
- » They often visit '*gunias/ ojhas*' for treatment instead of going to the hospital.
- » Most people support the accused rather than the victim branded as a witch.
- » There has been no intervention by the administration to make people aware of the witch-hunting laws.
- » No help or rehabilitation was given to the victim in the above case.

Case Study 3

Man murdered and his home set ablaze by a villager for allegedly witching his wife

Year: 2021

Witchcraft related violence is steadily on the rise in the Sundargarh district. It is an exceedingly disturbing trend that is claiming lives and breaking families. In a recent case, a man was murdered over suspicion of practising sorcery at Patamunda village that comes under Mahulpada police station. The accused is a 23-year-old man, Tanguru Giri from the same village. He not only killed the 65-year-old victim, Kalia Dehury but also proceeded to burn down his house.

Kalia stayed with his wife, Saraswati Dehury, aged 55 in the village and earned his living by cultivating potatoes on his small piece of land. On 17 January 2017, Tanguru went to Kalia's field while the latter was working there and attacked him with a sharp axe. Kalia died on the spot. A horrified Saraswati, who was with Kalia at the time, ran back home, collected her children and fled the village. Tanguru then went to Kalia's house and set it afire.

After murdering Kalia, he went to a neighbour's house and stayed there for the night. The police arrested him the next morning when he was trying to flee the village. The villagers said that there was a past enmity between the two. Two years back, Tanguru's wife had died due to an unknown disease. He believed that Kalia had performed black magic on his wife. These suspicions had resulted from previous misunderstandings between their families. Tanguru is in jail awaiting his trials.

Observations:

- » The majority of the villagers in the district believe in witchcraft, black magic and sorcery.
- » They often visit the gunia/ ojha for treatment instead of going to the hospital.
- » Most people usually support the accused rather than the victim branded as a witch or sorcerer.
- » The intervention of the administration is negligible in removing the superstitious beliefs.

Case Study 4

Woman and her 4 kids brutally murdered after alleged witchcraft involvement instigated by a gunia

Year: 2020

Badindipur is a village under Koida block with a total of 123 households. The village has a population of 548, of which 284 are males and 264 are females. Adivasis constitute 62% of the village's total population as per Census 2011. A total of 151 children, aged 0-6, make up 27.55% of the total population. In 2011, the literacy rate of Badindipur was 44.84% compared to 72.87% of Orissa. Male and female literacy rates stand at 55.83% and 32.98% respectively. The village is situated 8 km away from sub-divisional headquarters of Koida, 85 km away from Rourkela and

185 km from the district headquarter of Sundargarh. Malda is the gram panchayat (GP) of Badindipur village.

On 25 January 2020, a 45-year-old woman, Mangri Munda, her two daughters and two sons were brutally killed over the witchcraft speculations. Their bodies were found dumped in a well. The four children were Mara, 10, Tekel, 7, Chamara, 4, and Raibari, 1. The murder was planned and executed by Debara Munda and his three brothers-in-law, Kisri Munda, Salu Munda and Dagam Munda. It was instigated by their relatives, Motu Munda and Budhram Munda, a *gunia*.

Mangri's husband Sudam Munda is a tipper driver. Sudam often stayed away from home due to the travelling nature of his job. Mangri had earlier been married to Sudam's elder brother, Tanguru Munda and the couple had two daughters and two sons. After Tanguru's demise, she married Sudam and had another daughter with him. Six month before the ghastly murders, one of the couple's daughters had died due to a snake bite. The family had somehow managed to overcome the grief and striving to lead a healthy and happy life.

The killers took the absence of Sudam as an opportunity. On 24 January night, they attacked Sudam's house and murdered the helpless Mangiri and her children. When Sudam came home the next day, he found bloodstains on the floor. Unable to find his wife and children, he enquired in his neighbourhood, but everybody kept mum. By now desperate and fearing the worst, Sudam informed police. As per his FIR, police came to the spot and started an investigation. On 27 January 2020, police recovered the bodies and arrested all the six persons involved in the crime. The police also seized a spade and a crowbar from the accused persons as murder weapons.

According to the villagers, all this had started when Debra's daughter fell ill. He did not consult a doctor and instead sought help from the village *gunia*, Budhram. The *gunia's* remedies failed to cure the sick girl and she died

soon after. Some days later, Debra's second daughter also died after falling sick. Budhiram instigated Debara that Mangri was a witch who had cast an evil eye on his family. He alleged that everybody's life was in danger because of her black magic. A furious Debra told this to his relatives, and they hatched the plot to murder Mangri and her children. Currently, the accused are in jail awaiting trial.

Observations:

- » Superstitious beliefs are a big problem in tribal communities.
- » Lack of access to healthcare is the single most important factor that encourages such practices.
- » Many people have started going to the hospital. Still, there are some who visit the *gunias/ojhas* for treatment.
- » The *gunias/ojhas* often prescribe violent methods by branding someone a witch.
- » People including the local representatives were not aware of the laws on witch-hunting. To date, no steps have been taken to generate awareness regarding the law.
- » There is a need for strict enforcement of the law, all out effort combined with awareness and basic services and facilities to be made available for the vulnerable groups.

Case Study 5

Widow murdered by two villagers doubting her of using witchcraft to harass their families

Year: 2015

Chikatnali is a small village of Bonai block having 150 households with 90% of the population being tribals from Munda, Kishan and Oram communities. A widow, Sita Kishan lived in the village along with her son Murali Kishan,

his wife and three daughters. Sita's husband had passed away two years prior to the incident.

Villagers said that at around 5 pm on 2 September 2015, two villagers, Baneshwar Kishan and Dasarathi Kishan attacked Sita with an axe. Sita died on the spot. After killing her, Baneshwar went to Tikayatpali police station with the axe and surrendered to the police. He told the police that Dasarathi and he killed Sita because they suspected her to be a witch. The next day, the police went to the spot, recovered Sita's body and arrested the two accused persons. Baneshwar and Dasarathi were released from jail after two and a half years due to lack of evidence. They are currently staying in Chikatnali as free men. Sita's son Murali also stays in the same village.

According to villagers of Chikatnai, Dasarathi had on many occasions alleged that Sita practised black magic to harass his family and it was the reason why many of his family members were repeatedly falling sick. Finally, Baneshwar and he planned to kill her to end their respective families' suffering.

Observations:

- » The killing in this case is also related to health problems due to the lack of proper healthcare facilities.
- » The support to the alleged witch is negligible. It is visible as the accused persons are still staying in the village freely after their release from jail.
- » Due to fear of police, many people did not provide much information and were unwilling to discuss the matter.

Case Study 6

Widow stoned to death on witchcraft suspicions; her son forced to take the blame

Year: 2003-04

Kilinda is a small village of Talbahali GP under Lahunipada block of Sundargarh district. It is 43 km away from the block headquarters and 197 km from the district headquarters of Sundargarh. Rourkela, at a distance of 56 km, is the nearest city from Kilinda. The village's 39 households have a population of 188 of which 93 are males and 95 are females. There are 53 children, aged 0-6. The Scheduled Tribes constitute 99.5% of the total population as per Census 2011. The village has a very low literacy rate of only 23.8%; female literacy is even lower at 8%. Like many tribal pockets of Odisha, the age-old practice of witch-hunting is still prevalent in Kilinda.

In the village, a 55-year-old widow, Visaka Mundawas was killed by some villagers suspecting her of practising witchcraft in 2003-04. Visaka stayed in the village with her husband and son. A few months before the incident, her husband had passed away. After her husband's death, many people started doubting her to be a witch. The *gunia* often took her name as the cause of many people's illness in the village. She became an easy target for people's allegations. Some villagers, including her neighbours, plotted to kill her to get rid of their misfortunes. Proceeding with the plan, one evening the villagers intoxicated her with liquor and then crushed her to death with stones. Her body was thrown into a river, 3 km away from the village.

A day later, the woman's corpse was found floating in the river by some children who were taking a bath. The incident was reported to the police. Fearing arrest, the killers threatened Visaka's son to take the blame for the murder on himself, which he did. Thus, no case was lodged against those who had actually carried out the murder. On the other hand, Visaka's innocent son was arrested for murdering his own mother on the basis of his confession. He stayed in jail for four years and was later released due to lack of evidence.

Observations:

» Due to the threat of the villagers, the son of the deceased took the

blame on himself even though he was innocent. The actual culprits managed to escape the law.

- » To date, people continue to visit *gunias* when they face health issues. Fortunately, the percentage is gradually decreasing.
- » Most of the people of the village, even the educated ones, continue to have a deep fear of witches and witchcraft.
- » The women branded as witches get no support or rehabilitation from any organisation.
- » Neither the police nor administration has taken any steps to spread awareness against witchcraft in the village.
- » There were no new cases of witch-hunting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case Study 7

4 women alleged to be witches tortured by villagers and saved by NHRC intervention

Year: 2013

Kiralaga village is under Subdega block. There are many small hamlets that make up the entirety of Kiralaga, also a gram panchayat. The village has 936 households with a total population of 4,228. Out of them, 2,054 are males and 2,194 are females. Scheduled Tribes constitute 42% of the total population. Ambapada is a hamlet of Kiralaga village with 41 households with 149 people. It is situated 12 km away from the block headquarters and 40 km from the district headquarters at Sundargarh.

Even in this new age of scientific and technological development, the poorer strata of society still falls victim to evil superstitions. Many precious lives are lost to blind faith. The majority of those who suffer are women. They are tortured, humiliated and murdered – all on the basis of age old superstitious beliefs. It is certainly shameful in a civilised society.

One such event took place at Ambapada in February 2013. Four members of a family — Patrus Dung Dung, Christina Dung Dung, Philomona Dung Dung and Balmadina Soreng – were tortured by some villagers in presence of the local sarpanch. The villagers suspected the victims of practising witchcraft. The incident had attracted the attention of the National Women's Commission and the National Human Rights Commission. The involvement of the big names and the media led to the sarpanch losing his post.

Two months before the incident, a group of villagers had visited a nearby village for a marriage negotiation. While returning, they met with an accident, which resulted in serious injuries to the people inside the vehicle. They were admitted to different hospitals for treatment. Luckily, the accident did not cause any loss of life. Upon returning from hospitals, the villagers along with their families visited various *gunias*. They suspected supernatural involvement leading to the accident. Each of these *gunias* confirmed their fears and stated that there was indeed black magic involved that caused the accident. The *gunias* branded Patrus, Christina, Philomona and Balmadina as witches.

Enraged, the villagers decided to punish the four themselves. They went to their houses, dragged the victims out, stripped them naked and blackened their faces. Further, the victims were paraded naked on the village road. A meeting was later held in the presence of the local sarpanch to discuss the punishment to be given to the women branded as witches. Meanwhile, some locals informed the police about the incident. As the villagers were trying to settle the issues, the police reached the village and rescued the women. They arrested Prafulla Barla, Ani Barla and Sanjam Soreng for harassing the women. The accused persons were sent to jail and were released after a few months due to lack of evidence.

The case was brought to the notice of the National Human Rights Commission and a probe was undertaken. The Sundargarh collector and SP visited the village and reassured the victims to punish the real culprits. Two of the victims, Patrus and Balmadina, are now dead. Christina and

Philomona continue to stay in the village. They have received old age pension and houses under Indira Awas Yojana from the government. Nobody has taken any violent actions against them due to the fear of police. However, some villagers, including the accredited social health activist (ASHA), still believe that they are witches.

Observations:

- » People are going to hospitals during illness. However, some still visit witch doctors for treatments.
- » This case was brought to the notice of the National Human Right Commission, which resulted in the victims getting some support.
- » The police and administration intervened in the case and arrested the people. However, the villagers did not support the victims.
- » Over the years, the number of witch-hunting cases has decreased in this area.
- » No new cases was reported during the COVID-19 pandemic

Case Study 8

Woman killed by a mob doubting her of witching villagers; her husband and son critically injured

Year: 2018

Ratakhandi, a small village under Kuarmunda block, is located 7 km away from the block headquarters, 17 km from Rourkela and 88 km from the district headquarters. As per the Census 2011, the village has 408 households. The total population is 1,907 – 985 are males and 922 are females. There are 295 children, aged 0-6. Around 75% of the population belong to Scheduled Tribes. The literacy rate in Ratakhandi is 51.8% while the female literacy rate is only 20.8%. The village's economy depends on agriculture, collection of NTFP and wage work.

Ratakhandi has witnessed several shameful incidents where people, especially women, accused of practising witchcraft are burned, tortured or killed over the years. However, very few cases are in the public sphere and properly handled by the police and other law enforcers. Those accused in such crimes often go unpunished due to the lack of sufficient evidence.

Jasoda Singh, aged 60, her husband, Phagu Singh and two sons lived in Ratakhandi. They earned their livelihood from agriculture and wage work. Some villagers had problems with Jasoda. They suspected that her witchcraft practice had put the locals' life in danger. On the evening of 2 March 2018, a group of around 20 villagers came to Jasoda's house armed with iron rods, sharp edged weapons and wooden sticks. They dragged her out and assaulted her on the streets. The mob also thrashed Jashoda's husband Phagu and their 30-year-old son Kailash when they tried to intervene. Jasoda died on the spot while her husband and son were left critically injured.

Even when Jasoda, Phagu and Kailash were left bleeding, no one from the village came to their rescue. Informed about the attack, Jasoda's married daughter Gayatri Singh, who lived in a neighbouring village, rushed to the spot and took the three to the Rourkela Government Hospital. Jasoda was declared dead at RGH. Her husband and son were admitted in a critical condition. Fortunately, they were cured after 15 days of treatment.

Gayatri lodged an FIR with the Kuarmunda police station. After an inquiry in the village, the police arrested 14 people involved in the attack. They were taken into custody. One of them is out on bail while the 13 others are still in jail. The trial of the case began in January 2021. However, none of the accused has realised the gravity of their crime and continue to believe in the righteousness of their act of saving the village from a witch.

Observations:

- » Witchcraft beliefs are very strong in the district. Witches are widely thought to use their occult powers to inflict harm on other community members.

- » As seen during the study, relatives, kin, and neighbours are typically behind the murders or other crimes related to witch-hunting.
- » Health issues are one of the principal reasons for witch-branding and witch-hunting crimes in the district.
- » Many times, people from low-income groups, Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes are targeted the most, as happened in this case.
- » While witch-branding was made illegal through the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013, it has not deterred people from committing such crimes against vulnerable groups.

Case Study 9

Woman accused of witching her sister-in-law as she falls ill

Year: 2021

Karla village under Sundargarh block has 223 households with 948 people of which 458 are males and 490 are females. According to Census 2011, Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes comprise 58.86% and 24.58% respectively of the total population. The village has 113 children in the age group between 0 and 6 years. The literacy rate of Karla is 72.10%.

Sakuntala Kalo, aged 40, stays with her 45-year-old husband, Binod Kalo in Karla. Sakuntala's sister-in-law Surabhi Kalo, who has completed Class 12, was suffering from an unknown disease. She went to the Jharsuguda hospital for treatment. However, as mentioned by Surabhi's uncle, there were no medical complications found in her. Suspecting that Surabhi may have been a victim of black magic, her family consulted an *ojha* from another village. Performing magical rituals, he confirmed that it was indeed due to black magic that Surabhi had fallen sick. He branded Sakuntala as a witch with an evil eye on the family.

After this, there were several misunderstandings and quarrels between the two women. On 9 March 2021, Surabhi had a big fight over the issue with

Sakuntala and she dragged the latter to a nearby temple to make her take an oath. When Binod informed the police, both the parties were later called to the police station and the matter was sorted out there and a compromise was reached. However, the relations between the sisters-in-laws have gone sour.

Observations:

- » Witchcraft beliefs are very strong in the district.
- » As seen during the study, relatives, kin, and neighbours are typically behind the violence or other crimes related to witch-hunting.
- » Health issues are the primary reasons for witch-hunting related crimes in this district.
- » The police have not taken strong action against those supporting witch-hunting. No awareness programme has been initiated to sensitise people against superstition.
- » Support from the community towards the women branded as witches is negligible.
- » Almost all the villagers are reluctant to provide any information against the culprits due to fear of police.

Case Study 10

Woman admitted to hospital in critical condition after being attacked for alleged witchcraft practise

Year: 2018

Pamra village under Bargaon block has a population of 3,875 – 1,930 are males and 1,945 are females – according to Census 2011. Children (0-6 years of age) make up 12.08% of the total population. The literacy rate is 69.62 %. Scheduled Tribes comprise 61.78% of the population while 7.41% belong to Scheduled Castes.

Dukhi Baria, a 55-year-old woman, lives in the village with her family members. A neighbour, Rama Nayak suspected that a child in his family became sick due to Dukhi's witchcraft.

On 1 October 2018, Rama along with his wife and daughter accused Dukhi of being a witch and attacked her with an axe. Other relatives of his family also instigated the attackers. After assaulting Dukhi to their heart's content, they left her in a pool of blood.

Dukhi's family members found her in serious condition and rushed her to the hospital at Bargaon. She had been severely wounded in her head and torso. She was later referred to the district headquarters hospital in Sundargarh. She survived after 15 days' of treatment. In the meantime, police arrested Rama, his wife and daughter. They are currently out on bail while the trial is still underway in the court. However, the villagers continue to believe that Rama was right and that Dukhi was indeed a witch who deserved what she got.

Observations:

- » The majority of the villagers are now going to hospitals to seek treatment for illnesses. However, a section of the people still continue to believe in witchcraft and seek the help of gunia.
- » Almost every villager, with the exception of a very few, believes strongly in the existence of witches.
- » The victim receives the least support from the public in such a case.
- » When asked about how to end such a practice, many villagers kept quiet as they saw nothing wrong with it. They believed in punishment. There were a few others who suggested massive and regular awareness campaigns.
- » There was almost no involvement by the administration or legal action.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013.

Stakeholders' Interview: Sundargarh

Suresh Mahakur, villager and local teacher

What is the situation in regards to witch-branding and persecution in the area?

Many such cases are noticed in this block. A similar incident happened in our village last year.

When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?

Many cases arise due to poor health. Due to the influence of the gunias/ojhas, many people do not go to the hospital and think that somebody is casting black magic on them. As per the direction or information of the local ojha, they further brand someone as a witch. However, this is completely a superstitious tradition.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No. Communities have always stood against the witch.

Who are the gunias/ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

The common people believe that they are the persons who are supposed to have magical healing powers. When the gunias/ojhas fail to treat any sickness, they attribute it to witchcraft.

Have witch-branding and witch-hunting case increased during the COVID-19 pandemic?

No such cases have come to light here during the pandemic.

How can this practice of witch-branding, persecution and killing be stopped?

It needs a massive campaign by the government and police on a long term basis. It may take time to stop this practice.

Please let me know your ideas about how this practice can be ended legally and socially.

Legally – campaigns by police and stringent action against the accused.

Socially – involving panchayats in this process.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

No Idea.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services and government agencies?

No comments

How have you influenced the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent for years?

By creating awareness in the villages and also among the children in school

Nabarangpur

Nabarangpur district has an area of 5,294 square kilometres and a population of 12,20,946. Of the total population, 49.5% are males whereas 50.5% are females. Scheduled Tribes constitute 55.79% of the population while 14.53% belong to Scheduled Castes. Only 38.53% of the district is literate. The people in the district predominantly rely on agriculture for their livelihood.

Case Study 1

Woman murdered by her relative and her family ostracized for allegedly witching his family

Year: 2019

Gujumapadar village under Papadahandi block is located 55 km away from the Nabarangpur district headquarters. A total of 25 tribal families live in the village. The total population of the village is 125 out of which 72 are males and 53 are females. In September 2019, an unfortunate incident occurred in the village that scarred the family of Tulabati Santa. Tulabati, aged 55, was murdered on the suspicion of being a '*pangeni*' (witch).

We discussed the incident with the anganwadi workers and villagers. They revealed that Tulabati's husband, Anna Santa and Mana Santa were brothers. The person accused of killing Tulabati is Danu Santa, the second son of Mana. Both the families lived separately and practised farming to earn their living. Mana Santa's family often fell ill and suffered from fever during the year. Thus, he started suspecting Anna's wife, Tulabathi of witching them.

A year ago, both families had planted maize on their fields. However, Tulabati's family had reaped a good harvest while Mana Santa's harvest was not good enough. Besides, to protect the family's crops from wild animals, Danu Santa decided to spend the night in the field. He told his family that he could not sleep at night and often felt uncomfortable.

The continuous fever, the year's bad crops and Danu's sleepless nights led the family and some villagers to believe Tulabati to be a witch. Manu's family and the villagers accused Tulabati of harassing the family and trying to kill Danu. In September 2019, when Tulabati was taking her afternoon nap, Danu entered her house and murdered her with a machete. When Tulabati's family came to know of it, they immediately reported the matter to Papadahandi police station. The police visited the crime scene, recovered the body and arrested Danu. Speaking on the request of anonymity, a villager said that most of the villagers believed Tulabati to be a witch. Even after her murder, they ostracised her family. Fearing for their lives, the family members left the village on 13 February 2021. Two days later, the villagers demolished her house.

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, the majority of them still seek the help of a '*cheragunia*' (witch doctor).
- » Villagers often do not support the victim.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government agencies to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 14 February 2021 at Gujumapadar. Both men and women from the village attended the meeting. The discussion revealed that the village had no basic infrastructure for education and children's health. There is a dirt road that connects Gujumapadar with Moidalpur, the gram panchayat.

According to the discussions, the tribals of the village believe in sorcery and witchcraft practices. When somebody's health deteriorates, they call a '*cheragunia*' to cure them. The anganwadi workers and villagers were reluctant to discuss the issue at first. Most of them believed in the existence of witches but the ongoing police case scared them from saying so publicly. They, however, said that Danu rightly accused Tulabati of being a witch.

After discussion, it was clear that the villagers had deep faith in '*guni garedi*' (sorcery). They not only believe in the existence of witches but many other traditional rituals. On the new moon night, they believe witches walk on their hands and eat human faeces. Moreover, there is a lore that witches

come to drink the blood of young children and women in the forms of cats and dogs. To keep these witches away, villagers take many precautions on the new moon nights. They draw three lines of black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with raw rice on their front doors to keep these nightwalkers away.

Case Study 2

Woman forced to drink cow dung water after cheragunia accused her of being a witch

Year: 2018

Sindhiguda village under the Papadahandi block has 158 families out of which 22 are Scheduled Tribes and two are Scheduled Castes. The majority of 135 families belong to the General category. The total population of the village is 810 of which 404 are males and 406 are females. Sindhiguda is 40 km away from the district headquarters of Nabarangpur.

An unfortunate incident occurred in the village in which a 42-year-old woman, Gangai Gouda, was forced to flee from the village after being tortured based on her rumoured involvement in witchcraft. We discussed the incident with a few anganwadi workers, accredited social health activists (ASHAs), villagers and members of Gangai's family. They revealed that Gangai was known to offer pujas to a local deity. The villagers believed that she practised sorcery and often visited her to cure their illnesses.

In September 2018, the family of Bhagirathi Gouda fell severely ill. They called Gangai to perform pujas to cure them of the fever. However, their health further deteriorated along with the fever affecting a few other villagers. Soon after, the villagers concluded that someone had cast an evil eye on the village. The villagers called a 'chiragunia' to find out the witch who was the cause of all the mishaps. He performed the required rituals and stated that he had learnt from the gods that two women being pangeni (witches) were trying to harm the villagers. Filled with fear and

rage, the villagers called a meeting and accused Gangai of being a witch. They dragged her out of her house, tied her hands and publically beat her up. They also forcibly made her drink cow dung water to prove that she was indeed the witch trying to kill the villagers. Luckily, a villager, Ram Mirigan informed the Papadahandi police station about the incident. A few young men had also videotaped Gangai's public humiliation that served as evidence against the culprits.

The police rescued Gangai and arrested 12 villagers on the charge of defamation. The next day, the police held a meeting with the villagers and Gangai's family to understand the issue better. The matter was amicably settled in the meeting. Nevertheless, after the humiliation, Gangai left Sindhiguda and went to stay at her father's place in another village.

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, most of them still seek the help of cheragunia.
- » Villagers often do not support the victim.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government agencies to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 14 February 2021 in Sindhiguda village of Nuakot gram panchayat. The meeting was attended by men and women from Sindiguda. The discussion revealed that people of all communities in the village believed in sorcery and witchcraft. Often, when people fell

ill, the villagers called a cheragonia for treatment rather than going to a hospital.

Anganwadi workers, ASHAs and villagers were reluctant to discuss the issue due to the fear of the police. Everyone repeatedly said, “Let bygones be bygones.” They were of the impression that the more they spoke, the more they would be in danger. They thought it was best to stay away from the matter as they did not know what the witch would do next. Although scared of the police case, they continued to believe and fear the witch. Most of them continue to believe in several superstitions that surround the witch.

The villagers have deep faith in *guni garedi* (sorcery). They not only believe in the existence of witches but also many other traditional rituals. They believe that witches walk on their hands and eat human faeces on the night of the new moon. They also believe that witches drank the blood of young children and women by shapeshifting into cats and dogs. According to their superstitious beliefs, when someone takes a witch form, no one can see the witch but she notices everyone. The villagers always hide their young ones when the suspected witch visits someone’s homes. When she crosses someone’s house, they ask their young ones and pregnant woman to greet her from the back so that she leaves them unhurt. When the witch leaves, they sprinkle raw rice on children and would be mothers.

Case Study 3

Woman beaten and publicly humiliated by her relatives for allegedly practising witchcraft

Year: 2018

In 2018, another case of witch-hunting came to limelight in Sindhiguda village.

Kamala Gouda, a 43-year-old woman, was branded as a pangeni and ostracised from the village. We discussed the matter with several anganwadi workers, ASHAs, villagers and Kamala herself. Kamala's husband, Archit Gouda died ten years ago and she lives with her son, daughter-in-law, two grandchildren and an unmarried daughter. Her nephew, Muna Gouda also lives in the same village.

In September 2018, Muna's family was afflicted with fever for a long time. Muna visited a *chiragunia*. Offering pujas and chanting mantras, the *chiragunia* stated that two women, including a widow in their cousin's family, were witches trying to harm the family. Kamala used to worship and offer pujas to her ancestral deity, Khadia. Another village woman, Gangai Gowda used to practice prayers and pujas to cure people and visited Kamala often. It instigated the family members to take the matters into their own hands. Upon hearing the statement made by the *cheragunia*, Muna called a meeting in the village. Soon, they dragged Kamala out of her house with her hands tied. They then proceeded to beat her mercilessly and made her drink cow dung water.

Receiving information about the incident from an anonymous source, the police rushed to the village. They rescued Kamala in time and brought 12 villagers into custody. Soon, the police officers also held a meeting with the villagers asking them to live together in peace. Kamala is still living with her family.

Discussing the matter, Kamala said: "I worshipped my ancestral deity, Khadia for the wellbeing of my family. But, the villagers called me a witch. After the case with the police, no one dares to point a finger at me while I am around but I know they talk behind my back. I know they still consider me a witch. Whenever I visit someone's house, they hide their children from me. Whenever I pass someone's house on the street, they make children and pregnant women take my blessings for their safety and put 'arua' rice (raw rice) on their front doors. After knowing these events that take place behind my back, I have not visited anyone in the village for the

past two years. Even the anganwadi worker did not want to come to me because she was six months' pregnant. She was scared that if she met me, she would fall ill."

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, most of them still seek the help of a *cheragunia*.
- » Villagers often don't support the victim
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government organisations or agencies to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 14 February 2021 in Sindhiguda. Both men and women from Sindhiguda village attended the meeting. The discussion revealed that people of all communities in the village believe in sorcery and witchcraft. Often, when people feel sick, the villagers visit a *cheragunia* for treatment rather than going to a hospital.

Anganwadi workers, ASHAs and villagers did not encourage us to discuss the issue with Gangai or Kamala. Due to the fear of the police, the villagers and the workers were reluctant to discuss the issue at first. They were of the impression that the more they spoke, the more they would be in danger. They thought it was best to stay away from the matter as they did not know what the witch would do next. Although scared of the police case, they continued to believe and fear the witch. Most of them continue to believe in several superstitions that surround the witch.

The villagers have deep faith in *guni garedi*. They not only believe in the existence of witches but many other traditional rituals. On the new moon night, they believe that witches walk on their hands and eat human faeces. Moreover, they believe that witches come to drink the blood of young children and women by shape shifting into cats and dogs. To keep these witches away, villagers take many precautions. According to their beliefs, they draw three lines of black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with raw rice on their front doors. They believe that when someone takes a witch form, no one can see the witch but she notices everyone. They always hide their young ones when the branded witch visits someone's house. When she crosses someone's house, they ask their young ones and pregnant woman to greet her from the back so that she leaves them unhurt. When the witch leaves, they sprinkle raw rice on children and pregnant women.

Case Study 4

Woman made to dip her hands in boiling cow dung water to prove she wasn't a witch

Year: 2019

Nuaguda is a village under Nabarangapur block. It is only 5 km away from the district headquarters. A total of 50 families live in the village. Out of them, 47 are Scheduled Tribes and three are from the General category. The total population of the village is 203 out of which 98 are males and 105 are females. In July 2019, a 45-year-old woman, Drupati Jani, was allegedly made to dip her hands and drink boiling cow dung water.

Drupati lives in Nuagada village with her husband, Banamali Jani, aged 52, daughter Shubha Jani, aged 19, and son Kula Jani, aged 23. Her 27-year-old elder son, Dibya is married and lives in the nearby Keshoriguda village. The family earns its living by farming and raising goats on their farmland of three acres.

Pada Jani is a neighbour of Drupati Jani. There are five members in Pada's family. For most of the year, Pada's family members remained sick. Distraught and worried, Pada's family called a *chiragunia* from Chhattisgarh for treatment. After his rituals, the *chiragunia* told Pada that a woman in the neighbourhood was the cause of this sickness. He concluded that the woman was a pangeni. Pada's family immediately suspected Drupati to be a witch.

On 7 July, Drupati's pet dog bit and killed one of Pada's goats. The next day, a flustered Pada told the villagers that Drupati, as a witch, killed his goat. Further, he said that he had felt severe chest pain and alleged that she wanted to kill him too. Drupati and her husband refuted the allegations but Pada was adamant in his claim. The villagers wanted her to prove that she was not a witch. There is a belief among the villagers that if someone's hands are dipped in boiling cow dung water and they are not harmed, then it is confirmed that they are not a witch. Despite her family's protests, Pada and his brother, Porushati Jani forcibly dipped her hands in boiling water mixed with cow dung. It left her hands burnt and ruptured. Soon, Dibya lodged a written complaint at Nabarangpur police station. Drupati was immediately admitted to a hospital while the police arrested Pada and Porushati. Both spent eight months in jail before being released on bail.

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, many of them still seek the help of a cheragunia.
- » Villagers often don't support the victim.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government organisations or agencies to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.

- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 16 February 2021 in Nuaguda village of Baghsiuni gram panchayat. The meeting was attended by women from Nuaguda. The discussion revealed that people of all communities in the village believe in the practice of witchcraft and sorcery. In the village, if somebody's health deteriorates, they call upon the cheragunia to cure them.

Anganwadi workers and the women of the village were initially reluctant to discuss the issue because they feared that their superstitious ways would draw the police attention. But after the discussion, it was clear that the villagers have deep faith in *guni garedi*. They not only believe in the existence of witches but many other traditional rituals. They think that witches become very powerful when they walk on their hands and eat human faeces on the new moon day. Besides, they believe that witches shapeshift to cats and dogs to drink the blood of young children and women. They also believe that when one takes a witch form, no one can see them but they can see others. To keep these witches away, villagers take many precautions according to their superstitions. They draw three lines of black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with raw rice on their front doors.

Case Study 5

Woman assaulted by her step son accusing her of witching his father to take his land

Year: 2017

Baragaon village, under Nandahandi block, has 212 households – 108 from Other Backward Classes, nine from Scheduled Tribes and five Scheduled

Castes. Of the total population of 892 in the village, 453 are males and 439 are females. All the families in the village belong to the Christian community.

In an unfortunate incident in 2017, a Dalit woman, Divyamani Bagh was branded as a pangenji by her stepson. Her stepson physically assaulted her and threatened to kill her because he thought she was after his father's land. We discussed the matter with a few anganwadi workers, villagers and Divyamani . Divyamani was Alopas Bagh's second wife. Alopas was first married to Anandamani Bagh and had four sons – Santali Bagh, Suneli Bagh, Joseph Bagh and Yakshapatra Bagh – with her. Later, he married Divyamani and both had a daughter, Esther Rani. Alopas' second marriage caused friction between Anandamani and Divyamani. Soon Alopas decided that it was better for his wives and their children to live separately. He divided his time between his two families but spent more of his time living with Divyamani. Anandamani alleged that Divya was a witch who used her witchcraft to control her husband. Soon, the suspicion was passed on to her sons who thought of their stepmother as a witch. They believed that her motive was to take the two acres of land that Alopas owned.

According to Divyamani, Alopas had diabetes and high blood pressure. Not wanting to worry the others, he spent more time with her as she took care of his health. In March 2017, Anandamani's youngest son, Yakshapatra, went to Divyamani's house drunk and started a quarrel. He accused her of casting spells on his father to have control over his land property and assaulting her. . He also threatened to kill her at night. As none of the villagers came to her rescue, she lodged a complaint with the police, which arrested Yakshapatra on charge of assaulting Divyamani. He spent 15 months in jail. Alopas Bagh died in 2020.

Observations:

- »» The villagers have strong faith in the existence of witches.
- »» Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, the majority of them still seek the help of a *chiragunia*.

- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government agencies to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 21 February 2021 in Baragaon village of Mentri gram panchayat. Both men and women from the village of Baragaon attended the meeting. The villagers were reluctant to discuss the matter. However, it was clear from the discussion that the villagers had deep faith in guni garedi. Fear of witches is deep-rooted. They think witches suck the blood of women and children by shapeshifting into cats and dogs. To keep the witches away, villagers take many precautions on the new moon nights when witches become very powerful – they draw three lines of black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with raw rice on their front doors. Upon being asked about Divyamani, villagers remained silent while a few others said that the fight was due to a land dispute.

Case Study 6

Woman beaten and accused of using witchcraft to cause chickenpox in children

Year: 2016

Indira Colonypada village under the Tentulikhunti block is located 45 km from the district headquarters. A total of 52 families live in the village of Indira Colonypada. There are 37 Adivasi families and 8 Dalit families; 7 families are from the general category. The village has a total population of 243 – 127 are males and 116 are females.

Damai Harijan, aged 50, lives in the village with her husband, Bidu Harijan, aged 55. The Dalit couple's family comprises of their elder son, Kalu Harijan, aged 29, daughter-in-law, Sasmita Harijan, aged 25, younger son, Runu Harijan, aged 21, and granddaughter, Kunimani Harijan, aged 8. In December 2016, Kunimani contracted chickenpox and fell ill. The family sought the help of a 'gunia' to cure her disease. The *gunia* proceeded to worship a goddess and for five days continued to bathe the girl with lemon and turmeric. Eventually, Kunimani recovered.

Ballab Harijan, aged 25, is one of Damai's neighbours. He lives with his wife, Padmini Harijan, aged 23, son Rama Harijan, aged 7, and brother, Gangaram Harijan, aged 22. After Kunimani had healed, Ballab's son, Rama contracted chickenpox. Ballab and his wife Padmini became suspicious of Damai thinking that she used witchcraft against their son after curing her own granddaughter of the same. They had an altercation regarding it with Damai. Two days after the altercation, Ballab and his brother, Gangaram entered Damai Harijan's house drunk and beat her up. Damai lodged a written complaint against them at Tentulikhunti police station and Ballab and Gangaram were arrested. After 11 months in Nabarangapur jail, the two brothers came back to the village on bail.

Observations:

- » The villagers have strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, most of them still seek the help of a *chiragunia*.
- » Villagers often do not support the victim.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government agencies to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.
- » People are not aware of or educated about witch-hunting laws.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 24 February 2021 in Indira Colonypada village of Patraputu gram panchayat. Only women from the village attended the meeting. It was clear from the discussion that people of all communities in the village believed in sorcery and witchcraft. They prefer going to a *chiragunia* rather than going to the hospital when someone falls sick.

Anganwadi workers and the villagers revealed that both the families were suspicious of each other when their children fell ill. After interacting with the women of the village, it became clear that there was an unwavering belief in *guni garedi*. These superstitious beliefs took many forms. According to them, on the new moon night of Shravan month, the witch walked on her hands and ate human faeces. She took the form of cats or dogs and drank the blood of children and young women. Further, to prevent these witches from entering their homes, villagers, as a precaution, draw three equal lines with black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with raw rice on their front doors. They believe that these steps help keep witches at bay. They assume that the witch will ignore a child if there is a fishing net placed under the child's pillow at night.

Case Study 7

Old man beaten mercilessly by villagers after neighbour accused him of witching his oxen

Year: 2016

Biripiti village under the Kosagumuda block is located 70 km away from the district headquarters. A total of 175 families live in the village – 47 are Scheduled Tribes, 13 are Scheduled Castes and 115 are general. The village has a total population of 678 including 340 males and 338 females.

In August 2016, a 70-years-old man, Mangatu Muria was beaten mercilessly by his neighbours who accused Mangatu of using black magic to kill their

oxen. We discussed the matter with his son, Chitaram Muria, aged 52, and daughter-in-law, Phul Muria, aged 42. Mangatu is currently bedridden due to old age related health problems.

Mangatu's family comprises of Chitaram, Phul , and his granddaughters, Manima, aged 16, Champa, aged 13, Pratima, aged 11, and Sabita, aged 9. After their marriage, Chitaram and Phul did not have children for six years. Mangatu often offered pujas to please the gods for his son's fruitful marriage. He hoped for the couple to be blessed with children. Soon after, the couple were blessed with 4 daughters. Seeing his prayers getting fulfilled in the form of his grandchildren, an overwhelmed Mangatu recited his prayers every day.

Lakshmi Nath Muria, aged 55, is Mangatu's neighbour. He lived with his wife, Lachhma Muria, aged 50 and four children. Lakshmi Nath earned his livelihood from agriculture and by collecting forest produce. He also had a pair of oxen besides two cows and five goats. Once, Lakshmi Nath's oxen had loose motions. Noticing it, Mangatu cautioned his neighbour that his oxen were suffering from diarrhoea and would die without proper medication. Two days later, both the oxen died. Seeing his neighbour's statement come true, Lakshmi Nath became doubtful of Mangatu being a witch and killing his oxen.

The two families quarrelled and Lakshmi Nath gathered some other villagers to assault Mangatu and his family. Mangatu was beaten mercilessly. Later, Chitaram called a village meeting to discuss the matter and explained his father's innocence. However, no one seemed to pay him any heed to his pleas. Seeing no other way, Chitaram filed a complaint at the Kosagumuda police station against Lakshmi Nath for assaulting his father and got him arrested. The next day, the Santoshpur gram panchayat sarpanch went to the police station with some other villagers and claimed Lakshmi Nath to be innocent. He also called Chitaram to the police station to strike out a compromise. The police persuaded both sides to let go of the incident and live in harmony in the village.

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches and black magic.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, most of them still seek the help of *gunia*.
- » The victim did not get the support of the villagers.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » Government agencies are yet to take up steps to ensure a stop to such practices or spread awareness about the same.
- » People are not aware or educated about the laws relating to witch-hunting.

Details FGD:

A group discussion was held on 4 April 2021 in Biripeiti village of Santoshpur gram panchayat. The meeting was attended by men and women of the village.

The discussion revealed that people of all communities in the village believed in sorcery and witchcraft. They sought the help of a cheragunia for treatment rather than going to a hospital.

When asked about the incident, anganwadi workers, ASHAs and villagers were reluctant to discuss the incident due to the fear of the police. But the sympathy of many seemed to be with the culprits rather than the victim. They were of the impression that they should avoid speaking about it to stay away from any uncomfortable situation. They thought it was best to stay away from the matter as they did not know what the witch would do next. Although scared of the police case, they continued to believe and fear the witch. Most of them continue to believe in several superstitions that surround witches. They not only believe in the existence of witches

but many other superstitious rituals. According to them, on the new moon night of Shraavan month, the witch walked on her hands and ate human faeces. She shapeshifted to cats or dogs and drank the blood of children and young women. Further, to prevent these witches from entering their homes, villagers, as a precaution, drew three equal lines with black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with raw rice on their front doors. They believe that these steps help keep witches at bay. They assume that the witch will ignore a child if there is a fishing net placed under the child's pillow at night.

Case Study 8

Woman accused of practising witchcraft and family, ostracized by her relatives

Year: 2017

Turahandi village under Kosagumuda block is 40 km from Nabarangpur district headquarters. A total of 126 families live in the village – 49 Adivasi families, two Dalit families and 75 families from other castes. The total population of the village is 458 including 251 males and 207 females.

In March 2017, a 60-years-old woman, Dilamani Mali was accused of being a witch by her family and the villagers of Turahandi. During the village meeting, she was abused, insulted and ostracised by her family. We discussed the incident with the anganwadi workers and the family of Dilamani. Dilamani is the wife of Cowdi Mali, aged 65. The other members of the family are the old couple's son Giridhar, aged 40, daughter-in-law Chanchala, aged 35, and grandchildren, Jyotikala, aged 18, Chandrakala, aged 16, and Sabita, aged 14. According to the Mali family tradition, Dilamani often offered pujas to her family deities, Vrindavati and Gudi.

Cowdi's cousin, Mahadeb Mali lived in the same village with his wife, Dhanmati Mali. For some reason, one day Dhanmati Mali began to tremble, became unconscious and went into deep sleep. Her coma-like state

worried her husband. He and his son, Jogeshwar Mali became suspicious of Dilamani of being a witch who had attacked Dhanmati. The next day, Mahadeb and Jogeswar took Dhanmati Mali, still in her deep sleep, and laid her down in front of Dilamani's house. The father-son duo abused Dilamani holding her responsible for Dhanmati's condition. The villagers gathered around the scene and supported Mahadeb and his son. They also believed that Dilamani was a witch and asked her to heal Dhanmati soon. Dilamani tried to protest and said that she was innocent, but no one paid her any heed.

Later, a meeting was held in the village where Dilamani and her family were publicly abused and socially ostracised. Fearing for their lives in the village, Dilamani and Cowdi lodged a complaint at the Kosagumuda police station. Subsequently, the police intervened and held a meeting with the villagers, sarpanch and Dilamani's family. Two days later, the matter was discussed among the villagers and the sarpanch. They agreed to stop boycotting Dilamani and her family.

Discussing the incident with us, Dilamani got teary-eyed. She said: "I was not able to face anyone due to the accusation made by my nephew, Jogeshwar and the villagers. I did not leave my home for days and kept crying. My father's family also came and scolded me to stop practising pangen art. My family could not eat for days in shame and humiliation. Now, everything is fortunately back to normal. I visit families in the neighbourhood, and they visit me. However, the traumatic memories still haunt me."

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » Apart from a few who regularly visit the hospitals, the majority of them still seek the help of *gunia*.
- » Villagers often do not support the victim.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.

- » Government agencies need to take up steps to ensure such practices are stopped completely.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 7 April 2021 in Turahandi village of Temeri gram panchayat. Both men and women from Turahandi village attended the meeting. The discussion revealed that people of all communities in the village believed in sorcery and witchcraft. The villagers sought a gunia for treatment rather than going to a hospital during health issues.

When asked about Dilamani Mali, initially the anganwadi workers, ASHAs and villagers remained silent. Gradually opening up, they said that let bygones be bygones as everything had been sorted out. They seemed to be wary of the police and refrained from talking much about the issue but it was clear that they continued to believe and fear the witch. Most of them continue to believe in several superstitions that surround the witch. They have deep faith in sorcery and take precautions as laid down by some traditional rituals to keep the witches away and protect their families and children from any harm. For instance, they try to keep their young children beyond the sight of a presumed witch and sprinkle raw rice over children and pregnant women if she crosses their path.

Case Study 9

Woman attacked by his neighbour for allegedly witching his father and mother

Year: 2017

Rajoda village under Kosagumuda block is 70 km from the Nabarangpur district headquarters. Of the total of 204 families in the village, 99 belong to Scheduled Tribes, 41 to Scheduled Castes and 64 to the general category.

The total population of the village is 916 including 479 males and 437 females.

In July 2017, a 40-years-old tribal man, Gobind Samrath was abused and beaten by other villagers for allegedly practising witchcraft. His family members were also assaulted in the process. We discussed the case with anganwadi workers and the family members of Gobind. Gobind and his wife, Daimati Samarth, aged 38, live in the village along with their sons, Debendra Samarth, aged 15, Chandan Samarth, aged 13 and daughter, Bhagwati Samarth, aged 9. The family earned their livelihood through agriculture and collection of minor forest products.

Gobind's neighbour is Parva Bhatra, aged 40. Parva's family includes his wife, Bidya Bhatra, aged 39, son Parshuram Bhatra, aged 22, and daughter, Mandara Bhatra, aged 19. Gobind and Parva not only belong to the tribal community but have also been friends since childhood. An alcoholic, Parva often beat his wife, Bidya after getting drunk. According to a villager, Bidya and Parshuram had repeatedly asked Parva not to visit Gobind's house. Bidya not only always doubted her husband's character but also was suspicious of Daimati being a *pangeni*. She accused Daimati of controlling her husband, Parva, making him an alcoholic and getting him to visit her often.

Once, after getting drunk as usual, Parva verbally abused his wife and went to his friend Gobind's house. After he left, Bidya felt severe pain in her chest. Seeing this, Parshuram suspected that their neighbour, Daimati had cast a spell on his mother to kill her. Enraged, he went to Gobind's house and assaulted him and his wife. Later, he called a village meeting where he informed the villagers of his mother's chest pain and his father's behaviour. The villagers fully supported Parshuram and attacked Gobind and Daimati.

To save their lives, both Gobind and Daimati went to Kosagumuda police station to file a complaint. Upon receiving the complaint, police arrested and detained Parshuram for two days. Two days later, a meeting was held in

the village, which was attended by the sarpanch of Rajoda gram panchayat, a few villagers, Parshuram and Gobind's family. The issue was resolved there and Gobind's family was allowed to live peacefully in the village.

Observations:

- » The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- » They go to *gunia* when they face any medical problem. Going to the hospital is rare. The victim often does not get support from a majority of the villagers.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings are the main causes behind witch-hunting and branding.
- » Government agencies need to work sincerely to ensure a stop to such practices and sensitise the villagers.
- » People are not aware of or educated about the laws against witch-hunting and branding.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held in April 2021 in Rajoda village, which is also the gram panchayat headquarters. The meeting was attended by both men and women from the village. The villagers did not speak much about the incident. Even the frontline service providers like anganwadi worker and ASHA refrained from making any comments due to the fear of the police and the witch. But, they continued to believe witchcraft and fear the presumed witch. They also have strong faith in *ojha* and *gunia*, who suggest supposed measures against witches; people diligently follow such measures to protect their families, especially children and pregnant women.

Case Study 10

Woman and her children beaten ruthlessly by her husband on allegedly witching his third wife

Year: 2020

Makia village under Papadahandi block is 30 km away from the district headquarters. There are a total of 154 families living in the village with 66 are Scheduled Tribes, 61 are Scheduled Castes and 27 are general castes. The total population of the village is 1,699, which include 346 males and 353 females.

In May 2020, an unfortunate incident occurred in Makia in which a 40-years-old woman, Mangai Santa was almost killed by her husband, who assumed her to be a witch. Bhuban Harijan of Makia had married three women. First wife, Kalabati had four children. Bhuban and Kalabati had a soured relationship due to which she had moved back to her father's place with her children. His second wife, Mangai Santa had three daughters – Hema Harijan, aged 15, Lata Harijan, aged 13, Rita Harijan, aged 11 – and a son Gopi Harijan, aged 9. Bhuban then married for the third time to his cousin, Budai Harijan. For an unknown reason, Budai was bedridden with high fever for 15 consecutive days. Bhuban called a *chiragunia* to host ritualistic pujas to cure Budai. However, it did not work. Budai instigated her husband saying that his second wife Mangai had cast a witchcraft spell on her. She claimed that Mangai shapeshifted and came to drink her blood every night.

Bhuban and Budai would often abuse Mangai and accuse her of being a witch. Bhuban soon turned violent and stopped providing for Mangai's children and would often beat them up. Unable to take their father's anger, Hema and Lata shifted to their maternal uncle's place. On 14 May 2020, Budai was again down with fever. She told Bhuban that Mangai was trying to take her life. Enraged, Bhuban tied the hands and legs of Rita, Gopi and Mangai with ropes and beat ruthlessly. He told his second wife and children that he would kill them and make Budai drink their blood to cure her. As he tried to strangle his daughter, their neighbours rushed to the scene and prevented the worst from happening.

One of their neighbours, Deshram Harijan, a government employee, lodged a written complaint in Papadahandi police station. Bhuban was arrested and granted bail after six months in jail. He now lives with his third wife, Budai who is doing well. Mangai lives at her father's village in Bhatikat with her children.

Observations:

gunia The villagers believe in the existence of witches and witchcraft.

- » Most of them prefer going to chiragunia for health issues. Only a few visit the hospitals.
- » Family disputes and misunderstandings often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » Government agencies have not taken enough steps to spread awareness about the issue and put an end to such superstitious practices.
- » People are not aware or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held on 14 February 2021 in Makia village. Both men and women from the village attended the meeting. It was revealed that people of all communities in the village believed in sorcery and witchcraft and consulted *chiragunia* for treatment of medical ailments rather than going to a hospital.

We discussed the matter with frontline service providers, government officials and the victim, Mangai Santa. Fear of the witch and faith in *gunia* continues in the village. However, in Mangai's case, neighbours and fellow villagers supported her. They all felt that her husband Bhuban Harijan's third wife had coerced him to suspect Mangai.

Recalling her ordeal, Mangai said: “My husband had come under the influence of his third wife and accused me of being a witch. For five months, he physically and verbally abused me. He would not provide me or my children with sustenance. I was not able to face anyone or tell them that I was married to this man. My neighbours, however, have been very helpful. They have protected me several times. However, I have been suffering with the trauma and humiliation since he tried to kill me.”

Case Study 11

Woman beaten up by a mob speculating her to practice witchcraft on children

Year: 2017

Betaharan village under Papadahandi block is 35 km from the district headquarters. The village has 191 families - 133 are general castes, 26 are Scheduled Tribes and 32 are Scheduled Castes. The total population of the village is 950, out of which 472 are males and 471 are females.

In 2017, 35-years-old Gunamani Harijan and her family members were beaten by a village mob. They alleged that her witchcraft practice was causing fever in children. Gunamani lived in the village with her husband, Trilochan Harijan, aged 40, sons, Rasan Harijan, aged 20, and Tantan Harijan, aged 12, and daughters, Barsa Harijan, aged 10 and Megha Harijan, aged 7. After Rasan’s birth, the couple had no children for seven years. She would worship and host rituals to please her clan deity in the hope of giving birth to a child. After five years, she gave birth to three more children. Since then she had been offering pujas for the wellbeing of her family.

Barshel Harijan, aged 35, is another resident of the village. He lived with his wife, Tova Harijan, aged 32, and three daughters, Bibhuti Mani, aged 12, Ashwani Mani, aged 10, and Rangeli Mani, aged 7.

Ashwani Mani and Barsha studied in the village upper primary school. For some reason, Ashwani Mani fell ill and was not able to go to school for 15 days. Upon recovering, she returned to school and fought with her friend, Barsha. Quoting her mother, Tova, Ashwani Mani told Barsha that the latter's mother, Gunamani had cast a dark spell that caused her fever. Further, she stated that she would not be friends with a witch's daughter. Barsha returned from school and narrated the incident to her mother. This had triggered a quarrel between Gunamani and Tova.

Hearing their yells, a mob gathered and sided with Tova. They started abusing and assaulting Gunamani despite her protests. Amidst the merciless beating, Gunamani lost consciousness. When Trilochan came to intervene and rescue his wife, the villagers beat him up as well. The next day, Gunamani and Trilochan reached the police to seek refuge and filed a complaint. The police then arrested Tova, Grassi Harijan and Abasalam Harijan. They were released from jail on bail after six months.

Observations:

- »» The faith in witches and witchcraft still exists in the village.
- »» Most of the villagers still seek the help of a cheragunia for their problems rather than visiting a hospital.
- »» Witch accusations and branding stem from family disputes and even minor misunderstandings.
- »» Villagers often side with the tormentors of the vulnerable people in the name of punishing presumed witches.
- »» No action has been taken by government organisations or agencies for a safer environment and spreading awareness.
- »» People are unaware of the laws against witch-hunting.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held in April 2021 in Betaharan village of Naktiguda gram panchayat. It was attended by men and women from the village.

We discussed the matter with frontline service providers like anganwadi workers and villagers. The villagers fear the police and the anganwadi workers fear the villagers. We also talked to the victim, Gunamani about the same. Currently, she lives peacefully in the village with her family and is just happy to be free of allegations. However, she shuddered while narrating the horrible incident. She said: “They had accused me of being a witch in front of the whole village. I lost my self respect and endured much humiliation.”

The villagers have deep faith in guni garedi. They not only believe in the existence of witches but many other superstitious rituals. They are scared of stories about witches who supposedly become powerful on the new moon night. According to them, such witches walk on their hands, eat human faeces and drink the blood of young children and women in the forms of cats and dogs. Villagers take many precautions on the new moon nights. As suggested by gunia, they draw three lines of black charcoal and tie castor leaves stuffed with rice on their front doors to keep their families safe.

Case Study 12

Woman assaulted by a *chiragunia* alleging her to be witch when she did not attend to him

Year: 2017

Trimurla village under Papadahandi block is 30 km away from the district headquarters. A total of 144 families live in the village of which 101 are Scheduled Tribes and 36 are general castes. The total population of the village is 545 including 273 males and 272 females.

In July 2017, 43-years-old, Krishna Beni Bisoyi was physically assaulted by the village’s *chiragunia* in broad daylight. None of the villagers protested his highly inappropriate action. Krishna Beni lives in the village with her 45-years-old husband, Balabhadra Bisoyi, and children, Laxmikantha

Bisoyi, aged 18, and Anjali Bisoyi, aged 5. The family does not have any agricultural land and both the husband and wife earn their living as daily wage labourers.

In the same village, Ujesti Saura worked as a chiragunia. According to Krishna Beni, whenever she had crossed paths with Ujesti, he had looked at her lustfully. However, she had not paid any attention to him. In July 2017, Ujesti gathered villagers and said that the previous night, god came in his dreams and told him that a woman from the Bisoyi family, whose maternal house was in Makia village, was a witch. He said that the witch was drinking the blood of his bulls. He further said that he went to his cattle shed late in the night and found a naked woman rushing out of there. Unless the woman was found by the villagers, a huge disaster will befall the village, he added.

The suspicion immediately fell on Krishna Beni, the only woman in the village from Makia. Hearing the matter, the villagers rushed to her house and abused her family. Offended by their words and comments, she confronted Ujesti and asked him why he was defaming her in the village. At that time, he was with seven other villagers. Feeling insulted, an enraged Ujesti grabbed her hair and ruthlessly assaulted her. He asked Krishna Beni how a witch like her would dare challenge a chiragunia like him. Villagers stood as mute witnesses to the assault on Krishna Beni. No one had come to her rescue even as she begged for help.

Her husband and son rushed to the scene and rescued her. However, the villagers still accused her of being a witch. Eventually, she and her husband lodged a written complaint with Papadahandi police station. The police arrested Ujesti who spent six months in jail before being granted bail.

Observations:

- »» The villagers have a strong faith in the existence of witches.
- »» Only Few go to the hospitals whereas the majority of villagers still seek chiragunia during any health issue..

- » Family disputes and personal grudges often lead to witch accusations and branding.
- » No action has been taken by government organisations or agencies to put an end to such practices or create a better environment.
- » People are not aware of or educated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Details of FGD:

A group discussion was held in April 2021 in Betaharan village of Naktiguda gram panchayat. The meeting was attended by men and women from the village. We discussed the matter with anganwadi workers as well as the victim, Krishna Beni Bisoyi. She said: “Even with the chiragunia in jail, I am still affected by the trauma of the humiliation. I am still suffering due to it. Although villagers have started talking to me again, I think, in their minds, they still feel that I am a witch but due to the fear of the police, they do not say anything.”

It was evident that the villagers had deep faith in sorcery and witchcraft. They still take the suggestions of gunia to ward off assumed witches. According to their superstitions, they draw three lines of black charcoal and tie castor leaves with stuffed raw rice on their front doors on the new moon nights when witches are supposed to be very powerful. They believe that when someone takes a witch form, no one can see the witch but she notices everyone. They always hide their young ones when the presumed witch visits someone’s homes.

Stakeholders’ Interviews: Nabarangpur

Damani Nayak, ASHA

Village: Sindhiguda

GP: Nuakote

Block: Papadahandi

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The witch problem in our area has been around for a long time but every witch is caught. Anyone who is caught deserves to suffer the punishment at the hands of the village council.

When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?

I have heard that people of low caste who worship gods, widows and those who remain in disguises can be witches. It can either be a man or a woman.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person branded a witch?

Why will anyone support a witch who wants people to suffer and children to die?

Who are the 'ojhas'? What is the basis of their power?

The *chiragunia* or *ojha* worship the gods to help people get rid of troubles at home. The gods say everything for the good of the house through the *chiragunia*. They can recognise any witch.

According to some reports, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?

It simply came to our notice then.

How can the practice of witch-branding, persecution and killing be stopped?

I don't know.

How do you think this practice can end, legally and socially?

I don't know.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I don't know.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services and government agencies?

I don't know.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I don't know.

Debanjali Majhi, anganwadi worker

Village: Baripadar (Gujumapadar)

GP: Maidapur

Block: Papadahandi

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The witch problem in our area has been around for a long time but every witch is caught. Those who are caught are meted out punishment at the hands of the village council.

When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?

In our area, if a woman walks around at night and is caught worshipping at odd times then she is suspected to be a witch. It is said that the witch often monitors children and pregnant women as her potential targets.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No one will help a witch. Obviously, people will be sceptical.

Who are the *ojhas*? What is the basis of their power?

The chiragunia or ojha worship the gods to help those having problems. The gods say everything for the good of the house through the chiragunia.

According to some reports, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?

We just happened to come across those cases more.

How can the practice of witch-branding, persecution and killing be stopped?

Police and doctors in all villages should meet people and explain to people not to go to chiragunia.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I don't know.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services, and government agencies?

I don't know.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I don't know.

Madan Mohan Majhi, president, Bhatra Jati Samaja

Village: Anchalguma.

GP: Jhariguma.

Block: Tentulikhunti

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The witch system dates back to ancient times. It simply comes to our notice when such a case happens. People of these communities have not learned anything. However, the belief system is breaking slowly and gradually.

When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?

Family quarrels and frequent illnesses make people suspicious of someone who they brand as a witch. The villagers usually suspect women and men who are known to offer pujas often.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No one will help a witch.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

Due to the lack of education, people worship the gods to get rid of their problems when they are in trouble. It is assumed that the gods say everything for the good of the house through the chiragonia/ojha.

Have witch-branding cases increased during the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, what are the reasons for this increase?

Some cases have come to our notice. The reasons are the same as stated above.

How can the practice of witch-branding and killing be stopped?

Government officials need to hold meetings in every village to prioritise education. Health workers need to interact with people and explain scientific methods and the need to stop going to chiragunia.

How do you think this practice can end, legally and socially?

The law needs to be discussed at the GP meetings.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I don't know anything about the law.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I don't know.

Puspanjali Nachika, sarpanch, Mokia GP

Block: Papadahandi

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

For years, our region has had a witch problem. The villagers call chiragunia in times of need. They brand someone as a witch. The village council hands over punishment and the branded witch must suffer.

When a woman or man is likely to be branded as a witch?

I hear that widows, tribals, and oppressed people are often branded as witches.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No one will ever support a branded witch if she is caught. Most of the time, not even her family members come to her rescue.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

The chiragunia or ojha is supposed to be the messenger of the gods and helps people get rid of their problems. The gods say everything for the good of the house through them. Chiragunia are said to have the power to recognise a witch.

As reports indicate, witch-branding has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?

Such cases have come to our notice. Reasons for branding are as stated above.

How can the practice of witch-branding, persecution and killing be stopped?

The government, especially the health department should hold meetings in the villages and sensitise the people.

How do you think this practice can end, legally and socially?

I think at the village level, people need to be made aware of the causes of the diseases.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I don't know.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services and government agencies?

I can't say.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I can't say.

Rabindra Pradhan, social worker

NGO: SEDP

Village: Majhiguda

GP: Nandahandi

Block: Nabarangpur

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

The problem of witches in our area has been around for many years, but the villagers do not say anything to outsiders. It comes to our notice when it happens.

When a woman or man is likely to be branded as a witch?

People of the lower castes who worship the gods, widowers and widows are the most vulnerable groups. I have heard that they are usually branded as witches.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

Who will support a branded witch? The villagers are afraid of this and do not tell anyone.

Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?

Chiragunia or ojhas are supposed to be gods' messengers to help people. The villagers approach them for all kinds of problems.

What are the reasons for the increase in branding and persecution of women as witches during COVID-19 pandemic?

Some cases came to our notice. The reasons of branding continue to be the same.

How can the practice of witch-branding and persecution of and killing be stopped?

Education needs to be broad based.

What are your ideas to end this practice, legally and socially?

In every village/ caste society/ school, science needs to be widely discussed.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I don't know much about the law.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women's groups, health services, and government agencies?

I don't know.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I cannot say anything without knowing the law.

Name of the informant: Chandrama Harijan

ZP member, Papadahandi Zone 1

What is the situation of witch-branding and persecution in the area?

For years, our region has had a witch problem. The villagers call the chiragunia in times of need. He identifies the witch and the village council punishes the branded witch.

When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?

I hear that widows, tribals, and oppressed people who worship the gods and dress differently from others can be identified as witches.

Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?

No one will ever support someone branded as a witch, not even their family.

Who are the *ojhas*? What is the basis of their power?

Chiragunia or *ojhas* worship the gods on behalf of common people. Thus, people approach them with their problems.

How can the practice of witch-branding, persecution and killing be stopped?

The government, especially the health department should hold meetings in the villages and sensitise the people about their health problems.

What are your ideas on how this practice can end, legally and socially?

I think at the village level, people need to be made aware of the causes of the diseases. If the government has a law on this, the villagers need to be made aware about it.

Is the current legal provision sufficient to deal with witch-hunting? Does it include the proper rehabilitation, legal aid, protection of the survivors?

I don't know.

How did you collaborate with the community to tackle and bring down such practices? Did you receive cooperation from women’s groups, health services, and government agencies?

I can’t say.

How can you influence the government and other key actors, regarding their response to the violent crime of witch-hunting prevalent over the years?

I can’t say.

Malkangiri

Malkangiri has an area of 5,791 square kilometres and a population of 613,192, according to Census 2011. Of the total population, 49.5% are males and 50.5% are females. A majority, 57.83% of the district are Scheduled Tribes while 22.55% belong to Scheduled Castes. The literacy rate of the district is 48.5%. The district headquarters is in Malkangiri town. The people of the district predominantly rely on agriculture and daily wage labour for their livelihoods. During rainy seasons, many areas of the district are prone to heavy flooding that cuts them off from the outside world. The district is also prone to malaria.

Case Study 1

Man stoned to death by 4 villagers after threatening to bewitch the village

Year: 2016

Gauda Gurai is a small village of Doraguda gram panchayat (GP) under Chitrakonda block of Malkangiri district. The village’s 30 households mostly belong to three different tribal groups – Paraja, Rana and Kumbar. Out of the total population of the village, 74 are males and 87 are females.

On 22 February 2021, we conducted a meeting with the villagers to understand their beliefs around witches and witchcraft. Village head,

Bhakta Ram Sukri and other village members, both males and females, attended the meeting. One of the important cases being discussed was the murder of a 40-years-old man, Nanda Muduli who had allegedly been practising witchcraft.

Nanda stayed in the village with his wife, Dalima, aged 38, and son, Ramesh, aged 17. He was known for having a foul mouth and a drinking problem. Often, in his drunken state, he scared and threatened many villagers saying that he would kill his enemies by witching them. Villagers had noticed that he often avoided attending village meetings. He also stayed away from the village at night.

According to villagers, Nanda went to the forests every night and prayed to goddess Chandi. Many men and women who had a quarrel with him in the past had died. In 2016, people began to believe that he was a sorcerer and accused him of trying to harm the villagers. However, he continued with his wayward ways. Four youths of the village – Ajay, aged 30, Dhana Sukri, aged 35, Naba Muduli, aged 35, and Chitra Muduli, aged 35 – decided to take matters into their own hands and conspired to kill him. Villagers said that they assaulted him after catching hold of him and buried him in the outskirts of the village thinking he was dead. But when villagers tried to dig the spot, they could not find his body.

Two days later, the villagers found Nanda walking on the road. The four youths killed him on the spot by pelting stones at him. Five days later, the villagers found his body floating in the nearby river. The police were informed and the four accused were arrested. Nanda's wife, Dalima and son, Ramesh continue to earn their livelihood through agriculture and daily wage work. According to Dalima, Nanda did not practice *guni garedi*, he was just an angry man.. However, they had no idea why or where he went every night.

Observations:

» Villagers strongly believe in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft.

- » Especially during health emergencies among children, they take the patient to a '*disary*' for treatment instead of going to a hospital.
- » The *disary* often uses egg, liquor and live cocks to find out the cause of the disease. The cause is mostly said to be black magic or witchcraft.
- » No one is educated about the existing laws relating to witch-hunting.

Case Study 2

Political opposition party suspected to use witchcraft to kill Sarpanch

Year: 2015

Majhuguda is a small village of Gunthwada GP under Chittrakonda block. The village's 17 households are divided into Paraja, Rana, Kandha and Kumbar tribal groups. The total population of the village is 92 of which 39 are males and 53 are females. Agriculture is the principal source of income in the village. There is a primary school and an anganwadi centre in the village.

We held a meeting in the village on 22 February 2021, which was attended by both men and women of the local community. They discussed the premature death of a former sarpanch, Banu Sisa. According to them, the 32-years-old Banu died in 2015, due to prolonged health issues. But, it was rumoured that Banu's death was caused by witchcraft. Banu was the first sarpanch of the Gunthawada GP. After successfully completing his five-year term as a sarpanch, he was elected for a second term. However, two years into his second term, he died due to several health issues. He left behind his first wife, Tula Sisa and second wife, Amika Sisa along with his sons Jagannath Sisa, aged 11, Amit Sisa, aged 7, and Manoj Sisa, aged 8. He also owned five acres of agricultural land and a tractor.

After Banu was afflicted with multiple chronic health issues, his family members took him to hospitals in Chittrakonda, Malkangiri, Koraput, Berhampur, Bhubaneswar, Cuttack and even outside Odisha to

Narsingpatnam and Visakhapatnam. When his ailments were not cured, his family members visited a *disary*. Banu underwent the *disary's* treatment at his father-in-law's house at Potangi for two months. However, there was no sign of his recovery.

Worried, his family members then took him to another *disary* in Podia. After staying there for three days, Banu started feeling better but as his family members were preparing to take him back home he died the same night.

Discussing the matter, the villagers said that he was a good sarpanch and had got several awards for his good work. They were sure that it was the witchcraft and sorcery of the opposing party that led to his demise. They had noticed that he had lost his appetite and by the day, had started to look emaciated.

Observations:

- » Villagers continue to have deep faith in the existence of witches and witchcraft.
- » Even death due to prolonged illness is attributed to witchcraft by enemies. Taking a patient to a *disary* for treatment instead of a hospital is very common.
- » The *disary* often uses eggs, liquor, goats and cocks to find out the cause of the disease. More so than ever, the fingers are pointed at witchcraft.
- » People are still unaware and uneducated about the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act.

Case Study 3

Man found hanging; villagers speculate the reason to be his witchcraft

Year: 2015

Kalahandi Sahi is a village of Chittrakonda GP under Korkukonda block. There are a total of 35 households with a population of 187 – 98 males and 89 females. The village is dominated by tribals.

In 2015, a 35-years-old man, Madan Khora, was alleged to be murdered in Kalahandi Sahi over suspicions of witchcraft. Madan, who had studied up to Class 12, was a samiti member for five years. Before that, he had even worked with an NGO in the block. Madan's father, Ratan Khora and brother, Sadan Khora said that they noticed drastic changes in him before his death. Madan had suddenly stopped eating his usual meals and sometimes would not return home from work. His behaviour turned erratic and he often spoke rudely to his family members.

One day, they said, he had gotten agitated when served his food. He had thrown his food and had left the house. Worried, his family members started searching for him and found him sitting, scrunched in acute pain. They took him to several hospitals in Malkangiri, Jeypore, Berhampur and even Bhubaneswar for treatment. However, according to them, nothing was found in his medical reports. The unfortunate family sold off their family gold and even took a huge loan for his treatment. They spent around ₹80,000 for his medical aid.

When nothing worked, the family members took him to a *disary*. However, the *disary* said that it was too late for him to do anything as Madan had already taken too many medicines. He told them that Madan had become mentally unsound. Finally, Madan ran away from his house and a few days later, some people found him hanging from a tree in another village. The villagers said that Madan might have been murdered by some people on the suspicion that he was a sorcerer. It was rumoured that his witchcraft had backfired on him.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in the existence of witches and witchcraft.

- » Despite available healthcare facilities, a sizable section of the community still has faith in *disary*.
- » Physical as well as mental health is neglected for a long time until there is no option left but to go to the hospital.
- » Although literate, people are still unaware of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Case Study 4

Man alleged to have killed a fellow villager with witchcraft after their land dispute

Year: 2019

RSC-19 is a small village in Nuagada GP under Chitrakonda block. It is a tribal dominated village with 75 households comprising Gouda, Rana, Paraja, Paika and Jogi tribes. On 22 February 2021, a meeting was conducted in the village to understand the villagers' faith in witchcraft and sorcery. Besides the villagers, village head, Baideb Pujari, sarpanch, Subash Lokei, anganwadi worker, Baide Lokei and a priest, Bhagban Khilla, attended the meeting.

According to most of them, witch and witchcraft were still an imminent part of their community. People often visited disary to protect themselves from dark magic in case of land dispute, jealousy regarding wealth and even for revenge. Such a case came into light with the death of Sahadeb Hantal of the village in 2016. The villagers said that Sahadeb had five acres of agricultural land. He often travelled to Andhra Pradesh for work.

One day, during his absence, Sahadeb's sister sold two acres of his land to Guru Khilla for ₹4,000. When Sahadeb returned from Andhra Pradesh, the villagers told him about the sale of his land. He immediately approached Guru to explain that there had been a misunderstanding and requested him to return his land. However, Guru refused to oblige and their relations

turned sour. One month after the incident, Sahadeb fell ill. He went for medical treatment but there was no improvement. According to the villagers, he refused to eat his meals and continued to lose weight drastically. They said that losing the land had adversely affected him mentally.

Later, his family members took him to a *disary* but he too was not able to do anything. Sahadeb was bedridden for two months when the *disary* suggested that perhaps someone witched him to fall ill.. Sahadeb soon passed away and villagers blamed Guru for killing Sahadeb. People were wary of Guru for a long time until he too passed away.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft.
- » Especially during any health issues among children, they take the patient to a *disary* for treatment instead of going to a hospital.
- » Physical as well as mental health is neglected for a long time till it goes out of hand.
- » Villagers believe that evil eye or witchcraft comes into play when there is jealousy, land dispute or a need for revenge.
- » People are still unaware of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013.

Case Study 5

Man killed by his cousin, villagers speculate use of witchcraft on both sides

Year: 2020

Kuchalwada is a village in the Mandapalli GP of Kalimela block of Malkangiri district having 120 households, predominantly belonging to the Koya tribe. A meeting was conducted on 20 February 2021 in the village where village head, Baga Kawasi and ward member, Ganga Kawasi were present along

with the villagers.

In 2020, Rama Madhi of the village was murdered by his cousin, Bhima Madhi over suspicions of witchcraft. His body was found near the Poteru river. Bhima was the son of Rama's elder brother. Families of both the cousins stayed together in the village.

Rama lived with his wife, Podiya, a daughter and two sons. He also owned three acres of land. The families of Rama and Bhima had years of dispute and misunderstanding. Rama often fought with his cousins and once he had even threatened to kill Bhima's teenage sister. Strangely, she died a month later. Everyone immediately started suspecting Rama of practising witchcraft. However, instead of feeling sad for the girl's death, Rama threatened to kill their whole family. Rama's behaviour angered Bhima Madhi who vowed to kill him. A few days later, Rama's body was found near Poteru river. Following a police investigation, Bhima was found to be behind Rama's murder and was arrested. He spent nine months in jail before being released on bail.

In the meantime, soon after Rama's death, his wife and daughter fell ill and they too died within three months. Many people still think that Bhima had taken the help of a *gunia* to kill Rama, his wife and daughter. Bhima had suspected that Rama had practised witchcraft and was planning to hurt Bhima's family. So, he also did the same thing to Rama and his family, villagers speculate.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft.
- » Especially during any health issues among children, they take the patient to a *gunia* for treatment instead of going to a hospital.
- » According to villagers, people often visit *gunias* to take revenge against someone.
- » People are still unaware of the existing laws relating to witchcraft.

Case Study 6

Man's eventual death from deteriorating health sparks speculations of witchcraft

Year: 2016

Narsingpur is a village in Nuagada GP under Chitrakonda block. There are 20 households in the village with a total population of 107 out of which 59 are males and 48 are females. The village is dominated by the Paraja tribe. On 20 February 2021, a meeting was conducted in the village. It was attended by several villagers including village leader Peda and auxiliary social health activist (ASHA), Subarna Padva. The meeting was organised to understand the culture, healthcare facilities and the belief system around witchcraft and sorcery.

The discussion revolved around the death of 37-years-old Magala Badanaik in 2016. Tula Badanaik, Magala's wife, was convinced that his death was caused by a witch. According to her, Magala had suddenly fallen ill and was not cured even after taking medicines. The family spent a lot of money to take him for treatment in hospitals in Chitrakonda, Malkangiri and even Koraput. However, there seemed to be no problem with his medical reports.

Later, the family took him to a *disary* who told them about a witch who was causing it. But he was not able to cure Magala who finally passed away after being bedridden for two months. According to villagers, witchcraft is common in the village. They said that 35-year-old Mahadeb Hantal and 18-year-old Mangal Panda had also died earlier because of witchcraft.

Observations:

- » There is strong belief in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft in the village.

- » People visit hospitals when a patient becomes very serious. When he or she does not get cured, they consult a disary.
- » People highly believe in the power of disary to protect and cure them. The disary offers several pujas to god for treatment.
- » People here are still unaware of the laws around witch-hunting and continue to have blind faith on disarys.
- » No steps have been taken by any government body to educate them against their superstitions.

Case Study 7

Man's suicide case prompts speculations of witchcraft practise by his relative

Year: 2018

Nuagada under Nuagada GP of Chitrakonda block is a tribal village dominated by Dora and Paraja tribes. A meeting conducted in the village on 20 February 2021 was attended by several villagers including samiti member, Jagatrai Padwa. The discussion in the meeting revolved around healthcare, blind beliefs and witchcraft practices. The focus of the discussion, however, was the murder case of Lakshman Khilla who was allegedly killed due to witchcraft.

According to Jagatrai, Lakman was the adoptive son of Suku Khilla. Suku, who is no more, had four sisters, all married. Two of them live in Machkund and Lamtaput villages. The other two others live in Nuagada. The villagers said that the two sisters living in the village often quarrelled about Suku's land. Their land dispute could not be solved even in the village meetings. Balaram, the husband of Suku's younger sister, took control of the land, refusing to share it with others. The villagers had often found him picking a fight with Laxman.

Laxman tried to sanction the building of an Indira Awas Yojana house. However, Balaram did not let it happen even though the village members had given Laxman the instructions to go ahead with his housing plan. Several cases were lodged with the police as well as in the tehsil office against Balaram for grabbing the landed property. He was even arrested twice. Many times, he threatened to kill Laxman too.

After a few years, Laxman's health had started to deteriorate and he seemed to lose his mental balance. He went for several medical check ups but nothing seemed to cure him. His family took him to a *disary* but he said that it was too late. He told Laxman's family members that someone had been doing witchcraft to kill him and the spell had already spread through Laxman's entire body. Two days later, Laxman committed suicide by hanging from a tree. The villagers suspected Balaram's alleged witchcraft practices behind Laxman's death.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft.
- » People do not visit hospitals unless a patient becomes very serious. They often go to a *disary* to deal with their medical problems. People believe in the power of the *disary* to protect and cure them.
- » People here are still unaware of the laws around witch-hunting and blindly follow superstitious practices.
- » No steps have been taken by any government body to educate them against their superstitions.

Case Study 8

Village head's weakening health and affected salfi trees induce speculations of witchcraft

Year: 2020

Rathaguda is a small village under Nuagada GP in Chitrakonda block. It is 32 km away from the block headquarters and 90 km away from the district headquarters. There are a total of 30 households dominated by the Paraja and Jodiya tribes.

Sanu Pujari lived with his two wives, Tulasa Pujari and Guri Pujari in Rathaguda. There were 13 members in his family. He came from a good financial background and owned around 10 salfi or wine palm trees. He often earned a good amount by selling palm each year in the market. Moreover, he had seven acres of cultivated land. According to the villagers, his wealth attracted a lot of jealousy from others.

In 2020, he suddenly fell ill soon after he was chosen to be the village head. He went to several hospitals in Chitrakonda, Balimela and Malkangiri for health checkups. However, there was no improvement in his health even after taking the doctor's prescribed medicines. Some of his friends and relatives suggested he visit Laxman Hantal, a disary from RSC-11 village. The disary conducted several rituals on Sanu's body using wood, paddy, soil and even bones. After a while, Sanu slowly started recovering/

Nevertheless, soon after Sanu noticed a red discharge from his salfi trees. Worried that it was blood, he visited the *disary* again. After his pujas, the red discharge stopped. According to the villagers, Sanu was a victim of witchcraft since many people were jealous of him. It was not uncommon to be jealous of someone with good financial condition, they said. They believe that if Sanu had not visited the disary at the right time, he could have died.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in sorcery and witchcraft.
- » They often consult disary for their health problems. Nevertheless, they go to the hospital when things go out of control.

- » People believe in the power of the disary to protect and cure ailments. Disary conducts rituals using wood, soil, paddy and bones, and offer puja to gods for treatment.
- » Villagers believe if one does not visit the disary on time, they will die.
- » People here are still unaware of the laws around witch-hunting and continue to believe in superstitions.
- » No government body has taken steps to educate them against their superstitions.

Case Study 9

Old man's disease and death rumoured to be witchcraft of envious villagers

Year: 2020

Dariguda, a village under the Tamasa GP of Malkangiri block, is dominated by the Koya tribes. The village has

108 households. We discussed the villager's beliefs regarding witches and witchcraft with them and ASHA. They spoke about Deba Sodi who they suspected to have died in 2020 due to witchcraft done by people jealous of his wealth.

Deba was a 60-year-old man with five members in his family. He owned around eight acres of agricultural land, salfi and tamarind trees. He was considered to be a rich person in the village. So when he was granted an Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) house by the government, many people in the village protested as they thought he had enough land and money to be able to get a house by himself. The incident made people extremely bitter towards Deba.

According to ASHA, Seema Sodi, a few weeks before Deba died, he became extremely sick. He was admitted to Malkangiri district headquarters

hospital but the doctor advised his family to take him back home because nothing could be done. He died a few days later after being bedridden. The villagers believed Deba's application for an IAY house had triggered many people to be envious of him. They had used witchcraft to teach Deba a lesson. In their community, witchcraft and *disary* is a very common belief. If someone does not get better even after going to the hospital, they conclude that it is the result of witchcraft.

Observations:

- » Villagers have deep faith in the existence of witches and sorcery.
- » When one's health condition is severe and cannot be treated even in a hospital, the villagers conclude it to be a work of the witch.
- » People believe in the power of the disary to help reverse the effects of evil magic.
- » They believe if one does not visit a disary in time, they will die.
- » People here are still unaware of the laws around witch-hunting and continue to have superstitious beliefs.
- » Government has taken no steps to help educate and aware the community against such beliefs.

Case Study 10

Man's worsening health and eventual death prompts rumours around witchcraft

Year: 2016

RXC-19 is a village under the Nuagada GP in Chitrakonda block of Malkangiri district. The village has 75 households dominated by Gouda, Rana, Paraja, Paika and Jhodi tribes. Villagers and sarpanch, Subash Lokei spoke about the death of Ghasi Khillo who died in 2016 allegedly due to witchcraft by those who were jealous of his wealth.

According to the villagers, Ghasi was a gentle and soft-spoken man. He was always ready to help others in need and often sorted out quarrels between villagers. People looked up to him and sought his opinions on their problems. However, his health suddenly started deteriorating. He visited a local *disary* for help and for a while, he felt fine. However, his health started to worsen after a few days and the *disary* could not treat it further. He drastically lost weight and his stomach swelled. He went to several hospitals at Chitrakonda, Malkangiri, Jeypore in Koraput and spent a lot of money on his treatment. However, his ailment could not be cured.

A family member took him to another *disary* in Boipariguda. He stayed there for 15 days where he started feeling better and returned home. However, just a few days later, his body started swelling and he lost his appetite. He stopped eating and drinking till he died. The *disary* concluded that nothing could be done since a powerful witch was targeting him. The villagers were also sure that it was witchcraft that had killed him. Villagers said that Ghasi had always complained of pain and swelling in his neck. Subash stated that witches often targeted those who were successful and wealthy. Envy drove them to curse and harm people.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft.
- » People choose to go to hospitals as the last resort. They first seek the help of a *disary* for treatment.
- » They think *disaris* have the power to protect and cure them.
- » When someone earns more money than others, villagers assume them to be the target of witchcraft.
- » People here are still unaware of the laws around witch-hunting and continue to follow superstitious beliefs blindly.
- » No steps have been taken by any government body to educate them against their superstitions.

Case Study 11

Son is suspected of taking help of a *disary's* witchcraft to kill his father

Panarguda is a village under Gorakhunta GP of Malkangiri block. The village is dominated by Koya tribes and has a total of 120 households. During our discussions, villagers spoke about Bhima Madkami who was allegedly killed by witchcraft.

Bhima was a 52-years-old man who lived with six members of his family including his two sons, Mala Madkami, 29 and Sambhab Madkami, 35. Both his sons were married and have children. Bhima had around seven acres of land where he cultivated paddy and a variety of vegetables to earn his livelihood.

A few years ago, he sold a part of his land to a few Bengali immigrants to pay for a mortgage. However, he did not share the money he received with his family and spent most of it drinking. Soon conflict erupted between him and his sons regarding the land money. They wanted the land or some amount of money. According to the villagers, the younger son Mala was often found threatening to kill his father.

Soon, Bhima became ill and was bedridden. His elder son, Sambhab took him to Malkangiri district headquarters hospital for treatment but his health only worsened. A few days later, Bhima passed away. The villagers alleged that Mala had taken help from a disary to do witchcraft/ sorcery on his father. They believe that jealousy and greed for the land had driven Mala to take such a drastic step.

Observations:

- » Villagers have deep rooted belief in sorcery and witchcraft.
- » People go to hospitals as a last resort. They first seek the help of a disary for treatment.

- » People have faith in the power of the *disary* and trust them for their protection.
- » Villagers say that witchcraft is very common in their village and often happens due to land disputes.
- » People here are unaware of the laws around witch-hunting. No steps have been taken by any government body to educate them against their superstitions.

Stakeholders' Interviews: Malkangiri

Laxman Hantal

A talk with a local *disary* about his supposed healing powers

RSC-11 is a small village under Nuagada GP of Chitrakonda block with only 8 households. The village is dominated by Paraja, Rana, Gouda and Kumbhar tribes. Laxman Hantal, aged 45, is known to be a respected *disary* in his village. He stays in the village with 7 members of his family.

According to him, most of the villagers believe in witchcraft and sorcery. They believe if there is an evil power then there is a good power to help them against it. Laxman claims to be a good sorcerer who helps people affected by the evil eyes of the witches. According to him, land disputes, wealth difference and jealousy drive people to do witchcraft or seek help from witches for revenge. For witchcraft, one needs a targeted person's clothes, dust from their feet and so on to complete their ritual. He believes that if they do the ritual around a tree and the tree starts drying up then the targeted person will also start drying up by the day.

However, Laxman is a *disary* who helps counter such evil practices. He claims to have cured around 200 people. He takes pride in his supposed supernatural power that helps him along the way. He uses wood, glass, fresh soil and bones to counter the curse of a witch. People in the neighbouring villages and districts also come to Laxman for treatment.

The villagers here believe that if there is witchcraft hampering a person's life then no treatment in the hospital can save them. Only a powerful disary can help. There are several people practising witchcraft in the village and people seek Laxman's help to counter that.

Observations:

- » Villagers strongly believe in the existence of sorcery and witchcraft.
- » People choose to go to hospitals as the last resort. They first seek a disary's help for treatment.
- » People believe that if there is witchcraft hampering someone then no doctor but a disary can help.
- » Villagers say that witchcraft is very common in their village and often happens due to land dispute, family dispute or plain jealousy.
- » Many disary also believe that they have supernatural powers to counter the curse of witches and treat people.
- » People here are unaware of the laws around witch-hunting. No steps have been taken by any government body to educate them against their superstitions.

Koraput

Koraput has an area of 8,807 square kilometres and a population of 13,79,647 according to Census 2011. Of the total population, Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes comprise 50.56% and 14.25% respectively while 49.2% are males and 50.8% are females. The literacy rate of the district is 49.21%. The people of the district primarily rely on agriculture and forestry for their livelihoods.

Case Study 1

Two sisters, alleged to be witches, asked to shave their head after the death of their family

Year: 2006

Badaliguda is a village in the Lamptaput GP under Jeypore block. The village has 760 households and a total population of 4,530 out of which, 2,372 are males and 2,158 are females. The village has a mixed population – 60% are Scheduled Tribes, 15% are Scheduled Castes, and the rest Other Backward Class (OBC) and general castes. In 2006, two Dalit women from the same family – 30-years-old, Laba Harijan and 25-years-old, Santi Harijan – were allegedly branded as witches by the villagers.

Laba and Santi are daughters of Arjun Harijan, who had another daughter and a son. Laba is a widow and has two children who study in the village's primary school. Laba had been staying at her father's place ever since her husband died and working as a daily wage labourer. Santi also stayed with her. According to Laba, both she and her sister were alleged to be witches because their mother died due to an unidentified disease. Soon, her husband also died, followed by their father within a few years. The villagers believed that there was a negative power in the black hair of both the sisters. There was so much anger against Laba and Santi that they and their brother were not allowed to attend their father's funeral. However, they were finally allowed after villagers allegedly forced them to shave their heads to do away with their long hair. The sisters even lodged a complaint with the police.

Now, Santi and her brother stay away from the village. The family gets benefits from the state government's welfare schemes. Laba has a ration card and gets a widow pension.

Observation:

- » The villagers continue to have a deep faith in witchcraft and sorcery. Any unidentified health issue leads to witchcraft suspicions.
- » Caste-based discrimination is common in the village, which often leads to such accusations.
- » During any health issue, the villagers go to the hospital as a last resort.

- » It is mostly a woman, especially a widow, who is alleged to be practising witchcraft if any of her family members dies due to unknown reasons.
- » While the family does benefit from social welfare programmes, there has been no awareness about blind beliefs and superstitions.
- » None in the village know about the existing witch-branding and witch-hunting laws.

Details of FGD:

The team interacted with the villagers, both males and females in March 2021. The meeting also included an anganwadi worker, caste leaders, both the victims and their paternal uncle.

According to the victims, the villagers had blamed them for the deaths of their mother and father, especially because Laba was a widow. Somehow, they believed that their long black hair hid negative energy, which helped them do witchcraft related rituals. While Laba was discriminated against, Santi and her brother were asked to leave the village. They also faced caste discrimination. None of them was allowed to attend their father's funeral if they did not shave their heads. Jhinu Harijan, the victims' paternal uncle, confirmed that the family and the villagers were scared that the girls would bring bad omen and thus asked them to shave their hair off.

However, according to the caste leaders, neither of the victims was forced to shave their heads. They were just informed of the rules and rituals that they had to follow to be a part of the community again. They claimed that the girls were not staying in the village for some years and suddenly came back to attend the funeral. They feared that the girls had gone and mingled with other tribes, which made them different from the others. According to the leaders, their tribe did not accept people who ate and lived with other communities. The ward member said that the girls were not forced but to maintain the purity of their caste, they had to follow the rules, which had been there since ancient times.

The leaders and the villagers denied that they accused the sisters of doing witchcraft and sorcery. Instead, they mentioned that Arjun did not attend the funeral even after hearing about his father's death. He lived with an Adivasi girl, which made the leaders and villagers unhappy.

Case Study 2

Woman and daughter killed by their neighbours for allegedly witching their nephew to die

Year: 2018

Pindapadar is a village under Dasamantapur block in Koraput district. It is 22 km away from the district as well as block headquarters. There are 26 households with 110 persons, 95% of them belong to Scheduled Tribes. On 16 November 2018, a 45-years-old woman and her 14-years-old daughter were murdered over witchcraft suspicions.

We talked to the villagers and the victim's family to understand the incident better. Lima Jani lived in the village with his wife, Kataki Jani and daughter, Suar Jani. When Lima went for work, Kataki and Suar would take turns to collect firewood from the forest. One day, Kataki was getting ready to leave for the forests when two of her neighbours, Rama Jani and Padma Jani, called them outside to talk. When Lima came home for lunch, he did not find his wife and daughter anywhere. He and a few other villagers then tried to trace them in the forests thinking they might have gone there to collect firewood. On the way, they saw blood marks and following the trail they found the lifeless bodies of Kataki and Suar below a slope.

Lima immediately reported the matter to Dasamantapur police after which an investigation was led. It was found that Rama and Padma were the family's neighbours. Their 15-years-old nephew had been ill for a long time and the family had taken him to a local *ojha*. Reciting his mantras, the *ojha* had said that Kataki and Suar had practised witchcraft on him. Enraged and wanting to cure the boy, the boy's father and uncles had plotted to kill

the presumed witches. The police arrested Rama and Padma on charge of murdering the mother and the daughter. Both were sentenced to six years in jail. However, no action was taken against the ojha or other villagers who instigated them to kill the women.

Observations:

- » Murder driven by superstitions and blind beliefs are common in the Dasamantapur block.
- » People often seek the help of ojhas during health emergencies instead of going to hospitals. There is a lack of proper healthcare facilities for children.
- » Witchcraft and sorcery are age-old practices that the villagers continue to believe in. There is also a lack of educational facilities in the village.
- » While the belief in superstitions is decreasing, a sizable section still sticks to it. The government has not taken any steps to educate or aware the community against such superstitions.
- » They do not know about the existing laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Details of FGD:

A meeting was held in the village in March 2021. The focus group discussion (FGD) involved auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM), accredited social health activist (ASHA), community youth, traditional leader, panchayati raj institution (PRI) members, a teacher and a few villagers. When asked about witch-hunting practices, the community leaders said that those were age-old practices in the village. For them, it was difficult to reach out to healthcare facilities so they turned to their traditional knowledge that had been passed from generation to generation for treatments. They believed that they needed to preserve their generations old traditions. They said that witches and witchcraft certainly existed but were hidden from the public eye. However, the youth present in the meeting said that they did not believe in ojhas and preferred to go to a hospital. But, the village did

not have easy access to healthcare or vehicles to reach hospitals so most of them continue to depend on *ojhas*.

Most of them kept quiet when asked if the murders of Katakai and her daughter were the first cases in the village related to witches. Some of them said it was the first such case registered at the police station. Earlier, another incident had occurred when a woman branded as a '*dahani*' was driven away from the village. While mostly women were branded as witches, some men had also fallen victim to such superstitions. Any vulnerable person such as a widow or single woman could be branded as a witch. They said that one could be identified as a witch even when she or he is born – from the date and time of birth, any physical mark or if anyone in the neighbourhood became sick at the same time. Most of the participants admitted that it was a bad practice. Some said that it was due to the lack of education and accessibility that most villagers continued to practise it.

Case Study 3

Anganwadi worker and her mother alleged to have witched officers to secure their jobs

Year: 2018

Nanda Namala is a village under Boipariguda block. Around 15 km from the block headquarters, the village has a total of 200 households, 90% of which are Adivasis. The village has 587 males and 613 females. It has a primary school and an anganwadi centre.

In 2018, two women, Bala Talia, aged 55, and her daughter, Damaburi Talia, aged 32, were branded as witches by the villagers. According to the victims, the accusations were a result of their growing prosperity. Not many in the village were as educated as Damaburi. The family had even brought some land and a grocery shop to have a stable income. Further, Damaburi had secured a job at the village anganwadi centre. She had got the job by competing with a relative, a resident of the same village.

Their achievements did not go down well with their relatives, neighbours and other villagers. Rather, it generated intense jealousy and hate towards them. Soon, it led to multiple accusations, and repeated taunts and threats. The villagers believed that Bala had used witchcraft to gain the confidence of the administration officials to help her daughter get a stable job. They further accused both mother and daughter of performing various pujas and mantras to gain recognition from sector supervisors and the child development project offices (CDPOs).

Bala and Damaburi went through immense mental trauma due to repeated accusations, taunts and threats heaped on them. They finally filed a written complaint at the Boipariguda police station against some of the villagers including their relatives. The police arrested the persons tormenting them and they were handed out four years' jail terms.

Observations:

- » Superstitious and blind beliefs in witchcraft are still prevalent in the village. Many youth and educated people also continue to hold on to these beliefs.
- » Jealousy over wealth and employment often causes people to brand the victims as witches.
- » Victims are often women who are educated and prosper economically.

Details of FGD:

A FGD was held on 13 March 2020 with the villagers and the victims. We discussed the case at hand as well as the beliefs of the people pertaining to witchcraft and witches. The villagers were certain that Bala Tali was a witch and had cast witchcraft to win the favour of the officials in order to get her daughter the job at the anganwadi centre. Most of the villagers present there said that her relatives had found her doing many pujas and chanting mantras. Thus, they were suspicious from the very beginning. There was also rumour about Bala and Damaburi drinking the blood of the

children who went to the anganwadi centre causing them to fall sick. Most of the villagers were thus scared to send their children to the centre.

According to Damaburi, not many in the village are as educated as her. They are envious and cannot not fathom her prosperity. The superstitious beliefs are rampant in the area and even the educated people fall victim to them. These beliefs may appear as backward and superstitious but they have a deep impact on the victims' life beyond one's imagination. Damaburi confessed that she has had multiple mental breakdowns and she still does not get marriage proposals due to the baseless accusations.

Case Study 4

Woman forced to shave her head and ostracized after being alleged to be practicing witchcraft

Phulabadi is one of the remotest villages under Pipalpadar GP of Naranyanapatana block. The small village has only 45 households and a total population of 315 – 190 males and 125 females. The predominantly Adivasi village does not have access to government healthcare, education facilities or an all-weather road.

Pidika Sute, aged 45, lived in the village with her husband, Damara Sute, two sons, daughters-in-laws and an unmarried daughter. The family earned its living from agriculture while one of the daughters-in-law worked as a cook at the village anganwadi centre.

Pidika was first accused by her neighbour who had been suffering from a prolonged illness. He claimed to have seen her as a witch in his dreams. Sometime later, another neighbour, Biru Rabha accused her of being a witch. Biru's husband was suffering from cancer. However, without any healthcare facilities available, Biru took her husband to an ojha who was unable to cure it but declared that it was because of Pidika's witchcraft. Then, the village priest also blamed Pidika for his granddaughter's illness

and eventual death. As more cases arose and with increased visits to the *ojha*, villagers were assured that she was indeed a dangerous witch.

She was forced to shave her head and banned from being included in any social celebration. The *ojha* and some villagers also forced her to leave the village. Soon, many started accusing her daughter of being a witch too. Out of fear, the family finally filed a complaint at the Narayanapatna police station. The police arrested five villagers including the *ojha*. All of them were sentenced to six years in jail.

Observations:

- » Most of the villagers continue to believe in the existence of witches and witchcraft.
- » Lack of access to healthcare is one of the main reasons for witch-branding in the village. Poverty and lack of safe sex facilities often lead to poor health conditions and deaths.
- » People continue to visit *ojhas* and practise traditional methods for curing themselves.
- » Without any educational facilities, people in isolated sectors of the district often blame women for mishaps when they fail to explain the reason behind them.
- » Conservative society, social conflicts and financial disputes also lead to witch-branding.

Details of the group discussion

A meeting was held in the village on 14 March 2021. Both men and women of the village including the victim and her husband were part of it. We discussed the matter at hand in order to understand the views regarding witches in the village.

We realised from the discussion that due to lack of proper healthcare many of the villagers visited the *ojha*. Unable to cure diseases like cancer,

these ojhas easily find someone to blame, usually a woman. When Pidika was married into the village, she had given birth to immature babies who had died due to being underweight. This had made the *ojha* and the villagers suspicious. The villagers believe that witches have magical powers that they use to attack humans, destroy crops, cause harm to livestock and influence the body and mind of others. The *ojha* has the power to recognise witches and counter her curse in many ways. One of the ways to find a witch is to see her stars, birth signs and health signs.

The gullibility of the people and patriarchy are the major reasons for putting the blame on a woman. According to Pidika, the villagers were also jealous of her economic growth due to the land they owned and her daughter-in-law's job in the anganwadi centre.

Many still follow traditional methods of curing ailments. While discussing the case with us, Damara Sute said that the *ojha* had thrown the corpse of sacrificial animals in front of his house to get rid of the witch. Many villagers had splattered cow dung at his house to purify the area. Due to fear, they had got both their sons married before they reached the marriageable age.

Case Study 5

Man murdered for allegedly using witchcraft to harm his neighbour's mother

Year: 2018

Dumbaguda is a small village under the Dasamantapur GP of Narayanpatna block. The village has 47 households with a total population of 329 including 161 males and 168 females. The Adivasi village has difficult accessibility and is a Naxal affected area. With no all-weather road connection, the villagers have to walk 5 km to get any transport to the block headquarters.

In January 2018, a resident of Dumbaguda, Leku Habika, was murdered and his body was found dumped in the forest near his house. Villagers

suspected that he was practising black magic along with his wife. The prime accused person in the murder case was Budharam Bahika who claimed that Leku and his wife, Puruti Hebika were responsible for the long-running illnesses in his family. Budharam Bahika and another accused person, Bansi Murmu told the police during interrogation that Leku was responsible for the illness of Budharam's mother. He had spent over ₹10,000 to cure his mother by various traditional healers and doctors. However, her condition had only worsened over time. Budharam approached an ojha in Narayanpatna who told him that someone was casting black magic to harm his mother. With the rumours already spreading in the village about Leku, Budharam became sure that Leku practised witchcraft. He planned to kill him with the help of Bansi whose son was also ill for a long time. On 26 January 2018, they took Leku along on the pretext of buying him alcohol from a nearby liquor shop and murdered him. On the basis of a complaint by Puruti, the police arrested Budharam and Bansi. The two were sentenced to 12 years in jail.

Observations:

- » The villagers continue to believe in the traditional methods of healing and witchcraft practices.
- » Due to the lack of accessibility and proper healthcare facilities, people often visit ojhas for treatment.
- » There is a dire need for community awareness in the area, including among the frontline service providers like anganwadi workers and ASHAs.

Details of FGD:

A meeting was held in the village on 14 March 2021. Both men and women of the village were part of it. We discussed the matter at hand to understand their views regarding presumed witches in the village. We realised that there was a lack of basic facilities in the area. Without proper education, healthcare facilities or all-weather roads, people preferred traditional healing methods or visited *ojhas* for treatments.

Superstitions about witchcraft and black magic came with generations old belief systems. The community believed in the good and bad in nature, witches who harmed and sorcerers who protected them. Moreover, the community supported the act of witch-hunting. The villagers even praised the murderers saying they did good work by killing the witch before he brought a worse fate to the village. None from the community was aware of the laws that existed against such practices.

Case Study 6

Woman attacked and ostracised for allegedly using witchcraft to kill newborns

Year: 2019

Sundi Panchada under Laxmipur block is 32 km away from the district and 16 km from the block headquarters respectively. The village has 705 households with a total population of 3,092 with 65.2% belonging to Scheduled Tribes and 21.06% to Scheduled Castes. Females make up 46.8% of the total population.

In 2019, Aneeta Sabar of the village was rushed to the district headquarters hospital when she experienced labour pains. In the hospital, she gave birth to twin daughters whose weights were critically low. The mother and the twins were discharged from the hospital after the delivery.

Aneeta already had three children and had conceived after a gap of 11 years. The birth of the daughters was an overwhelming experience for her. However, the younger one of the twins died within 23 days, on 2 December 2019. The cause of the death was unknown to the villagers due to the poor healthcare facilities in the village. Aneeta went into a frenzy and accused her neighbour, Kumari Sagar of being a witch. She even attacked Kumari with a blade.

Kumari had already been branded as a witch by the local ojha after the death of another newborn girl who was prone to illness. Rita Devi, the

newborn girl's mother, was Kumari's relative. When her infant was in a serious condition, Rita took her to the *ojha* but he could not cure her. He found the easy way out by instigating Rita against Kumari saying that the latter was casting black magic on her. He even made the poor woman spend ₹30,000 on performing rituals to counter Kumari's curse. He also took a goat, a pig, a hen and new clothes from Rita's family. Despite all these, Rita's newborn daughter could not survive.

Thus, the death of Aneeta's daughter became a trigger for other villagers who joined her in assaulting Kumari and boycotted her socially. After a complaint was lodged at the Kakiriguma police station, six people from the village were arrested. They were sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment.

Observations:

- » Villagers continue to have deep faith in the existence of witches and witchcraft.
- » Lack of healthcare and educational facilities makes accessibility during health emergencies difficult.
- » Due to the lack of community awareness about law and order, the community believes in taking justice into their own hands.

Details of FGD:

A meeting was held in the village on 15 March 2021. Both men and women of the village were part of it. We discussed the matter at hand to understand their views regarding witchcraft in the village. Discussing the case, the villagers informed us that Aneeta had conceived after 11 years. It was a rather emotional experience for her. She was not able to breastfeed her babies who were then fed powdered milk. However, when one of the twins died, she went into a frenzy. Many could not understand the cause of death and thought it to be the work of a witch. Doctors and nurses from a nearby hospital reached her house late and found that the infant was suffering from jaundice seeing the yellowish colour of her body. But by that

time, Kumari Sagar had already been branded as a witch by the local *ojha* and she had to face Aneeta's accusations and anger.

Regarding Rita Devi's case, many people said that her daughter was born with a weak body and was prone to sickness. They had even visited many hospitals but without any success. Then the local *ojha* intervened. The family had spent a lot to cure their daughter but even after the *ojha*'s treatment, their daughter passed away. On the other hand, most of the villagers were sure of Kumari being a witch but were unwilling to speak more because of their fear of the police. They had hoped that Kumari and her family would leave the village if they boycotted her.

In the tribal culture, they said, witches were a danger to society and had no right to live. Elderly women and widows live in constant fear of being branded as witches when their neighbours fell sick or livestock died unexpectedly.

Case Study 7

Woman and her family beaten to death after being rumoured to have used witchcraft to kill a little girl

Year: 2019

Charada is a village under Bhitragada GP of Laxmipur block. The predominantly Adivasi village has 430 households with a total population of 1,802. The villagers earn their living from agriculture or daily wage work.

In 2019, Dulama Nayak, a 45-years-old woman, was branded as a witch by the villagers after a relative of the village's *ojha* died of an illness. Before her death, the girl's family had not only taken her to several doctors for treatment but had also consulted the *ojha*. After offering the final rites, the *ojha* and some villagers claimed that Dulama had been practising witchcraft and was responsible for the girl's death. Soon they devised a plan to protect their village and serve justice by killing the witch.

A group of men broke into Dulama's house late at night. She and her husband, Bali were fast asleep with their two sons and a daughter when they were attacked. All the family members were beaten to death with wooden sticks and axes. Later, their bodies were dumped in a well. An FIR was lodged at the Kakiriguma police station and six people were arrested. However, it is believed that more people were involved in the ghastly crime and had escaped arrest.

Observations:

- » Assumed existence of witches and witchcraft make people commit heinous crimes. Witch hunting murders are still prevalent in the district.
- » Lack of healthcare and educational facilities makes accessibility difficult during health emergencies.
- » Women are the primary targets in witch-hunting crimes.
- » Due to the lack of community awareness about law and order, the community believes in taking justice into their own hands.

Details of FGD:

A meeting was held in the village on 15 March 2021. Both men and women of the village were part of it. Many of those present in the meeting hinted that the murder of the whole family took a sinister turn since it was a relative of the ojha who had died. Most of them believed that justice had been served and the village had been saved after Dulama Nayak's murder. Although they were reluctant to discuss the case at hand, the deep belief in witches continued to haunt them. They mentioned that before the corpses of the family were thrown into the well, some villagers had also offered sacrificial pujas to their local deities. It is understood from the discussion that lack of good healthcare and education facilities drove people to commit serious crimes in the name of traditions and culture.

Rayagada

Rayagada district has an area of 7,073.00 square kilometres and a population of 9,67,911 according to Census 2011. Of the total population, males constitute 48.76% whereas females constitute 51.23%. The population is dominated by two major tribes – Gonds and Soras. The literacy rate of the district is 42.13%. The district headquarters lies in the Rayagada town. The people in the district primarily rely on agriculture and collection of forest produce for their livelihood.

Case Study 1

Man forced to leave the village and convert to christianity after allegedly practising witchcraft

Year: 2016

Gajiguda is a village under Siriguda GP of Gudari block. The village has a total of 56 households, all Scheduled Tribes, with a total population of 267. There is a primary school and an anganwadi centre in the village. The villagers depend on the community health centre (CHC) at Gudari 13 km away, and an ayurvedic hospital a kilometre away. Villagers earn their livelihood through agriculture and daily wage labour.

In 2016, the villagers drove Arambha Sabar, aged 64, out of the village after suspecting him of practising witchcraft. Rejected by his own community, he converted to Christianity. Arambha hails from a well-to-do family of Gajiguda. His family owned more than 20 acres of land and his brother was a sarpanch. In his younger days, he had also worked with an NGO. He has two sons who are graduates.

In 2016, two villagers fell severely ill and could not recover for a long time. They consulted an ojha, Jagannath Sabar of Baradapadar village. With his sorcery, he stated that they were actually victims of Arambha's witchcraft. Soon, more villagers said that they suspected Arambha to be a witch.

This triggered several quarrels between Arambha and the villagers. Finally, fearing for his life, Arambha left the village. Even after leaving the village, he repeatedly appealed to the villagers to allow him in but his pleas fell on deaf ears. He was banned from attending any social gatherings and ceremonies. Ostracised by his community, Arambha converted to Christianity.

Both of his sons are working and often visit him. They are forced to divide their time between him and the village. He continues to live a fearful and lonely life outside the village and cultivates paddy and cotton for survival on a small land that he has taken on lease.

Observations:

- » Villagers continue to have deep faith in witches and witchcraft.
- » People visit hospitals as a last resort for their ailments. They believe and depend on the ojhas and their traditional methods the most.
- » They continue to believe in the words of an ojha and outcast anyone suspected of witchcraft from their community on his instructions.
- » Financial jealousy often leads to accusing someone of practising witchcraft.
- » No steps have been taken by the government or any agency to sensitise people on the dangers of blind beliefs or about the law that pertains to witch-branding and witch-hunting in Odisha.

Details of FGD:

We held a focus group discussion (FGD) in the village in March 2021. The FGD was conducted to understand the views of the villagers regarding the case and superstitious beliefs. We also discussed the matter at hand with the victim, Arambha Sabar.

Some of the villagers argued that the belief in witches and witchcraft has been there since ancient times. They were confident about the effectiveness of their traditional methods. However, most of them are now

visiting hospitals for treatment. Many argued that Arambha was not a victim and had denounced his community. They denied forcing him out of the village. Instead, they argued that he had shifted as he had land to cultivate there. They also agreed that Arambha actually had a good reputation in the village and was from a well-to-do family. But, if there was a witch among them, they wouldn't hesitate to throw them out of the village. They would do it for the safety of the whole village.

On the other hand, Arambha said that people had taken the words of Jagannath Sabar seriously. Some of them were jealous of his status and money. Thus, they created a situation to outcast him. Due to the rumour about him practising witchcraft, his sons are still unmarried and he had to change his religion. No police action has been taken on the case.

Case Study 2

Family forced to migrate to Telangana after being abused for supposedly practising witchcraft

Year: 2016

Rengam, a village under Siriguda GP of Gudari block, is nearly 12 km away from the block headquarters. There are a total of 98 households in the village, out of which 96 households belong to tribal communities. Villagers depend on the CHC at Gudari for healthcare. They earn their living from daily wage work and agriculture.

Kalia Sabar and his wife, Sulochana Sabar were residents of Rengam. According to the villagers, in 2016, many children of the village became sick and took a long time to recover. One of them even died. Later, older people too were afflicted with some diseases. Distressed, the villagers sought the help of an *ojha* from Khamariguda village under Padmapur block to help them identify the cause. With his sorcery, the *ojha* stated that there was a woman in the village who had been practising witchcraft to cause harm to the villagers. The villagers immediately became suspicious

of Sulochana. A mob gathered in front of Kalia's house and abused them in filthy language. When the Kalia and Sulochana tried to protest, the mob beat them up too. Both were threatened to leave the village.

When sarpanch, Judhistir Sabar tried to intervene and help the couple, he was threatened by the mob as well. Finding no alternative, the couple decided to leave the village and migrate to the neighbouring state of Telangana. Since then nobody has seen or heard of them.

Observations:

- » A deep belief in witchcraft and sorcery continues to exist in the community.
- » People seek the help of a traditional leader or an ojha during health issues rather than going to a hospital.
- » Anganwadi workers and accredited social health activists (ASHAs) are trying to spread awareness in the village through various programmes and educating them to go to the hospitals in times of need.
- » People are still not educated about the existing laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.
- » There is a lack of awareness and education campaigns by the government.

Details of FGD:

We held an FGD in the village in March 2021 along with the villagers, anganwadi workers and ASHAs. According to them, the beliefs surrounding witchcraft persist very much in the community. The villagers believe in their ancient traditional practices; they think of them as a part of their culture. However, according to the villagers, the younger generation is more aware and visits a hospital for medical treatments. Anganwadi workers and ASHAs are trying their best to persuade more and more people to visit hospitals for treatment.

Talking about Sulochana and her family, villagers informed that , fearing the police, her tormentors had stopped abusing and threatening them. Nevertheless, they ostracised the family from their community. Thus, the family was forced to migrate to Telangana. No one had contact with them and their relatives refused to disclose their location fearing for their safety.

Case Study 3

Ceremonial woman accused of practicing witchcraft after her neighbour falls ill

Year: 2018

Gajiguda, a village under Siriguda GP of Gudari block, has 56 Scheduled Tribes households. The total population of the village is 267. There is a primary school and an anganwadi centre in the village. The villagers depend on agriculture and daily wage labour for sustenance. They depend on the CHC that is 13 km away at Gudari and an ayurvedic hospital, a kilometre away for healthcare facilities.

Saitari Sabar lived in the village with her husband, Khairu Sabar and two married sons. Saitari's family owned enough land to cultivate cashew and paddy for their livelihood. She was known to take the lead during community festivals, and worship the community deity. Many believed that the goddess possessed her body during their ceremonies. On the other hand, her regular worship also led many people to suspect her of practicing witchcraft.

Derema Sabar of the same village is Saitari's neighbour. He owned three acres of land in the same village and earned his livelihood through agriculture. His wife suddenly started falling ill and would not recover. Distressed, he visited an *ojha*, Jagannath Sabar, in Baradapadar village and offered him rice in exchange for his wife's treatment. With his sorcery, Jagannath led Derema to believe that Saitari had casted black magic on his wife. Only a counter spell from Saitari could cure her. Enraged, he fought

with Saiteri and Khairu, abusing and threatening them. He demanded that Saiteri cure his wife lest he took severe actions against her. However, fearful of Saiteri's infamous powers, he lodged an FIR against her at the police station.

Both Derema and Saiteri were called to the police station where the police officer explained to Derema that there was no such thing as a witch and threatened to take action against him. Soon, he withdrew his complaint against Saiteri. A written declaration of truce was also made by both in the police station. According to villagers, he also paid a fine of ₹4,500 to Saiteri for harassing her.

Observations:

- » Many villagers continue to have a deep rooted faith in witches and witchcraft.
- » Many follow the traditional methods of cure and do not visit hospitals in time. They prefer visiting an ojha instead.
- » Due to lack of efficient healthcare facilities, proper diagnosis cannot be ensured.
- » Financial jealousy can often lead to witchcraft accusations.
- » There is a lack of awareness by the government and thus people are not educated about the laws regarding witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Details of FGD:

We visited the village for a meeting in March 2021 to understand the beliefs pertaining to witches and witchcraft. Both men and women of the village attended the meeting. Many hesitated to discuss the case at hand due to the fear of police. However, they continued to have a deep rooted faith in witchcraft.

In Saiteri's case, many believed her to be innocent, though they admitted that she prayed to the community deity often and was suspicious. They said that she took the lead during festivals as the goddess possessed her. This led to a few suspecting that she was a witch. Derema was unaware of the laws against witch-branding. However, he calmed down and resolved the matter when police explained it to him. Fortunately, there is a decline in such superstitious beliefs in the village.

Case Study 4

Farmer with three acres of fertile land is beaten to death over alleged practise of witchcraft

Year: 2021

Pajilibanda is a village under the Buagada GP of Padmapur block. There are a total of 58 households that belong to Scheduled Tribes. There is a PHC, 22 km away and a CHC, 35 km away at Padmapur. There is an anganwadi centre and a primary school in the village.

Recently, 62-years-old man, Sriram Muli was attacked and killed by a few villagers who accused him of practising witchcraft. Sriram lived a kilometre away from Pajilibandha and owned three acres of land. The land was close to stream water, perfect for cultivating cashew, paddy and other crops. His elder son lived in Khambariguda village, 12 km away from Pajilibanda. Villagers had reservations about Sriram's activities and believed him to be practicing witchcraft. Whenever deadly epidemics claimed lives, villagers were quick to hold Sriram responsible for it. It often led to heated exchanges between him and some villagers.

On the evening of 25 February 2021, a few villagers went to Sriram's house and beat him to death. They threatened his family members who tried to intervene. They then burnt his body and scattered his ashes across his stretches of land.

Observations:

- » Many villagers continue to have deep rooted beliefs in witches and witchcraft.
- » Many follow the traditional methods of cure and do not visit hospitals in time. They prefer seeking the help of ojhas.
- » Due to lack of efficient healthcare facilities, proper diagnosis cannot be ensured.
- » Financial jealousy often leads to accusations of witchcraft. Many villagers are also infamous alcoholics that affect their sense of reasoning.
- » There is a lack of awareness campaigns by the government and thus people are not aware of the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting. Justice is often meted out in Kangaroo courts.

Details of FGD:

We visited the village in March 2021 and held discussions with some of Sriram Muli's family members as well as a few other villagers. It was found that many people of the community believed in witchcraft and sorcery. Due to Sriram's frequent travels out of the village, many of them became suspicious of his activities. Many of the villagers present claimed that Sriram was indeed practising witchcraft and many of their fellow villagers had died due to it. They had taken the side of the accused who were involved in Sriram's murder.

It also came to our notice that many of the villagers consumed liquor regularly that hampered their reasoning sensibilities. A villager told us that a distant relative of Sriram had started the rumour about him being a witch due to a family dispute leading to misunderstandings among the villagers.

There are no male members of Sriram's family in the village but only females. Traumatized by the incident, they live in a fearful environment.

Case Study 5

Man kicked out of the villager for allegedly witching death and diseases

Year: 2016

Seriguda, a village under Gudari block, has 255 households with a total population of 1,120. Most of the people living in Seriguda belong to Scheduled Tribes; there are few from the general castes. The village has an ayurvedic health centre and two anganwadi centres. There is a CHC 10 km away in Gudari. People earn their livelihood mostly from agriculture and wage labour.

Ganga Sabar was a well-known ayurvedic practitioner of the village. He owned around four acres of land and earned his livelihood through agriculture. In 2016, the wife of one of Ganga's friends fell ill. Her condition worsened by the day until she was vomiting blood. Her ailment could not be treated even at the CHC. As per the community's age-old traditions, he took his wife to a bejuni who then with his sorcery revealed that one of his closest friends, Ganga, had been casting black magic on his wife. Soon, his wife died of her illness. Few more cases of similar diseases and deaths occurred in the village and people were quick to accuse Ganga of trying to kill the villagers. Several kangaroo courts were held in the village to decide an apt punishment for Ganga. Fearing for his life, Ganga fled the village along with his family and took refuge in a forest 5 km away. The villagers threatened him to never return to the village. Without his agrarian earnings, his financial condition worsened by the day and he died four years later. The villagers have now allowed his sons to come back to the village.

Observations:

- » Many villagers continue to have deep rooted beliefs in witches and witchcraft.
- » Many follow the traditional methods of cure and do not visit hospitals in time. They prefer seeking the help of *bejuni*.

- » Due to lack of efficient healthcare facilities, proper diagnosis cannot be ensured.
- » Financial jealousy often leads to accusations of witchcraft.
- » There is a lack of awareness campaigns by the government and thus people are not aware of the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting. Justice is often meted out in Kangaroo courts.

Details of FGD:

We held a village meeting in March 2021 where many villagers, both men and women, were present. We discussed their superstitious beliefs about witches and witchcraft. During the FGD, people admitted to believing in the ancient evils of witchcraft and witches. When asked about Ganga, everyone was reluctant to talk about him. They were sure that he had caused the death of over 100 people in the village and said that talking about him would bring bad luck to the village. People from the village still visit *ojha/bejuni*. The younger generation is more open to visiting hospitals for medications.

Case Study 6

Man ostracized and accused of witching a woman from another caste

Year: 2011

Jira village under Padmapur block is 7 km away from the block headquarters and depends on it for health facilities. There are a total of 249 households, most belonging to Other Backward Class (OBC). There is an anganwadi centre and a primary school in the village. People earn their livelihood from agriculture, wage labour and livestock rearing.

Janmajay, aged 50, was a resident of Jira and owns around 10 acres of land where he cultivated cotton and paddy. He belonged to the Baishnab caste. He was a close friend of an ayurvedic practitioner named Bala from

another village. He often approached Bala for medical assistance. However, rumour began to spread across the village of his involvement in witchcraft.

In 2011, a fellow villager from Gouda caste fell severely ill. Her condition worsened by the day and it affected her ability to think clearly. She blamed Janmajay for witching her. She claimed to have seen him in her dreams trying to harass her. She repeatedly quarrelled with Janmajay. Soon, the villagers started suspecting him. It reached a flashpoint when a few villagers beat him up. Janmajay reported the matter to the police, who tried to resolve the matter by explaining to the villagers that there was no such thing as a witch. The police also threatened them by saying that if in the future anybody harassed Janmajay, they would be arrested. The villagers refrained from interacting with him due to the fear of the police but ostracized him from their community.

Meanwhile, the woman who had accused him of using witchcraft on her visited a hospital for a successful treatment.

Observations:

- » Many villagers continue to have deep rooted beliefs in witches and witchcraft.
- » Many follow the traditional methods of cure and do not visit hospitals in time. They prefer seeking the help of bejuni.
- » Caste based discrimination is common in the village.
- » There is a lack of awareness campaigns by the government and thus people are not aware of the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Details of FGD:

We held a village meeting in March 2021 in the presence of the villagers as well as the sarpanch and anganwadi workers. In the FGD, the anganwadi workers brought to our notice that the belief in witch and witchcraft was

very much prevalent in the locality. However, due to the fear of the police, not many accusations came to the limelight. They said that they often tried to persuade the villagers to visit a hospital rather than an ojha for treatment.

The sarpanch said that people believed in a supernatural and unseen power that tried to harm them. Although there had been no such incident in the recent past, he said that there was no guarantee that such an incident wouldn't happen in the future. The woman who had blamed Janmajay for her illness was eventually treated at a hospital and is currently living a healthy life in the village. Janmajay, on the other hand, is still suffering from mental trauma from the incident. For a long time, he could not get his children married and had relentlessly begged the villagers to accept him back into the community.

Case Study 7

Man kicked out and dies a subsequent ill-health death for witching his fellow villagers

Year: 2015-16

Burlendi is a village under the M.K. Rai GP of Gudari block. The village has 51 households with a total population of 282. Most of the people are Scheduled Castes and only six families belong to OBC. People depend on the block headquarters, situated 8 km away for medical facilities. There is also a health sub-centre, 2 km away from the village. The villagers earn their livelihood from daily wage labour while a few of them engage themselves in agriculture.

During 2015-2016, a 75-years-old man, Pentha Patika, was driven out of the village and forced to live in a temporary settlement away from his family. He died in October 2020 due to poor health conditions.

In his younger days, Pentha Patika was known to be a physically fit and fine man. However, his wife and he were distressed about not having any children. Pentha started worshipping deities and engaged himself in several rituals to be blessed with a child. He would put sindoor on his forehead, kajal on eyes and dress in a peculiar way for ritualistic successes. People began speculating about him practicing witchcraft. One day, his nephew fell ill due to an unknown disease. After observing his physical conditions, Pentha said he would not survive for long. Within a few days, his nephew died aggravating suspicions from his family. Within a few months, many villagers died due to various health conditions. Villagers thus concluded that it was Pentha who had cast his black magic to harm the villagers. Worried, the villagers threatened to kill Pentha if he did not leave the village. Pentha moved to his wife's maternal village in Jaypanga in Derigaon GP. However, owing to his disrepute as a witchcraft practitioner, he was not allowed to stay there.

He travelled from village to village for almost three years before taking refuge in an abandoned ANM building in M.K. Rai village. His ration card helped him fulfill his basic necessities. When his health started to worsen, his wife shifted to M.K.Rai to take care of him. However, the villagers from Burlendi put pressure on her not to stay with him. She was thus forced to shift to her father's village instead. Through his remaining life, a few of his close friends provided him with money and food to survive. But his health condition declined further and he died in October 2020. Pentha's wife continues to live in Jaypanga village in a hostile environment where people see her as the wife of a sorcerer.

Observations:

- » Many villagers continue to have deep rooted beliefs in witches and witchcraft.
- » Many follow the traditional methods of cure and do not visit hospitals in time. They prefer seeking the help of ojhas.

- » Due to lack of efficient healthcare facilities, proper diagnosis cannot be ensured.
- » Many villagers are infamous alcoholics that affect their sense of reasoning.
- » There is a lack of awareness campaigns by the government and thus people are not aware of the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Details of FGD:

We conducted a meeting with the villagers to understand the traditional beliefs and the case of Pentha Patrika. Many people admitted to believing in witchcraft and sorcery. It also came to our notice during FGD that many villagers have poor health owing to alcohol consumption.

Talking about Pentha, a few believed his innocence while most of them said that he obviously practised witchcraft. He had a fearful appearance with heavily kohled eyes and sindoor on his forehead. He dressed himself in a peculiar way and hosted ritualistic Devi pujas. After being banished from the village, he became a vagabond. Those who believed he was innocent tried to help him with money and food from time to time. When he died, they collected money from the village and tried to give him a respectful cremation.

Case Study 8

Villagers migrate to other villages in fear of being harmed by an alleged witch

Year: Not mentioned

Balipanga is a village under the M.K. Rai GP of Gudari block. Four decades back, around 20 families lived in the village. However, today, there is just one family that lives in the revenue village. Bairagi Nishika, aged 72, is the

head of the family. Other villagers left Balipanga fearing for a terrible fate after suspecting Bairagi of practising witchcraft.

Bairagi is the eldest son among the three sons of Tanka Nishika. The family owned five acres of land and Bairagi was also the village chief. His sons and daughter are married. However, none of the marriages were supported by his community members. The first to desert the village was his younger brother, Rama Rao Nishika.

The process of desertion was set in motion after villagers found Bairagi engaged in various ritualistic activities. One day, Rama Rao's wife fell ill and without proper medical assistance, she passed away. To understand the cause of her death, Rama travelled to Andhra Pradesh to meet a kalisi (witch doctor). The kalisi said that his wife's death was caused by one of his close relatives practising witchcraft. Soon after, he suspected his brother, Bairagi of being the evil sorcerer. Upon returning, Rama shifted out of the village to settle in a nearby place. Soon after, Bairagi's other brother also left Balipanga with his family out of fear.

A couple of years later, Aparao Muttika, the then sarpanch of Jananidhi GP, fell ill. People around him told him that he had been attacked by a witch and called an ojha from Nilamguda village. The witch doctor after performing his rituals pointed to a direction claiming that the witch who had attacked Aparao stayed around there. People from Jananidhi and nearby villages suspected Bairagi of being that witch. Soon they conspired to kill him to end the suffering of many villagers. However, Tripathi Panigrahi, the then Gudani notified area council (NAC) chairman came to know about it and dissuaded the villagers from taking such an extreme step. He tried to explain to the villagers that witchcraft was a superstition. Upon his advice, Aparao's family took him to Visakhapatnam for treatment and he survived.

However, that did not deter the villagers from blaming Bairagi for all kinds of health issues among the villagers. They were afraid of Bairagi being a powerful witch. Gradually, all families left Balipanga one by one to settle in

nearby areas. Bairagi's family continues to live in the same village and does not have a good relationship with any of the other villagers.

Observations:

- » Villagers have a strong faith and blind belief in the existence of witches.
- » Many do not visit hospitals unless they are in a critical condition. Most of the time, the villagers prefer to seek an ojha for help.
- » The healthcare system is inefficient due to poor infrastructure.
- » People are not aware of the laws regarding witch-branding and witch-hunting in Odisha.

Details of FGD:

We held a meeting among the villagers who had left Balipanga and settled in nearby areas in March 2021 to discuss the matter. In the FGD, many people said that witches still existed while a few others said they had started to understand that there were no such things as witches. Talking about Bairagi Nishika, they said that villagers did not have a good relationship with him from the start. His sons had gotten married outside the village into other communities and his daughter had eloped with a man from a lower caste.

Bairagi's brothers too believed that he was a witch because the *khalisi* told them so. But they did not take any steps against him as he was not only the village chief but also their elder brother. According to the anganwadi worker present, Aparao Muttika had a weak nervous system and came back cured from Visakhapatnam. However, many others refused to believe that he was cured because of better healthcare. Rather, they believed that it was because he went so far away from Balipanga that Bairagi's dark spell did not work on him. Due to the fear of Bairagi's supposed black magic, villagers still refuse to come back to Balipanga.

Case Study 9

Temple priest forced out of the village after being accused of using witchcraft on his cousin

Year: 2009

Gumiguda village under the Kutraguda GP of the Bissamcuttack block has 33 families residing in it. Out of them 28 belong to OBC and five to Scheduled Castes. The total population of the village is 143. There is a primary school in the village. People depend on Muniguda, 15 km away, for healthcare facilities. However, the villagers often seek traditional medicines and witchcraft for cures.

In 2009, a 64-years-old temple priest of Gumiguda, Abhimanya Batta, was branded a witch after the death of his cousin and was forced to migrate to another district. Abhimanya is the son of Ghenu Batta. Ghenu was the chief priest of the village's Manikeswari Temple. The ritualistic knowledge and art of worship was passed on to Abhimanya from his father. He earned his living as a priest in the temple as well as being a sorcerer to help out villagers in the time of need. At the time, he owned 40 acres of land and was also a samiti member along with his brother, Bangali Batta.

After Ghenu's death, Abhimanya's cousin, Hara Batta wanted to be the chief priest and often fought with him for the position. Abhimanya tried to explain that Hara would die if he performed any pujas wrong as he had no experience in it. However, Hara always fought with him because he believed that he was denied a position he deserved. After a few days, Hara fell severely ill, could not recover from his ailment and eventually died. After cremating Hara's body, his family members accused Abhimanya of practising witchcraft to kill Hara. The villagers took the family's side and forced Abhimanya to leave the village. He lodged a case at the police station and the case continued for years after. Out of anguish and nervousness, Abhimanya shifted to his father-in-law's house in Roduguma village of

Kandhamal district. Abhimanya's elder brother, Bangali was also forced out of the village. He shifted to Sindhupanga village near Bissamcuttack.

A court case has been underway for the past 12 years. Abhimanya also has agricultural land in the village, which remains unattended; he is not able to cultivate it because of opposition. It is his misfortune that he is not wanted in Roduguma too; villagers over there want him to leave their village.

Observations:

- » Many people of the village continue to have a deep faith in witches and witchcraft.
- » They follow the traditional methods of cure and rarely visit hospitals. Rather, they visit khalisi in the village for treatment.
- » The healthcare system is inefficient due to poor infrastructure.
- » Rumours about witchcraft practices often stem from family disputes.
- » There is a lack of awareness campaign by the government and thus people are not aware of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013.

Details of FGD:

We held a village meeting with the villagers in March 2021 to understand the matter of Abhimanya Bhatta and the beliefs surrounding witchcraft and sorcery. Many of the villagers still believe in witchcraft although the numbers are decreasing. The villagers told us that with Abhimanya gone, life had been more peaceful. They said that since the whole thing was a family dispute, if he were to return then it would cause more conflict in the village. People continue to depend on traditional practices before visiting a hospital.

Case Study 10

Man alleged to be practicing witchcraft on his neighbour's daughter saved by sarpanch's timely advice

Year: Not mentioned

Jalanidhi is a village 5 km away from the block headquarters at Gudari. A total of 198 families live here. For medical facilities, people depend on a CHC nearby. The majority of the population belong to Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. There is an anganwadi centre and upper primary school in the village. People earn their living from agriculture and daily wage work.

A few years ago, Das Sabar, a fellow villager, was accused of practising witchcraft by his neighbour. Das Sabar was a devotee of Mahima Alekh, a religious order. He has two sons, one studying for his graduation while the other is married. His married son lives at his grandfather's village at Gajiguda. Das had also adopted his younger brother's daughter after the death of his brother and sister-in-law. Das was known to spend hours meditating and worshipping Mahima Alekh. His daughter was a close friend of the daughter of Arjun Sabar, a neighbour.

One day, Arjun Sabar's daughter fell terribly ill. She told her parents that she dreamt of Das attacking her. Her parents deduced that it was Das Sabar's witchcraft that had affected their daughter. They got into a row with Das. Soon, a village meeting was called in presence of the then sarpanch, Aparao Muttika. Understanding the situation, Aparao told them to stop quarrelling unnecessarily otherwise he would call the police. Moreover, he tried to make them realise that there was no such thing as witchcraft and they were just blind beliefs. He advised Arjun and his wife to take their daughter to a hospital for treatment. The girl was then hospitalised and it was found that she had a severe gastric problem. With the right medication, she recovered.

Observations:

- » Villagers have deep faith and belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft.
- » When sick, many people first consult an ojha for treatment before going to a hospital.
- » Inefficient healthcare systems and poor infrastructure have forced people to turn to ojhas.
- » There is no awareness drive by the government to clear the blind belief from people's minds. Thus, no one from the village is aware of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013.

Details of FGD:

We held a meeting with the villagers, anganwadi workers and ASHA in March 2021 to understand the case at hand. Anganwadi workers and ASHA have taken several steps to educate the villagers against witches and witchcraft practices. While the number of those believing in superstitions is decreasing, they still persist. They have also tried to advise people against conflict with Das otherwise they would have to face the police. Due to the fear of the police, many have kept quiet. Even after the girl had recovered in the hospital, some villagers had decided that they had to find the witch who was hidden in the village. Each family was to give ₹100 and a handful of rice to get an ojha to find the witch. Nevertheless, no one could be found eventually. Despite all these, Das continues to live in fear whenever someone becomes sick. Community people avoid mingling with him.

Baleswar

Baleswar has an area of 3,806 square kilometres and a population of 2,317,419 according to Census 2011. Of the total population, males constitute 51.31% and females, 48.89%. The literacy rate of the coastal district is 71.11%. The district headquarters lies in the Baleswar town. The revenue for the district is mostly derived from agriculture, fishing and tourism.

Case Study 1

Old man survives attempted murder over suspicious use of witchcraft on a fellow villager's son

Year: 2018

Baghamara is a hamlet under Jamudiha village – also gram panchayat (GP) – of Nilgiri block. There are 1,404 families in the village with a total population of 5,630 – 2,753 males and 2877 females. There are 762 children, aged 0-6 years. According to Census 2011, 3,149 people belong to Scheduled Tribes and 313 to Scheduled Castes. The literacy rate of Jamudiha village is 73.34% compared to 72.87% of Orissa. The male literacy rate stands at 80.98% while female literacy rate is 65.92%.

Despite the higher literacy rate as compared to much of Odisha, many villagers continue to believe in witchcraft and seek the help of *ojhas* and *gunia* in times of problems. Due to the ill advice of these *ojhas*, many innocent lives have fallen victim to the evil act of witch-hunting.

A murderous event occurred in June 2018 when a 70-years-old man, Ram Singh, was attacked over rumoured involvement in witchcraft. Ram lives with his family in Baghamara where Baishnav Singh and his family also reside. That year, Baishnav's son was critically ill and did not recover for a long time. The family took the child for treatment to an *ojha*. With his sorcery, the *ojha* made a revelation to the family that Baishnav's son was a victim of Ram's black magic.

Alleging that Ram was a witch, Baishnav's brother, Chotaram Singh and his brother-in-law, Jatia Singh attacked him. They dragged him out of his house and brutally beat him up. They even attempted to drown him in a nearby pond after hitting his head with a rock. Ram Singh's daughter intervened and was beaten up by the duo as well. They also tried to throw the father and daughter off a cliff when some villagers rescued them. They were taken to Nilgiri sub-divisional hospital by the villagers in serious condition.

Police arrested Chhotaram and Jatia on the basis of a complaint lodged by Ram's family members

Observations:

- » Despite a higher literacy rate, some villagers continue to believe in witchcraft and sorcery.
- » Regardless of their educational status, they seek the help of ojha and gunia to deal with their health, financial and marital issues.
- » There is an urgent need for steps to be taken by government agencies to make people aware of the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Case Study 2

Old man and his daughter beaten and forced to drink cow urine after being suspected of witching their neighbours

Year: 2020

Kahalia is a tribal dominated village under Pokharisahi GP of Nilgiri block. In 2020, an unfortunate incident occurred in which an 80-years-old man and his daughter were brutally beaten and were forced to drink cow urine.

The victim, Parshuram Barik, lives with his 30-years-old daughter, Puspanjali Barik in Kahalia village. Some villagers suspected that he practised black magic as he often kept the idols of several deities at home and worshipped them time and again. Gourahari Barik, Jogendra Barik, Laxmimani Barik, Trilochan Barik, Shrabana Barik, Narendra Barik, Shashidhara Barik and Biswanath Barik were Parshuram's neighbours. Laxmimani and another villager, Sabita Barik reportedly had a very high fever for a long time. Seeing no improvement in their health, they sought out an ojha to understand the cause behind it. Casting his so-called spells, the ojha confirmed that it was Parshuram who had done witchcraft on them. He also said that only Parshuram could cure both.



On 15 June 2020, the neighbours marched to Parshuram's house and threatened to kill his family if he did not cure Laxmimani and Sabita. They accused him of being a witch. When Parshuram protested and denied having anything to do with witchcraft, he and his daughter were dragged out of the house. They were tied to a tree and beaten mercilessly. They were even forced to drink cow urine.

After the incident, Parshuram and Puspanjali lodged a written complaint at the police station. Police arrested the alleged attackers and the case is still under trial at the court. Another case was also filed against Parshuram by the family members of Sabita. Enmity between Parasuram and his neighbours continues till date.

Observations:

- » People are still steeped in superstition and have deep faith in witchcraft and sorcery.
- » Despite being educated, people go to the hospital as a last resort. They prefer seeking an ojha to deal with health, financial and marital issues.

3. No action has been taken by any government agency to educate and sensitise people about the harm caused by superstition.

Case Study 3

A family is humiliated and driven out of the village after being accused of practicing witchcraft on their relatives

Year: 2021

Mahisamunda, a village under Srirampur GP of Baliapal block, has a total of 64 households with 297 people. Among them, 148 are males and 149 are females. Children aged 0-6 years comprise 11.78% of the population of the village. In Mahisamunda, male literacy stands at 96.95% while the female literacy rate is 77.86%.

The village had seen a number of inhuman crimes and practises related to witchcraft. In January 2021, an entire family was forced to leave the village over alleged witchcraft practice. Luksu Tudu, aged 50, and his wife Rukmini Tudu, aged 42, lived in the village with their 8-years-old son.

The family was accused of doing black magic when two sons of Luksu's elder brother died within a gap of a few days due to an unknown ailment. His elder brother and his family held Rukmini responsible for the deaths. They alleged her of practising witchcraft. Several arguments and fights erupted between the two families. Soon, the villagers also started supporting Luksu's older brother and fined Luksu's family ₹12,000. Luksu paid the fine after selling their food grains and household items. However, the matter did not end there. The villagers decided to ostracise them as well. They were not allowed to use the community tube well nor could they buy groceries from the village market. It became difficult for the family to sustain themselves. Luksu reached out to the sarpanch for help but the latter expressed his inability to help him. Finally, the villagers beat them and drove them out of the village.

The family had to take shelter in a culvert about 5 km away from their village. Their plight was highlighted in the media and drew public attention. Baliapal tehsildar, Subrat Kumar Patra sent the local revenue inspector, Niranjan Singh to enquire about the issue and rescue the family. The administration brought the family to Palapada where a temporary arrangement of food and shelter was made available to them. After the administration's intervention, the family is now back to living in their own home at Mahisamunda.

Observations:

- » Despite a higher literacy rate, belief in witchcraft and sorcery still persists.
- » People go to the hospital as a last resort and seek the help of an ojha to deal with health, financial and marital issues.
- » The administration only reached out to help the family when the media highlighted the case.
- » The administration has not taken any steps to educate people about the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Case Study 4

Woman paraded naked over suspicions of practicing witchcraft

Year: 2011

Jharanaghati village under Nilgiri block of Baleswar borders Mayurbhanj district. Home to Santhal and Kolha tribes, the village comprises three hamlets – Mahulabani, Bhaliaposhi and Tangana. It has 228 households with a total population of 1,056.

Duli Marandi is a resident of Mahulbani hamlet of the Jharanaghati. She stays in the village with her husband, Dukhiram, three daughters and two sons. Dukhiram earns the family's living by doing petty trading of non-timber forest products (NTFP). He also owns a small patch of land.

On 20 October 2011, fellow villager, Ratha Marandi and his son beat up Dukhiram by accusing him of practising witchcraft in order to grab his land. When Duli was going to lodge an FIR against them, a group of villagers including Basi Marandi , Kumuda Soren , Ratini Marandi , Karna Soren , Rabindra Soren , Rabindra Marandi , Basa Majhi , Ratha Soren , Krupasinidhu Marandi, Sudam Marandi , Bhagaban Marandi and many others attacked Duli. They stripped her naked and physically abused her. They accused her of being a witch and threatened to kill her. Ratha and his son looted ₹800 from her. After the incident, Duli lodged a complaint against her attackers, who were later arrested by the police. After a few days, all of them were released on bail. Duli left the village due to the threat on her life and stayed in Kaptipada in her father’s house for some time. She is back in the village now but the enmity between both the parties continues. The case is pending in court. Many villagers continue to believe that she is a witch.

Observations:

- Faith in witchcraft and sorcery still persists in the community.
- People seek the help of an ojha to deal with health, financial and



marital issues. They go to the hospital as a last resort.

- » Land grabbing is one of the main reasons that often leads to witch-branding in this case.
- » The government has done little to educate people about the laws against witch-branding and witch-hunting.

Case Study 5

Young man is severely beaten up after an ojha names him a practitioner of witchcraft

Year: 2018

Kantabania is a revenue village under Shyama Sundarpur GP of Oupada block. The village has 123 households and a total population of 702 of which 380 belong to Scheduled Tribes and 183 to Scheduled Castes; the rest belong to other castes.

In July 2018, a young man, Pratap Singh was severely beaten by fellow villagers after they suspected him of practising black magic. It began when Fakir Singh of the village and his wife fell sick. According to the villagers, Fakir had been so ill that he had lost his mental balance. His wife, too, was seen vomiting blood. The two were taken to hospitals in Nilgiri and then Cuttack for better treatment. However, both could not recover. The villagers say that doctors had found no signs of disease in them and were convinced that it was due to witchcraft. Another old man of the same village, Raghunath also fell ill within a few months and his limbs were swollen. Fellow villagers Pratap, Uma Singh and Suna Singh visited an ojha to find the reason behind his poor health. After his ritualistic pujas, the ojha accused three men of practising witchcraft in the village. Interestingly, Pratap's name was figured among the three supposed practitioners. Upon hearing this, the villagers got enraged and beat him up severely. No one paid any heed to his requests and protests.

However, the case was resolved within the village and no police case was filed. According to some locals, police are apathetic to such incidents in the area.

Observations:

- » Some villagers continue to believe and have deep faith in witchcraft and sorcery.
- » Villagers make it a point to first go to a witch doctor; going to the hospital is a last resort.
- » Sometimes, due to late admission into the hospital and the unavailability of efficient infrastructure, some health problems cannot be treated.
- » According to a few locals, police are apathetic in such situations and do not help the victim as much.

Kandhamal

Kandhamal has an area of 8,021 square kilometres and a population of 7,33,110 according to Census 2011. Of the total population, males constitute 49.09% whereas females constitute 50.90%. The literacy rate of the district is 64.13%. The district headquarters lies in the Phulbani town. Kandhamal is best known for its cultural heritage and handicrafts. The revenue for the district is mostly derived from agriculture and forestry.

Case Study 1

Village teacher threatened to leave the village over witchcraft allegations

Year: 2019-20

Dadapada is a village under G Udayagiri block of the district. The village has 51 households and a total population of 158 – 51 males and 48 females; there are 91 children, aged 0-6 in the village. Of the households, 47 belong to the Scheduled Tribes and 4 to Scheduled Castes. The village

has an anganwadi centre and an upper primary school. However, there is no healthcare facility available.

Fortunately, there is no disturbance caused due to religion here but the same cannot be said about superstitions. In 2019-20, a 47-years-old man, Parameswar Mallick, was accused of practising witchcraft and threatened to leave the village.

Parameswar, who lived in the village with his wife, a son and two daughters, joined as a science teacher in the village primary school in 2009. His wife was an Anganwadi worker. Parameswar and his seven friends had formed a '*kirtan mandali*' (devotional music group) and enjoyed practising songs in the village mandap. In 2017, Parameswar's job demanded more time and commitment from him due to which he had to leave the group with a heavy heart.

In the year 2019-20, one of his *kirtan* friends, Birakishor, fell severely ill. His condition was rather critical and, on his deathbed, he wanted to see all of his friends from the *kirtan mandali*. While all his friends visited him, Parameswar could not make it due to prior engagement. A few days later, Birakishor passed away. Soon, Birakishor's family members and a few villagers started suspecting Parameswar of practising witchcraft on him. They argued that Birakishor would take Parameswar's name often on his deathbed and that's why he was not present when he was called. He was threatened and asked to leave the village for his own good. Exasperated, Parameswar took the help of G Udayagiri police to solve the matter. A village meeting was held where the police explained to the villagers the consequences of such accusations. The villagers then withdrew their decision. However, the trauma of such an accusation still haunts Parameswar and his family.

Observations:

- » Black magic and blind beliefs are still prevalent in the village. However, the number of those blind beliefs is gradually decreasing.

- » People go to the hospital as a last resort and, at times, due to inadequate facilities available, health problems are not fully diagnosed.
- » During a health emergency, people are quick to blame someone for witchcraft rather than going to the hospital for proper treatment.
- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or regarding existing laws by the government or any agency.

Case Study 2

Man is forced to flee the village over his relatives' conspiracy branding him as a witch

Year: 2012

Lujurimunda is a village 6 km away from the block headquarters at Tikabali and 43 km away from the district headquarters. Also, the gram panchayat (GP) head, the village has 168 households with a total population of 442 – 155 males and 242 females. Of the total households, 153 belong to Scheduled Tribes and 81 to Scheduled Castes. There is an anganwadi centre and an upper primary school in the village. However, there are no healthcare facilities.

Even though there is no history of caste or class discrimination in Lujurimunda, the same cannot be said about witch-branding. In 2012, Baga Kanhar was ordered by the village committee to leave the village over witchcraft accusations. The order was on the basis of allegations made by some residents of the village.

A 36-years-old woman of the village, Sanjana Behera, claimed that she was having recurring dreams of Baga trying to kill her. Another 54-years-old man, Sudhir Kanhar, also accused him of trying to disrupt his peaceful life. Both complained of being harassed by Baga and suspected him of practising black magic. Villagers called *gunias* from neighbouring villages

to confirm their suspicion. Through ritualistic *khatavidya* (in which the *gunia* uses a cot to find the witch) the *gunias* deduced that Baga indeed practised witchcraft and tried to harm the villagers. Angered, the villagers held a meeting and ordered him to leave the village. They abused him when he tried to deny the allegations. He lodged a written complaint at the GP seeking a meeting to discuss the matter. However, the meeting was unsuccessful and he was forced to flee from the village in 2016. He sold his land and shifted to another village, Budukapadar, 4 km away.

We discussed the matter with Baga as well as the anganwadi workers, accredited social health activist (ASHA), auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) and a few villagers. According to Baga, the whole thing was a conspiracy by his relatives and those who had higher political power. He claimed that everything was done due to family disputes to grab his land. The anganwadi worker and other frontline service providers corroborated saying that Baga had no knowledge of such practices and he continued to stay out of the village due to misinformation spread by his relatives.

Observations:

- » People still have faith in black magic and visit *gunias* to solve health, marital and financial matters.
- » The above case was a result of a family and land dispute.
- » People go to the hospital in the last stage of an illness and thus it becomes too late to be treated.
- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or regarding existing laws by the government or any agency.

Case Study 3

Man forced to pay compensation of ₹50,000 and ostracized from the village for witching his neighbours

Year: Not mentioned

Besides Baga Kanhar, another person, Bhimsen Pradhan was accused of practising witchcraft and ostracised from Lujurimunda village a few years back. Bhimsen, aged 57, lived in the village with his wife, two sons and a daughter. He earned his livelihood as a daily wage labourer. His troubles started when the members of neighbouring families started falling ill one by one. They suspected that someone was casting black magic to harm them. To find the cause and the solution, they called a *gunia* from Ganjam. With '*khatabidya*' (in which the *gunia* uses a cot to find the witch), the *gunia* concluded that Bhimsen was a witch and the cause of all the illnesses. The neighbours called a village meeting to come up with the right punishment for Bhimsen. He was asked to pay a compensation of ₹50,000 and ordered not to use the tube well and well for drawing water. His family was eventually isolated from the rest of the village. However, Bhimsen did not report the matter to the police.

Observations:

- » *Gunias* reign supreme in villagers' minds and easily misguide the gullible villagers.
- » The above case was probably a result of a land dispute.
- » People go to the hospital at the last stage of illness, which is too late for the patient to recover.
- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or regarding existing laws by the government or any agency.

Case Study 4

Man assaulted over the rumoured use of black magic on a child

Year: 2015

Khajurisahi village under Lujurimunda GP is 8 km away from the block headquarters at Tikabali and 44 km away from the district headquarters at Phulbani. There are 12 households in the small village with a total population

of 38. Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes are in equal numbers in the village while there are a few who belong to Other Backward Class (OBC). There is an anganwadi centre along with an upper primary school in the village. However, there is a lack of primary healthcare facilities.

Jilan Behera lived in the village with his family and earned his livelihood as a small-time farmer. In 2015, a young boy named Harihar Digal died after falling sick. While nearing his death, he took the name of Jilan and wrote his name on a paper. Suspecting Jilan of casting black magic on the boy, the villagers assaulted him. He filed a written complaint at the Tikabali police station. Three persons were arrested and they spent six months in jail before being released on bail. They reached an agreement with the police to leave Jilan and his family alone.

Observations:

- » People still have faith in black magic and visit gunias to solve health, marital and financial matters.
- » People go to the hospital in the last stage of illness when it is too late.
- » People believe black magic to be the cause of many health issues.
- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or regarding existing laws by the government or any agency.

Case Study 5

Man ordered to walk on fire alleging him of using black magic to kill young villagers

Year: 2021

Padikia is a village situated 7 km away from the block headquarters at G Udayagiri and 68 km away from the district headquarters. The village has 79 households – 58 Scheduled Tribes and 21 Scheduled Castes. It has a population of 213 with 130 males and 83 females. There is an anganwadi

centre and an upper primary school for educational facilities. But, there are no healthcare facilities available. People depend on the hospital in G Udayagiri for the same. Over 80% of the population in the village practice Christianity.

Kanteswar Pradhan, aged 71, lived with his family in the village and earned his living by farming and daily wage labour. In 2021, a 22-years-old girl, Jhumeli Pradhan, fell severely ill. Even after getting medical treatment, she succumbed to her disease. Soon after, a 21-years-old boy, Sanaj Naik, also started to show similar symptoms. The sick Sanaj told his family members that their neighbour, Kanteswar, often came in his dreams. Everyone soon suspected Kanteswar of harming Sanaj. They called an *ojha* to host pujas and rituals to figure it out. Eventually, the *ojha* announced that Kanteswar practised witchcraft and would try to harm young villagers one by one. Agitated, the villagers threatened him to stop practising black magic and ordered him to walk on fire to prove his innocence. He was even asked to hold fire in his hands. A few days later, Sanaj died.

Angered, the villagers asked Kanteswar to leave the village if he wanted to live. Troubled Kanteswar reached out to the police for help and gave a written complaint. The sarpanch then took a stand and threatened the involved villagers to file an FIR against them. Fearing the police, the villagers promised to leave Kanteswar alone.

Observations:

- » People still have faith in black magic and visit ojhass to solve health, marital and financial matters.
- » People go to the hospital in the last stage of illness and thus it becomes too late for the patient.
- » People believe black magic to be the cause of many health issues.
- » The majority of the population practice Christianity and do not believe in such superstition. However, some of them are still bound by their old traditions.

- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or existing laws by the government or any agency.

Case Study 6

Woman forced to flee the village after relatives spread rumours about her involvement in witchcraft

Year: 2019

Badabanga is a village situated 23 km away from the block headquarters at Daringbadi and 120 km from the district headquarters at Phulbani. The village has 84 households and a total population of 325 people. Out of the total, 165 are males and 160 are females. Scheduled tribes make up the majority of the village population with a sizable number of people belonging to scheduled castes. There is an anganwadi centre and an upper primary school in the village. However, there are no proper healthcare facilities.

In 2019, a 30-years-old woman, Shanta Pradhan, was branded as a witch by her relatives and driven out of the village. According to the victim, it was done to acquire her father's land from her. We discussed the matter directly with the victim. Shanta lived in the village with her 50-years-old husband and two daughters. She was the only child of her parents and had lost her father at a young age. She had also grown up watching her paternal uncle torture her mother. Her mother had left her own house to live at her father's place for safety. Being the only child of her parents, she wanted to build a house on her father's land. However, her uncles and cousins did not want to let go of the land. They started a rumour in the village that Shanta was a witch. With misinformation spreading, villagers asked Shanta to leave.

She went to the Daringbadi police station for help. The police tried to find a solution with discussions with both parties and suggested a compromise. The case was closed at the police station. However, a few days later,

Shanta's relatives started instigating the villagers yet again. Shanta, then, left the village and lived in a rented house at Simanbadi.

As Shanta narrated her story, we suggested she visit the court of Odisha State Commission for Women at Phulbani on 31 March 2021. The police ASP of Phulbani also asked her to file an FIR at the Daringbadi police station. Moreover, the commission issued a letter to the SP of Kandhamal to make an inquiry into the matter.

Observations:

- » People still have faith in black magic and visit gunias to solve health, marital and financial matters.
- » People go to the hospital in the last stage of illness.
- » The above was a case due to jealousy as well as greed for grabbing a woman's land.
- » Many of the people believe that witchcraft can be used both ways - good and bad.
- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or regarding existing laws by the government or any agency.

Case Study 7

An old man humiliated for allegedly harming his own family using witchcraft

Year: 2013-14

Jakamaha village, situated 9 km from G Udayagiri block and 69 km away from the district headquarters at Phulbani, has a total population of 138 including 75 males and 63 females. The village comprises people from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. There is an anganwadi centre, an upper primary school and a primary healthcare facility in the village.

In 2013-2014, an old man, Parmeswar Pradhan was accused of having cast dark magic that affected his own family. We tried to reach out to Parmeswar but he refused to give us any information or opinion about the incident. We discussed the matter with the villagers. They said that in 2013, the daughter-in-law of Parmeswar's elder brother fell severely ill. She would repeatedly dream of Parmeswar trying to harm her. When asked, Parmeswar kept mum. A few days later, his brother's elder son was also affected by the same disease as his wife. Even with medical treatment, he passed away. At the time, Parmeswar was not home and villagers suspected that he was practising witchcraft.

Later, in 2014, an old man of the same village fell ill and claimed to be dreaming about Parmeswar. The villagers reached out to Parmeswar and, to test the truth about their suspicion, asked him to feed rice to the old man. Within a few days, the old man was back on his feet and the villagers' suspicion was supposedly confirmed. They humiliated Parmeswar and forced him to leave the village. Till now, the villagers suspect him of practising black magic and having killed some villagers including his own nephew.

Observations:

- » People still have faith in black magic and visit gunias to solve health, marital and financial matters.
- » They go to the hospital in the last stage of illness.
- » Many of them believe that witchcraft can be used for both good and bad.
- » There have been no awareness campaigns against such beliefs or regarding existing laws by the government or any agency.

Nayagarh

Nayagarh has an area of 3,890 square kilometres and a population of 9,62,789 according to Census 2011. Of the total population, males and

females constitute 52.20% and 47.79% respectively. The literacy rate of the district is 80.42%. The revenue for the district is mostly derived from agriculture.

Case Study 1

Villagers migrate believing their village to be cursed by witchcraft

Year: Since 2009

Gunduribadi, a small village under Darpanarayanpur gram panchayat (GP) of Ranpur block, comprises two hamlets – Adivasi Sahi and Harijan Sahi. A pucca road built by the PWD connects Guduribadi with Darpanarayanpur. The village has electricity provisions too.

Harijan Sahi had a total of 13 Dalit families but now it is left with just six. Five families that lived in the village for generations have left the hamlet believing it to be cursed because of deaths due to reasons not known to villagers. The families, including 14 members – seven women, three young girls and four men – have shifted to other villages. Members of another two families comprising old people are no more. People fear that an unseen evil force has been killing men and uprooting families. Each family of the village had been provided with five decimal of land by the government. There are two borewells and two tube wells to provide drinking water to the villagers.

Villagers claimed that in the last five years, five people of Harijan Sahi had died mysteriously due to the presence of an unseen evil force. They are Dayanidhi Nayak, aged 50, Bansider Nayak, aged 45, and his 20-years-old son, Purnachandra Nayak, Maguni Nayak, aged 45, and his 21-years-old son, Babuli Nayak. Babuli died 19 days after his marriage. Earlier, an old couple, Satura Senapathy and his wife, Sumari Senapathy had also died.

Dayanidhi's wife, Ranju Nayak has left the village along with her sons, Mangaraj Nayak and Lingaraj Nayak. Ranju stays with his elder son, Mangaraj

at his wife's village, Bhatikila. Her younger son, Lingaraj, stays at his in-law's house in Hathibadi. Another woman from the hamlet, Chabi Nayak, now stays at Darpanarayanpur along with her three daughters.

Both Ranju and Chabi said that there was a vengeful spirit that roamed Harijan Sahi. At twilight, they heard the sounds of uneasy mooing of their cows, random branches breaking and alarming chirping of birds. Upon not finding the cause of such unrest, the villagers feared it to be the work of an evil spirit, they said. They reckoned that none of the deceased men had drug or alcohol addictions but had dropped dead while eating or sleeping.

Both the women recounted the story of Sambari Nayak who had died 13 years ago. Many villagers remembered Sambari to be a worshipper of a deity named Aadi Shakti. After his death, there was no one fit to give the offerings to the deity. Thus, the angry Aadi Shakti had cursed that no men would survive in the village. They asserted that since then men had been dying.

The villagers had reportedly reached out to a '*gunia*' in Saratasasan village at Balakathi for help. The *gunia* performed an exorcism to help rid Harijan Sahi of the spirit but it did not seem to work. They then went to another, more renowned *gunia* in Godipada near Baliadihi village to find a solution but the village still remained cursed as ever, the villagers said. Some of the villagers also approached government officials such as the local tehsildar and doctor yet no steps were initiated to help them out.

Left with no alternative and due to fear, the villagers started leaving the village. They abandoned their concrete houses provided to them under the government housing scheme. Some even extracted the wooden doors attached to the houses and took them along.

To understand the case better, we discussed the matter with the people of Gunduribadi's other hamlet, Adivasi Sahi. Besides 10 men and women of Adivasi Sahi, ward member, Hadubandhu Pradhan, village elder, Bhagawan

Pradhan, and women's committee leader, Pratima Pradhan attended the meeting. Panu Barik, a former ward member of adjacent village, Luni Sahi, was also present in the meeting. Interestingly, all of them said that there was no such thing as a vengeful spirit or a witch in Harijan Sahi. They added that all talks about the presence of an unseen evil spirit or witch were nothing but rumours and superstition. They believed that the people at Harijan Sahi were shocked by the sudden deaths due to diseases they could not diagnose. Those diseases were not treated in time and aggravated to their chronic forms. According to them, such superstitious beliefs were a result of the worsening economic conditions and age-old traditional beliefs of the people of Harijan Sahi.

Observations:

- » The age-old beliefs, traditions and superstitions still grip the minds of people. Thus, during any misfortune, the immediate blame falls on a witch or vengeful spirit.
- » Poverty, lack of scientific education and awareness are the major causes of such beliefs.
- » The untimely diagnosis of diseases and dependence on *gunias* add to such superstitious beliefs.
- » There is an urgent need for consistent medical checkups and awareness camps by the government in Harijan Sahi.

Case Study 2

Villagers' blind faith on witchcraft gives power to a *kalasi*

Year: 2016

Boroborjhora village under Chandapur block has 65 households with 350 individuals. The village's Bhubani Nayak, aged 63, is a worshipper of goddess Maa Mangala and known in the area to be a '*kalasi*' or the chosen one. It is believed by the villagers that Maa Mangala often possesses the

body of his chosen devotee to interact with other devotees. Due to his elevated position, Bhubani is often offered prayers by the villagers.

Bhubani is a married man who lives with his wife, Subashi Nayak, two sons, a grandson and five granddaughters. He also has a married daughter. The previous *kalasi* was Krushna Nayak, elder brother of Bhubani's father. Bhubani was first possessed by Maa Mangala in 1985 when he was 30-years-old and ever since he has served as the divine vessel for the deity. The goddess comes in the form of the *kalasi* two days a week, Saturday and Tuesday. He is known to make prophecies and granting boons on those specific days while wearing new garments. Moreover, on these days, the *kalasi* fasts from the morning to evening. Around 200 devotees line up in front of the deity's temple to get a glimpse of the possessed goddess. At the end of the day, the goddess takes leave from *kalasi's* body after meeting her devotees.

In addition, the villagers are allowed to have exclusive meetings with the *kalasi* (Bhubani) by paying Rs.100 on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays should they wish for his blessings and give specific offerings or prayers. On these days, he meets the devotees from 5 pm to 10 pm. He takes rest on Sundays and Wednesdays. On festive days, the villagers offer various celebratory materials to the goddess for her puja. The village celebrates an annual festival, *Dhana Koila*, dedicated to the goddess on the full moon night of *Ashwin* month of Odia calendar. They host a feast and gathering for the *kalasi* with the special non-vegetarian delicacy of burnt fish. The goddess is showered with newly bloomed lilies. According to the villagers, the *kalasi* has helped them alleviate their physical pain, land disputes, job problems, legal fights and exorcise evil spirits and witches. Harihar Nayak said that due to the presence and blessings of the goddess, people lived in harmony in the village. Another villager, Golok Nayak believed that the goddess had blessed the village with economic prosperity.

The *kalasi* and the servitors of the goddess receive much respect from the villagers. Many devotees consider Bhubani as their divine protector and

their faith has immensely benefited him. He lives a comfortable life with steady income that comes from the devotees' donations to the goddess. He has converted his thatched house to a concrete one. Moreover, as a ward member, he also has a lot of political influence too.

Observations:

- » In the name of culture and traditions, the elders of the tribal community continue to carry out superstitious rituals.
- » There is a dire need for awareness and education among the people.
- » Even during health emergencies, the patients first reach out to the *kalasi* for treatment.
- » The *kalasi* takes advantage of the gullibility of the people to earn a good income for himself.
- » Superstitions, blind faith and poverty are the major reasons for the continuation of such beliefs.

Case Study

An anti-liquor leader is framed for practising witchcraft through Khatabidya

Year: 2019

Kotgarh village under Ranpur block has 160 houses with a total of 900 individuals residing in it.

Bhaskar Dora and his three brothers are quite influential in the village with their political and financial power. Bhaskar's wealth and power came from his flourishing illicit liquor trade. His supply of liquor made many poor people drunk in Kotgarh and surrounding villages.

On the other hand, a village youth, Arakshit Dora was appalled by the way poor villagers were blowing their money on liquor and getting poorer. He wanted his village to be free of liquor. Arakshit established a peace

committee with the help of 30 other youths of the village and launched a drive against liquor trades and alcoholics. The committee members placed a pole in the middle of the village to punish illegal liquor sellers and alcoholics by tying them up and getting them arrested. A sizable section of the community supported his anti-liquor drive. He had also the support of his brother-in-law, Sanjay Dora and Dhoba Dora, his wife's uncle and a GP member for his endeavour. The success of the peace committee triggered fear as well as anger among those consuming and supplying liquor.

There was another angle to the rivalry between Arakhit and Bhaskar. In the previous GP election, Dhoba had defeated Bhaskar and his brothers, Krushna Dora, Sukuni Dora and Guru Dora. After their defeat, Bhaskar and his men had assaulted Dhoba. An FIR had been filed in Ranpur police station and Bhaskar and his accomplices had been arrested. At that time Bhaskar expected Arakshit to help him out by persuading Dhoba for a compromise but Arakshit stayed out of the mess.

So Bhaskar and his brothers nursed a grudge against Arakshit on both counts – election fights and anti-liquor drive. As Arakhit was popular in the village, Bhaskar plotted to defame him and tarnish his reputation. He started a rumour that ornaments worth over ₹2 lakh were stolen from his wife's locker. Then, he got a 'gunia' from a neighbouring village to find the thief. The gunia used 'khatavidya' (where a cot carried by four people provides direction towards witch/ evil force/ culprit) to identify the thief. Bhaskar pushed through a resolution in a meeting at the GP that anyone identified by the cot would be declared as the thief and be liable to pay a compensation of ₹7 lakh. The decision was approved by all the villagers despite the illegality of *khatavidya*.

On 10 June 2019, the *gunia* and three of Bhaskar's men carried the cot and took it to Arakshit's doorstep and declared him as the thief. At that time, he had gone out to Khordha district for some work. Upon returning, he was shocked to hear about the illogical decision at the meeting and became unconscious. His wife, Gitanjali was called to the village meeting

on behalf of her husband to give a statement. Arakshit's identification by cot spread like wildfire across villages and the shame of being called a thief broke him. Unable to deal with such a situation, he talked of ending life by suicide. However, many people in the village stood by him realising that he was being trapped by Bhaskar.

On the morning of 11 June 2019, a village meeting was convened again where Bhaskar and his brothers Krushna, Sukuni and Guru started humiliating and ridiculing Arakshit. As a result, a scuffle ensued between the supporters of both the warring groups. The meeting was called off for the day to resume the next day to decide punishment on Arakshit, who flatly refused to pay the supposed compensation of ₹7 lakh because he did not commit any theft. It was decided that a mediator from outside would be called to deliver the punishment on Arakshit. However, soon after the meeting, Bhaskar and his brother barged into Arakshit's house and attacked his mother-in-law and wife. Arakshit's friends intervened and his injured wife and mother-in-law were taken to the hospital. The police were informed and in the meantime, Sanjay Dora also called press reporters to intimate them about the arbitrary decisions of the kangaroo court.

Finally, after an inquiry, the police and district administration came to Arakshit's rescue. On Gitanjali's complaint, a case was registered against Bhaskar, his brother and accomplices at Ranpur police station. Due to the efforts of the Nayagarh SP, an awareness camp was organised to make people aware of the evils like *khatavidya*, witchcrafts and other superstitions. Government officials, police, academicians, local social activists, college students, ASHAs, anganwadi workers, and youth of Kotgarh participated in the camp. Fearing arrest after his mischief was exposed, Bhaskar fled the village along with his family members. Eventually, Arakshit emerged victorious keeping his reputation intact.

Observations:

- » There is a dire need for awareness and education among the people regarding superstitions.

- » Superstition, blind faith and poverty are the major reasons for the continuation of illogical practices such as *khatabidya*.
- » Due to lack of awareness, influential people often take advantage of gullible villagers for their own advantage.
- » This case happened due to a political dispute in the village.

Gajapati

Gajapati is a district of Odisha that came to be in 1992 after the bifurcation of Ganjam district. It has an area of 3,850 square kilometres and a population of 5,77,817 according to Census 2011. Of the total population, males and females constitute 48.96% and 51.04% respectively. The literacy rate of the district is 45.44%. The revenue for the district is mostly derived from agriculture and activities of cottage industry.

Case Study 1

Two villagers tied ruthlessly and burnt alive by a mob on the suspicion of using witchcraft

Year: 2015

Badeguda and Paderama are two tribal villages under Dambaguda gram panchayat of Gajapati district. On 27 May 2015, two people identified as Subhas Mallick and Pitala Majhi of Paderama village were burnt alive by a mob. The incident occurred within the limits of Adaba police station.

Subhash Mallick, aged 57 was a well-known quack of the two villages and dwelled in herbal medicines. People often sought him for herbal cures in times of health emergencies. However, in recent years, people grew suspicious of him for practicing sorcery to provide cure. The growing suspicions became rigid as death cases rose in the two villages. Not many had the resources to clarify the reasons at hospitals.

On 25 May, a few people of Badeguda and Paderama villages had called in a famous *gunia* from Daspalla, Nayagarh to identify the cause of the mysterious spread of disease and death. The villagers had collected money and pitched in to call a renowned *Gunia* who was well versed in dark practices of *Khata vidya*, *Nakha Darpana*, *Bata Vidya* and *Kula Vidya*. Arriving at Paderama village, the *gunia* advised the villagers to perform *Khata Vidya* and a wooden cot was carried around by four villagers. At the end of the procession, the cot halted near the house of Subhas Mallick, Pitala Majhi and Sami Majhi. A grim situation arose thereafter.

The identification of the evil village sorcerers enraged the villagers and they demanded compensation for the losses they had incurred. The three were humiliated and accused for causing deaths and misfortune in both the villages. The three were implored to pay ₹60,000 on the crime of practising evil sorcery. Dejected and fearful, Sami Majhi agreed without much complaints to pay the penalty to the villagers. With much hardship, he arranged ₹50,000 and gave his word to pay the rest later. However, Subhash and Pitala refused to pay. They denied the accusations made and protested against the unfair treatment. This drove the villagers to a frenzy and they trespassed their houses, beating them and their family members. Their family members were threatened to evict the village. Subhash and Pitala were dragged by the mob to a cremation ground and were ruthlessly tied upside down from a tree. Turning a blind ear to their pleas and cries, the villagers set fire to their live bodies.

Upon returning, the accused had threatened other villagers to not disclose any information otherwise they would face the same consequence. However, gathering his courage, Rajib Mallick, son of Subhash Mallick filed a complaint at the Abada Police Station. Following the FIR, the IIC, Anam Lakhra with other inspectors had rushed to the crime scene, collected relevant evidence and arrested 12 persons of the village as accused. The case was registered under the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013.

Observations:

- » There is a dire need for awareness and education among the people regarding superstition.
- » Superstition, blind faith and poverty are the major reasons for the continuation of illogical practices such as khatabdya.
- » There is a resolute trust and belief in Gunia.
- » This case was a result of blind faith, lack of medical information and untimely consultation with proper healthcare and medical personnel.

Case Study 2

Two villagers burnt alive by a mob over suspicious use of witchcraft to kill others

Year: 2015

Chudangapur is a tribal dominated village in the Mohana Tehsil of Gajapati District. It is located 33 km North from the district headquarters at Paralakhemundi. The literacy rate in the village is 51.7% and female literacy rate is just 27.3%.

On 5 September 2015, an infuriated village mob murdered Ganga Gamang, aged 60 and Biri Sundarray, aged 45. The two deceased men were always a target of witchcraft suspicions having been engaged in regular worshipping rituals for their local deities. In recent years, four people had died due to the spread of an unknown disease in the village.

The villagers had consulted a *gunia* who had recited mantras to help figure out the root cause of the misfortune in the village. He had stated Ganga and Biri to be practicing black magic and being sorcerers. The villagers decided to take the law in their hands. The two unfortunate men were dragged out of their house by the mob and pushed into the nearby forest. Having thrown insults at them, the mob had set fire killing both the men.

Soon after, an FIR was lodged at the nearest police station and the case was registered under the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 2013. Upon investigation and collection of necessary evidence, police had arrested the accused.

Observations:

- » There is a dire need for awareness and education among the people regarding superstition.
- » Superstition, blind faith and poverty are the major reasons for the continuation of illogical practices.
- » There is a resolute trust and belief in *Gunia*.
- » This case was a result of blind faith, lack of medical information and untimely consultation with proper healthcare and medical personnel.

Case Study 3

A woman beaten to death by a mob for allegedly using witchcraft to kill a child

Year: 2016

G Baliasahi is a distant and tribal dominated village in Gajapati district. The village falls within the limits of the Mohana Police Station. In 2016, a 52-years-old woman, Raibari Mandal was alleged to be practicing witchcraft and was beaten to death.

The wretched incident had occurred after the death of the young son of a fellow villager, Surendra Jani. His son was suffering from fever for the past few days and would not recover. He had sought a *tantrik* who had led him to believe that the boy was suffering due to a neighbour's witchcraft. The day after, the boy had died without receiving any medical treatment. Surendra was quick to accuse Raibari Mandal of being a witch and targeting his son. Following the death of his son, Surendra along with two other

villagers, Somnath Jani and Rushinath Jani had broken into Raibari's house and had harshly beaten her up with *lathis* and sticks. At the time, Raibari's husband and children were not home. With no one to stop or interfere, Raibari was beaten to death. The perpetrators had taken her body to the cremation ground and had burnt her body by the side of the child who she was thought to have killed.

Raibari's family immediately reported the matter to the police. Soon after the incident, most of the male members of the village had left in fear of interrogation by police. Police seized the murder weapons as well as the bodily remains from the cremation ground. In a bid to check the escalation of the matter, the Superintendent of police in Gajapati deployed a platoon of police force in the village.

Three of the accused, Surendra, Somnath and Rushinath were arrested and sent to jail. The case was registered under section 302 of IPC and Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013.

Observations:

- » There is a dire need for awareness and education among the people regarding superstition.
- » Superstition, blind faith and poverty are the major reasons for the continuation of illogical suspicions.
- » People continue to seek *Tantrik* or *Gunia* during health emergencies rather than visiting a hospital.
- » People of the village are not yet aware of the laws in place. Police interference is important in such cases to avoid the escalation of crimes.



CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS - DISTRICT-WISE FINDINGS



Keonjhar

1. Around 46% of witch-branding cases have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 33% of the cases were due to health issues in a fellow adult villager or family member. Around 21% of the cases arose out of agricultural unproductivity or livestock deaths.
2. \approx 92% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.
3. \approx 67% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 8% of the cases, rehabilitation was ensured to the victim.
5. In \approx 8% of the cases, the victims migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Mayurbhanj

1. Around 36% of witch-branding cases have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 27% of the cases were due to health issues in adult villagers/family members. \approx 36% of the cases arose from the eccentric behaviour of the alleged witch, family dispute and more unknown reasons.
2. \approx 55% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.
3. \approx 45% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 8% of the cases, rehabilitation was ensured to the victim.
5. In \approx 27% of the cases, the victims migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Ganjam

1. Around 36% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 8% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/family member. \approx 55% of the cases found their cause from misfortunes in the village or unknown reasons.
2. Around 73% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place. Out of this, 8% was done after the victim's death (even though the victim had reached out for protection)
3. \approx 27% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 0% of the cases, the survivors have got rehabilitation.
5. In around 18% of the cases, the victims migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Sundargarh

1. 40% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. 40% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/family member. 20% of the cases found their cause from misfortunes in the village or other unknown reasons.
2. 100% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place. 10% of the cases were not investigated properly and the accused were wrongly arrested.
3. 60% of witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 0% of the cases, the survivors have got rehabilitation.

Nabarangpur

1. 17% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 42% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/

family member. \approx 21% of the cases were due to the death of livestock and crop failure. Around 29% of the cases found their cause from misfortunes in the village, family disputes and other reasons.

2. 100% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.
3. Around 8% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 0% of the cases, the survivors have got rehabilitation.
5. In \approx 8% of the cases, the victims have migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Malkangiri

1. Around 5% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 68.2% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/ family member. \approx 5% of the cases were due to death of livestock and crop failure. Around 23% of the cases found their cause from misfortunes in the village, family disputes and other reasons.
2. Around 18% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/or negotiation had taken place.
3. 27% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 0% of the cases, the survivors have got rehabilitation.

Koraput

1. Around 44% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 41% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/family member. 25% of the cases found their cause from misfortunes in the village, discrimination and other reasons.
2. 100% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.

3. Around 38% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 0% of the cases, the survivors have got rehabilitation.

Rayagada

1. 15% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. 85% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/family member.
2. 40% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.
3. 10% of the witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 60% of the cases, the victims have migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Baleswar

1. 20% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. 60% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/ family member. 20% of the cases found their cause from misfortunes in the village or land grabbing.
2. 80% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.
3. No witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In 20% of the cases, the survivors have received temporary rehabilitation.
5. In 20% of the cases, the victims have migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Kandhamal

1. Around 14% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 57% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/ family member. \approx 29% of the cases found their cause from misinformation and land grabbing.
2. \approx 43% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place. Out of this, 8% was done after the victim's death.
3. No witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. In \approx 43% of the cases, the victims have migrated to nearby villages or towns to seek shelter.

Nayagarh

1. Around 33% of the cases were due to health issues in an adult villager/ family member. \approx 66.67% of the cases found their cause from misinformation and land grabbing.
2. \approx 33% of the cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.
3. No witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witch.
4. None of the victims have had to migrate to seek shelter.
5. Nayagarh is famous and renowned for its number of reputed *Gunias*.

Gajapati

1. Around 33% of witch-branding have occurred due to health issues in children. \approx 66.67% of the cases were due to health issues and deaths among adult villagers.
2. All of the above cases had a positive police response, i.e., investigations, arrests and/ or negotiation had taken place.



Witch-Hunting in Odisha

3. All the three witch-branding cases have resulted in the death of the alleged witches.
4. None of the victims had the chance to migrate out of the village. 33% of the cases saw migration of the family members who were alive.

CHAPTER IV CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD



Challenges

Laws that are currently in place are inadequate because they concentrate on the retribution method rather than eliminating superstitious practices that are irrational and evil. There are very few avenues to track incidents and no tendencies to meet the emerging needs of victims and survivors. In certain situations, the accused (usually strong village men) go unpunished as the attacks are presented as a result of mob fury.

The victims usually do not come forward to report it due to fear or their acceptance of the practice.

Lack of evidence leads to the release of the perpetrators. To punish someone for carrying out witch hunts, the court requires proof. In the case of witch-hunting, it is a socially manifested crime. Hence, people remain silent either out of fear or acceptance of the practice, which becomes a hurdle in collecting evidence. Thus, proper justice is not served.

Generally, an accused person involved in a witch-hunting case is powerful and influential. Due to the fear and threat by such people no one speaks against them. As in the case of *Tula Devi & Ors. v. State of Jharkhand*, the court dismissed the case as the victim had failed to prove that she was accused of being a witch and harmed. There was a lack of eyewitnesses too.

There is a delay in reporting the incident. Very few cases are recorded because of geographical reasons and societal pressure. If they are registered after a long gap, it renders the witness evidence as unreliable. This was the reason for not convicting the accused, as in case of *Madhu Munda v. State of Bihar* (2003 (3) JCR 156 Jhr)

India lacks clear national laws to prevent witch-hunting. Punishment is usually awarded based on the Indian Penal Code. There is a failure to create a formal law on witch-hunting that violates a range of core rights laid down in numerous international treaties and conventions. It includes the right to non-discrimination, right to safety, right to life, right to access to national courts, and the most significant, right to live a decent life free from cruel and inhumane treatment.

Lack of rules for proper execution and implementation of anti-witch-hunting laws that are present in a few states makes the law ineffective.

The intensity of punishment awarded to the convicted is meagre. The sentence is inadequate in comparison to the seriousness of the crime they commit. The penalty only applies for one year with a fine of ₹1000, which is insufficient in society to set a deterrence.

Way forward

Proceedings of the State-level workshop on the sharing of findings of this study

On 27 August 2021, Odisha State Commission for Women and ActionAid Association hosted a sharing workshop on the study of witch-branding in Odisha as part of the study and the study findings were shared with different stakeholders. Among the panellists was Dr Minati Behera, Chairperson, Odisha State Commission for Women, Ms Snehanjali Mohanty, member of the Odisha State Commission for Women, Mrs Nibedita Prusty, Joint Secretary, Home Department, Shri Bhagawan Sahoo, Additional Secretary, Law Department, Mr Bithika Swain, Joint Secretary, WCD and Mr Debabrat Patra, Associate Director, ActionAid Association. The workshop also saw an active participation of 75 stakeholders including field researchers, victims of witch-branding, district leaders and key opinion leaders. There was a sprightly contribution, sharing and recommendations from each side to help further the study and come up with necessary solutions.

The study had been conducted in the span of a year covering 13 districts of Odisha as presented by Mr B N Durga, M & E Manager, ActionAid Association. The intensive report was based on several media reports over the past 10 years, collection of primary sources of data such as FIRs, books, research papers, stakeholder opinions and key informants' interviews. More than 100 case studies were presented and discussed to understand the grounds for the continuation of such age-old traditions and to come up with evidence and solutions to raise awareness and help the victims of witch-branding. "While the main objective is understanding the community traditions regarding witches and condition of victims of perpetuated violence, it is important to shed light on awareness campaigns, educate them on the same, amendment of existing laws, approaching *Ojha* and *Gunia*, frame rules and supervise their implementation, strategise appropriate punishment for perpetrators and provide rationale rehabilitation to the victims," stated Mr Debabrata Patra, Associate Director of ActionAid Association. Adding on, Ms Minati Behera said, "The study is crucial to get an insight on the psychology behind witch hunts and maintain equal rights to all by giving them a chance to live a dignified life."

"Nevertheless, limited access to the collection of resources, unavailability of reliable sources, fear and stigma that resisted the victims and stakeholders to speak up, ethical publishing and lack of guaranteed security to informants and victims posed as a few limitations to the study. The major causes for witch-branding were found to be related to the health of children and other villagers, land grabbing, mental health issues and crop failure. However, only 69% of the cases saw police intervention, investigation and arrest. More than 30% had seen the death of the accused witch whereas 70% resulted in the migration of the victim and their family. Single women who were widowed or separated were found to be the most vulnerable groups to witch-branding related crimes. Whereas, the children of the victims continued to face the brunt of the stigma and were denied their fundamental rights", shared by Mr Durga while sharing the findings of the study with the stakeholders present in the workshop.

Among the district leaders, victims and stakeholders present in the conference, there were contrasting exchanges of opinions. While some narrated the disturbing story of their suffering, a few others debated on their faith in *Ojhas*. Hemant Kumar Sabar was a tribal man from the Rayagarh district. Due to the worsening health condition of a distant family member, they had sought out a *Disary*. The witch doctor had convicted Hemant's father to be using black magic to harm the family. Soon after, his father was brutally attacked and killed on false accusations and the rest of the family was forced to seek refuge in a nearby forest. Even with his father's elder brother being a Sarpanch, the family continues to live in the forest, using sewage water for their daily necessities and having no access to educational facilities. The tale had picked at the hearts of many and the Women's Commission lend a helping hand to solve his crisis at the earliest. Furthermore, there was also a success tale from Nayagarh of a woman who was forced to play around the knee-deep faith of her relatives to escape death. Suffering from a long-running fever, she was ill and required medical attention. But, her family insisted that she go to a *Gunia* instead. The *Gunia* had identified her to be possessed and the statement followed a suit of tortures in the hope that she be exorcised. As her health worsened with the physical and mental torment, she decided to act out in defence. She gave in to the claim and expressed herself as a *Kalisi*. Many became fearful of her and her family continued to opt for grim measures to purify her. Eventually, she was rescued and taken to her father's village where she was able to get necessary medicines. She was diagnosed with pneumonia and with the right medicines, she was able to get back on her feet. Although some of her relatives continue to believe that she was possessed at one time, she has been diligent in her efforts to aware her community regarding such hoaxes.

Simultaneously, Sabriti, a tribal woman from Malkangiri expressed her resolute in *Gunia*. A few years ago, her brother's daughter was diagnosed with cancer. They had taken her for advanced treatment to S.C.B. Medical College in Cuttack. The doctors had warned them that the patient had very slim chances of survival despite the ongoing chemotherapy. Desperate

to search for a cure, the family had reached out to a *Disary*. With his carefully picked herbal medicines, Sabitri's niece now led a normal and healthy life. Adding on, Tuni Mukhi, a member of the local political party in Kandhamal noted her unbreakable trust in witchcraft. She narrated the tale of her sincere and sweet 18-year-old son who was rather good at studies. Shockingly, his behaviour had turned rancid. He was mentally disturbed, acting out and had developed a vicious personality. While the doctors remained in the dark, she sought a *Gunia* for his treatment. He noted that someone had cast an evil eye on her son out of jealousy for her election. Eventually, with regular treatment from the *Gunia*, her son had recovered and was safe.

Having heard two sides of the same coin, there was a heavy dilemma in the room. It was apparent that there was a dire need to increase scientific temper among the masses. Through the years, the percentage of those believing in witchcraft might have gone down, it is far from being eradicated. Many, including the police force, have not been not well-versed with the Odisha Prevention Of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013. Many cases of witch hunts have gone unnoticed having been registered under IPC. Moreover, there are many loopholes in the law have that led to the accused escaping the hands of justice. Neither have the laws included enough severity in their punishment and compensation nor have they offered enough protection to the victims. Lack of tangible evidence has made it smoother to pass off witch hunt related violence as mob fury.

The present stakeholders suggested and recommended several steps as a way forward to raise awareness and help the victims:

1. *Ama Police Samhiti* can organise village level awareness meetings on the existing laws related to witch-hunting and help the police in swifter investigation and interrogation.
2. Bringing together a health team that would be responsible for giving regular check-ups and catering to the hesitations of the villagers. They

- would help villagers recognise and acknowledge both physical and mental health struggles.
3. The formation of a legal team could help generate information on laws and advise the public against witchcraft and witch-branding.
 4. The district legal service authority (DLSA) can train the paralegal volunteers on the issue of watch branding, the legal provisions and support the victims further in rehabilitation and link them with different entitlements of the government.
 5. Districts that have already had witch-branding awareness camps need to have follow-up camps with a focus on developing scientific temper and legislation that forbids witch-branding to help dilute the brainwashed perception of witches.
 6. There should be a categorisation of the high and low prevalence of the cases in the districts so that preventive actions can be planned as per priority.
 7. The involvement of traditional leaders, understanding local cultures and working from within the system is the need of the time. The collective decision of the *Jati Samaj* in terms of bringing resolutions against witch-branding is the key to prevention.
 8. The Odisha State Commission For Women proposed the creation of a helpdesk for victims of witch hunts.
 9. The panellists wholesomely agreed on an advisory committee at both state and district levels which would be involved in rapid response. A direct person of contact should be appointed who can oversee such cases.

The propositions of all were taken into consideration and further incorporated in the study. These propositions are presented below in terms of community-level, district-level and State-level interventions, and the role that could be played by civil society organisations.

While the right solution may take years, the combined trial and error effort of the community members will help eradicate the social evil. With the first-hand suggestions and their implementations, the study is hoped to amplify the issue and give it a national level of importance.

Community-level interventions

- » Special Awareness drives need to be conducted in witch-hunting prevalent districts of the state on priority basis.
- » Engagement with traditional leaders, women groups, PRI members and so on is key towards creating awareness on the impact of witch-hunting and the existing legislation.
- » Innovative programmes need to be designed with appropriate IEC in local languages to develop scientific temper.
- » Building rational thoughts and scientific temper should be a part of the curriculum at different levels of education.
- » A communication strategy including effective toll BCC needs to be developed to build rational thoughts and scientific temper.
- » The involvement of traditional leaders, understanding local cultures and working from within the system is the need of the time. The collective decision of the Jati Samaj in terms of bringing resolutions against witch-branding is crucial to the prevention of witch hunts.

District-level interventions

- » The victims of witch hunts need to be rescued immediately and provided with protection, treatment, counselling and care facilities by the administration on priority basis. Immediate police action needs to be taken against the culprits.
- » Model action should be taken in a few of the cases so that examples can be set for the police, frontline workers, and community.
- » Awareness on the witch-hunting act for different stakeholders like police, ANMs and all the frontline workers is needed.

- » There is a need to scale up the best practices of the district administration to stop witch-branding.
- » Proper rehabilitation (land, housing, and other social entitlements) is needed for vulnerable survivors of witch-branding and their families.
- » Ama Police Samhiti can organise village level awareness meetings on the existing laws related to witch-hunting and help the police in swifter investigation and interrogation processes.
- » It is important to bring together a health team that would be responsible for giving regular checkups and catering to the hesitations of the villagers. They would help villagers recognise and acknowledge both physical and mental health struggles.
- » A manual for district level practitioners needs to be developed for effective response on the issue of witch-branding and judicious support for rehabilitation of victims.
- » The District Legal Service Authority (DLSA) can train the paralegal volunteers on the issue of witch-branding, the legal provisions and support the victims further in rehabilitation and link them to different entitlements of the government.
- » Districts that have already had witch-branding awareness camps need to have follow-up camps with a focus on developing scientific temper and legislation that forbids witch-branding to help dilute the brainwashed perception of witches.
- » There should be a categorisation of high and low prevalence of cases in the districts so that preventive actions can be planned as per priority.

State-level interventions

- » The decadal review of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-hunting Act can be done next year and any loopholes in the Act can be plugged. We need to amend the existing act before the rules can be framed. Also, we can look at progressive legislation of states and incorporate it in the present act.

- » A task force headed by the DM in witch-hunting prevalent districts is necessary. And we need to draw a district action plan involving all the line departments. A district level officer is needed to be assigned for the task.
- » A state wise awareness drive is necessary to curb this practice involving women commission, police, health and education departments. To start with, we can focus on the districts where witch-hunting is prevalent. Special focus should be to influence the tribal leaders or their *jati samaj*.
- » The State Women commission can start the redressal process of some of the cases mentioned in the report so that a trust is instilled in the minds of vulnerable survivors.
- » Exemplary punishment should be given to the ojhass involved in the crime of witch-hunting.
- » As per the order the Home Department, Government of Odisha A 'Composite Action Plan to Prevent Witchcraft' has been developed in consultation with various Departments. The action plan needs to be implemented in terms of developing a convergence District Action Plan with various line departments at district level and formation of Task Force at district, block, and gram panchayat level.
- » A cost action plan both at state and district level is crucial to address the deplorable practice of witch-hunting with a dedicated budget. And periodic review of the state and district action plan and reporting need to be in place for ensuring effective implementation of the plan.
- » The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) structure with systemic capacity-building support should be used in addressing the issue of witch-branding and related violence.
- » One officer at block level from the ICDS structure can be declared as designated officer to deal with cases of witch-branding with the support of the front line workers.

- » Strict implementation of the existing law and development of rules with clear outline of the responsibility of officials at gram panchayat, block and district level for rescue, immediate protection, medical care, counselling, legal aid and rehabilitation need to be worked out.
- » There should be an appeal for national law that criminalises witch-hunting and mob violence against vulnerable communities, including women.
- » Guidelines could be developed for good coordination between the current state laws and the Indian Penal Code that prosecutes the suspects.
- » Keeping in mind the severity of the incident, a state strategy needs to be developed to address witch-branding.
- » Special officers at various levels need to be designated to deal with the issue and provide immediate support, rescue, and protection to the deceased family.
- » National and state human rights commissions should regularly monitor the action by the state and district administrations towards addressing the issue.
- » Formation of a legal team could help generate information on laws and advise the public against witchcraft and witch-branding.
- » The Odisha State Commission For Women proposed the creation of a helpdesk for victims of witch hunts.
- » Advisory committees can be formed at both state and district levels which would be involved in rapid response. A direct person of contact should be appointed who can oversee such cases.

Role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

- » Strengthen women organisations at grass root level and mobilize the support of the women's organisation at state level to encourage fighting against injustice.

- » Link the issue of patriarchy to gender-based violence and develop strategies accordingly while addressing these issues.
- » The issue of development disparity, violation of rights, inadequate health infrastructure and lack of access to education need to be addressed as one of the long-term strategies while dealing with witch-hunting and witch-branding.
- » The village level institutions, CBOs, people's organisations, women's organisations, traditional institutions, and their leaders need to be involved in the process of addressing the issue.
- » Ensure free legal aid to the victim, immediate protection and support to the survivors and the family members of the deceased. These should be ensured with strong social protection mechanisms.
- » Women's rights over property, their decision making power, participation in policy making, and independent expression need to be promoted as empowering processes.
- » A strong solidarity group composed of CSO members, retired police officers, teachers, advocates need to follow up on these witch-hunting cases.



GLOSSARY

Bhuyan	:	A scheduled tribe group found majorly in Odisha
CDS	:	Community Development Society
CHC	:	Community Health Centre
<i>Cheragunia</i>	:	Local term for an Occultist
<i>Chua</i>	:	A small water body
<i>Chuin</i>	:	The local term for a witch who is believed to suck human blood through a straw
<i>Dahani</i>	:	Local term for a witch
<i>Disary</i>	:	Local term for an occultist or sorcerer
DLSA	:	District Legal Service Authority
FGD	:	Focus Group Discussion
<i>Guni Garedi</i>	:	Sorcery or occult study
<i>Gunia</i>	:	Local term for an Occultist
<i>Handia</i>	:	Local country liquor
<i>Kalishi</i>	:	Local term for a person who serves as a vessel for goddess and has supernatural abilities
<i>Khatabidya</i>	:	A traditional tribal method of identifying a culprit or witch using a cot carried as per the direction of a witch doctor

- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act** : An Indian labour act of 2015 that aims to guarantee the right to work to every underprivileged individual
- Munda** : A scheduled tribe community
- Nakhadarpan*** : A traditional tribal method used by an Ojha of identifying a culprit/witch/evil force by supposedly seeing their face or name on his fingernail.
- NCRB** : National Crime Records Bureau
- NTFP** : Non-timber forest produces
- Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act, 2013** : An act that puts specific penalties on the crime of witchcraft, witch-branding, witch-hunting and witch doctors. It was formally published in 2014 by the Odisha Gazette.
- Ojha*** : The local term for a witch doctor
- Pangeni*** : Local term for a Witch
- PHC** : Primary Health Care
- Podu*** : Shifting agriculture using slash and burn methods
- PVTG** : Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group
- Raulia*** : Local term for an occultist or sorcerer
- Salem Witch Trials**: Series of prosecutions that occurred in colonial Massachusetts, USA, of people accused of practising witchcraft from 1662-1692.
- SHG** : Self-help group
- Stakeholder** : A person who is directly or indirectly involved or affected by the issue



- Tantrik* : Term to describe someone who practice pagan rites and cultures
- UNHCR : United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- Witch Branding : Tagging a woman (or anyone) as a witch and accusing them of practising harmful witchcraft.
- Witch hunt : Searching for those labelled as witches, collecting evidence and their executions.





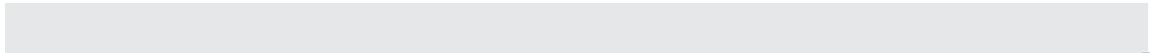


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