Chapter 3

Witch-hunting perspectives: spatial and temporal dimensions

3.1 International perspectives

The witch-occult, comprising different elements like witch-craft, witch-trials and witch-hunts have been in existence ever since the dawns of mankind, both in the primitive and advanced cultures round the globe (Sharma N.p.). Witch-hunts are not confined to a specific time or place (Schnoebelen 6). It has been opined that persecution of witches may be as old as witchcraft itself (Rajalakshmi N.p.). Comparison of both ethnographic and historical data shows that witch-craft beliefs and practices, along with witch-hunts are prevalent amongst Hindu, Christian, Islamic and Buddhist communities (Schnoebelen 6). Besides Europe and North America, major witch-hunts took place in Inca Peru, Aztec Mexico, Russia, China, India and some Bantu empires of Africa (Schnoebelen 6). Review on witch-craft accusations occurring in countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, Thailand, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Bolivia, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Nepal, etc has been made (Bussien et. al. 2). In the present day context, witch-hunts still manifests in countries like Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia, etc. (Saikia 6). There have also been some recent identified cases amongst the immigrant populations in England and France (Bussien et. al. 2). This is because when individuals migrate, the witchcraft beliefs they might hold travel with them (Schnoebelen 29). In 2013, the Witchcraft and Human Rights Network (WHRIN) documented 282
reports of witchcraft associated cases from 41 countries. The recent witchcraft related
violence in the European nations has been attributed to the growing African communities
(Minggu N.p.).

3.1.1  The European region
Starting in the mid-thirteenth century, people came to widely accept that witches do exist
and are capable of inflicting harm on others (Oster 2004). As early as 1227 A.D., Pope
Gregory IX established the Inquisitional Courts for holding witch-trials and in 1252 A.D.
Pope Innocent IV authorized the use of torture during inquisitional trials. Pope Clement
IV in 1265 A.D. also reaffirmed the use of torture (Robinson N.p.). The Church during
the thirteenth century had depicted the witch as a slave of the devil. It also persuaded the
society to believe that women were more inclined towards evil witch craft and devil
worship (Mohapatra 82). Johannes Nider (1436 – 37 A.D.) in his book *Formicarius* for
the first time described the prosecution of a man for witchcraft. During 1450s, the first
major witch-hunts began in many western European countries. Heinrich Kraemer and
Jacob Sprenger published the *Maleficarum* in 1486 – 87 A.D., which described the
activities of the witches and the methods to be used for extracting confessions out of the
witchcraft practitioners. During the fifteenth century, there had been reported occurrence
of as much as thirty-eight witch-trials in England, ninety-five in France and eighty in
Germany. Certain Protestant countries did not allow torture upon the trial victims
(Robinson N.p.). The European witch-hunts also took place in other European countries
like Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Netherlands, etc
(www.jw.org). In countries like Poland, communities have taken violent action against
suspected witches, when law did not provide for formal prosecution (Schnoebelen 8).
These trials and executions reached a peak during 1550 – 1650 A.D., mostly in eastern France, Germany and Switzerland, which is referred to as the ‘burning times’. The persecutions often occurred in areas where there were clashes between Catholics and Protestants. Trials were mainly conducted by secular courts whereas a minority was charged by the church authorities (Robinson N.p.). A witch-hunt that took place in 1585 in two villages in Germany left the villages with only one female inhabitant each. There were comparatively fewer executions in the Scandinavian countries, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Italy (Rose N.p.). In 1591, King James of Scotland authorized and elimination of suspected witches and as a result dozens of witches were burnt in the North Berwick area (Linder N.p.). A witch panic hit the Basque areas of Spain during 1609 A.D. In 1610 A.D., execution of witches took place in the Netherlands. Even during this peak times, people like Reginald Scott was critical of witch-trials and argued that witches did not really exist. Friedrich Spee von Langenfield was also of the opinion that the accused confessed only because they became the victims of sadistic tortures (Robinson N.p.). Occasionally, protests were also uttered by a section of courageous physicians like Johann Weyer, Paracelsus, Agostino Nifo, Symphorien Champier and others (Nemec 4). The last accused was executed in England in 1684 A.D. Germany stopped the execution of witches in 1775 A.D., Switzerland in 1782 A.D. and Poland in 1792 A.D. (Robinson N.p.). Some of the infamous witch trials were held at Val-Camonica (Italy, 1518), Chelmsford (England, 1566, 1579, 1589), Northampton (England, 1612), Bamberg (Germany, 1628), Loudon (France, 1634), etc (Nemec 4).

In Western Europe, witch-craft beliefs existed mainly in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (Bussien et. al. 2). During the period 1450-1750, approximately
one lakh witch-trials and nearly half as many executions took place in Europe. Amongst these, approximately three quarters were women, although the figures differed from country to country. In Hungary, Denmark and England, approximate ninety percent were women, but men also did suffer more than women in other European countries. In countries like Iceland the rate of accusations and convictions for men was ninety percent, sixty percent in Estonia and fifty percent in Finland (Schnoebelen 9). In other accounts, witchcraft executions are put at one million between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority taking place between sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Oster 215).

In the recent years, witchcraft related child abuse and deaths have been reported in the media in United Kingdom. A child from Ivory Coast was murdered in 2000, a Nigerian boy murdered in 2001, an Angolan child physically abused in 2005, etc all bears testimony to this fact. The other nationalities where these incidents were reported include immigrant nationals from Mauritius, Tanzania, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Caribbean, South Asian, etc (Schnoebelen 29 – 31). Between 2000 and 2005, the Department of Children, Education and Schools in United Kingdom, have reviewed 74 cases of child abuse which are suspected to be related to witchcraft accusations (AFRUCA Report 17).

3.1.2 The African region

Witchcraft beliefs and abuse is widespread amongst African communities and belief systems (Federici 2008, 3). In many African traditional beliefs, supernatural powers for controlling people or events are achieved by an agent or medium called witch. Such witches are known by different names in different parts of Africa. In the Democratic
Republic of Congo (DRC), witches are known as *Ndoki*, in Tanzania as *djinn*, in Nigeria as *Aje*, in Rwanda as *Abazimu* and in Uganda as *Emandwa* (AFRUCA Report 7). In Malawi, *msawi* denotes a witch and *usawi* means witchcraft (Dicks 106). These beliefs are spread throughout Southern Africa (*South Africa, Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia*), Eastern Africa (*Kenya, Uganda*), Western Africa (*Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo*), Central Africa (*Cameroon*) and Horn of Africa (*Ethiopia, Eritrea*) (AFRUCA Report 16). Routine assaults on witches are also recorded from Tanzania, Namibia and Mozambique (Federici 2008, 3; Schnoebelen 13). Although witchcraft practice and allegations are both illegal, it continues to flourish, especially amongst the Muslim Amacinga Yawo of southern Malawi (Dicks 103).

Normally, old men and women were branded as witches in the different African countries, but branding children as witches is a relatively recent event, which has been ascribed to different factors like poverty, dereliction of responsibility, breakdown of family, etc. These children can be from different categories viz. children with disabilities, those living with their step parents and in broken families, those involved in delinquent activity, those whose parents have been branded as witches, exceptionally bright students, etc (AFRUCA Report 9; Secker 23 – 25; Federici 2010, 20). Children are also implicated in witchcraft cases in different provinces like Luanda, Uige and Zaire in the DRC (Schnoebelen 16). In South Africa, women are likely to be accused twice more than men (Schnoebelen 13). In countries like *Burundi*, Tanzania, DRC and Kenya, albinos have been targeted in the name of witch-hunts (Foxcroft N.p.).

Public health crises have also led to witchcraft accusations in some of the African countries, e.g. tetanus epidemic in Benin, HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa and
Namibia, malaria deaths in Tanzania, etc. Research studies undertaken by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has detected a number of witchcraft-related incidents in the different refugee camps of internally displaced persons in countries like Botswana, DRC, Chad, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Foxcroft N.p.; Schnoebelen 22-26).

‘Witch camps’ and ‘witch sanctuaries’ have been set up in Ghana and South Africa for providing shelter to accused witches, who flees from their native homes (MGBako and Glenn 389). The Ghanaian Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice has estimated that around five thousand women, who have faced exile from their homes, are living in the ‘witch camps’. These camps are believed to be more than hundred years old and camps like the Gambaga Outcast Home do have traditional significance (Schnoebelen 21). Additional references are given in Section 2.2.2.

3.1.3 The American region

Although witch-trials and executions have been going on for a long time in the American continent, the Church ceased the execution in South America during 1830s (Robinson N.p.). In the late nineteen sixties, about eighty cases of witchcraft were documented from Oaxaca in Mexico. Central America has become a hot house for the persecution of witches in the twentieth century. In countries like Bolivia, it has been reported that individuals alleged to be witches are wither burned or buried alive, especially in places where the presence of the central government is insignificant. Those people who could escape such situations have formed witch refugee communities in places like Santa Cruz. In the rural areas of Guatemala and Haiti, violent mobs have killed people whom they
alleged to be sorcerers (Schnoebelen 8). In Chile, references of witchcraft have been found to have been in practice amongst the Mapuche Indians and in the southern island of Chiloe (Schnoebelen 36). During 1980 – 1995, two types of trials were held in North America, which repeated many of the same features of earlier witch-trials (Robinson N.p.).

3.1.4 The Middle-east region

Beliefs in magic, sorcery, witchcraft and ghosts are widely pervasive throughout the Islamic communities residing in the Middle East region. Supernatural practices are widespread which aims to bring good fortune, health, honour, power and other such well-being of the people. The Quranic magic invokes the guidance of God for exorcising the evil spirits and demons. Those spiritual healers who do not employ Quranic healing methods are designated as witches and sorcerers. In Saudi Arabia, usually natives authorized by religious authorities are allowed to practice Quranic healing methods. All magical practices are denounced as un-Islamic by clerics in this region. In order to deter magical practices, stricter laws, arrests and executions have been made in countries like Afghanistan, Gaza, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia (Mohapatra 82 – 83).

3.1.5 The Asian-pacific region

Witch-huntings have been reported from Indonesia for over fifty years, where older males are primarily targeted. In 1998, around one hundred alleged sorcerers have been reported to have been killed in Banyuwangi District of East Java (Schnoebelen 11). Anthropologists opine that witch-hunts in this country dates back to the colonial period and witch killings are seen as a measure for rural folks to get rid of antisocial elements. Political motivations and motivations driven by social dislike and envy were also some of
the driving factors for the killings (Minggu N.P.). In 2003, eight alleged witches were killed during mob violence in Cambodia. Beliefs in sorcery also exist in Thailand, primarily in the north-eastern parts, the southern Malay region and in Ayudhya, but the accusation trends differ widely from region to region. In some instances, sorcerers were forcibly driven out of their native villages. In Bangladesh also, economic inequalities have given rise to the birth of sorcery accusations. In cases where husbands work outside the country and the wives stay back at home, the wives becomes the prime targets for witchcraft accusations (Schnoebelen 6-7). In Nepal, victims are either tortured or killed and are forced to abandon their native villages. The elderly, widows, the destitute and those belonging to lower castes are often targeted. Widows are sometimes persecuted for depriving them of their property rights or for settling personal grudges. The problem is worst in the southern Terai region/belt (Schnoebelen 11; Shrestha 14). The problems exist in districts like Bardiya, Bara, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Makwanpur, Morang, Nawalparasi, Ramechhap, Rautahat, Saptari, Sarlahi, Sindhuli and Sunsari, the incidents amongst females being more than males (Shrestha 16). Witch-hunting incidents are prevalent within every caste in Nepal in differing extents, but it is most prevalent amongst the sudras² (low castes) and the dalits³ (untouchable castes). In 2001, amongst 25 witchcraft cases, 14 women belonged to indigenous and low castes while 4 belonged to the dalit category, and the targeted women were from the 16 – 76 age group (Shrestha 15). Witchcraft persecution is also widely prevalent in Papua New Guinea, especially amongst the eighty percent of the seven million-strong country who still live in rural areas (Hay N.p.). Suspected witches are tortured, dragged behind cars, thrown from cliffs, burnt or buried alive. The gravity of the situation is such that in one single year an
estimated two hundred suspected witches were killed in one single province. Rarely are
the deaths of alleged witches are being investigated by the law-enforcing agencies or
those responsible are convicted. Even individuals who intervene in the witchcraft
persecutions face risks of being accused or killed (Schnoebelen 9). Witch hunter mobs
frequent different places, which consist of young men. According to official government
figures, about one hundred fifty women are killed every year in witch-hunting cases.
Different scholars have cited reasons ranging from economic displacement, cultural shifts
to weak governance as the causes of these crimes (Minggu N.P.; Horowitz N.p.). The
Indian scenario is dealt with in detail in the following section (Section 3.2).

3.2 National perspectives

The term dayan can be itself found in the ancient Hindu scriptures and the dayan cult emerged not until during the fifteenth century in Maharashtra. With the advent of the
British rulers in India, many western thoughts and beliefs got infused into the traditional
thoughts and belief system of the people in different parts. During the 1840s and 1850s,
Rajputana (present day Rajasthan) and Jharkhand’s Chotta Nagpur region were the
breeding grounds for witch-hunts. At the same time, huntings were also reported in the
Singhbhum and the Santhal Parganas regions. However, during the period 1930 – 1970’s,
the practice scaled down in it’s intensity due to the Adivasi movement, but has remerged
during the eighties. Ever since then, there are no signs of abatement (Sharma N.p.).
According to sources in the Central Ministry of Home Affairs, two thousand two hundred
fifty-seven witch-craft murders took place in India ever since the year 2000 (M.P. Singh
N.p.; Parthasarathy N.p.). A Human Rights Committee report puts this figure around two
thousand five hundred. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB),
around two thousand four hundred cases of witch-hunting have been registered across India during the period from 1999 – 2012 [Appendix – E; **Fig. 3.1**]. But, it needs to be remembered that the actual figures will be many times higher, because a large number of cases goes unreported. At least twenty States in India, which are the homes for the different indigenous tribal communities, the witch-hunting phenomenon predominates. Once practiced only by tribal communities, the witch-hunting phenomenon is presently observed amongst the Dalits as well as other minority communities (Masoodi N.p.). It has been compared with infectious diseases as it is slowly spreading to newer and newer areas (Vaishnavi N.p.).

### 3.2.1 Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, the witch-hunting phenomenon has been reported from different districts like Adilabad, Karimnagar, Warangal, etc. and in places where the Kolam, Gond, Khond and the Koya tribals reside. In most of the cases in Andhra Pradesh, women belonging to Dalit and Bahujan castes are the victims of witch-hunting. The reasons are many. In certain cases, it has been seen that some of these women have properties in their name and in order to have gain ownership over these properties, these women gets branded as witch and gets killed. In some other cases, some of these women gets exploited by the influential sections, and when they do not yield to the demands, they gets branded as sorcerers and subjected to different sorts of physical and mental humiliation. It has also been observed that, in certain instances, a victim was branded because he refused to vote for a particular political party. If people of the locality fell ill
or even when buffaloes stop giving milk, certain people are falsely implicated as witches. In one instance, it has been observed that, a daughter-in-law when became unable to feed her old mother-in-law, the former started projecting the latter as a witch. Thus, it can be hypothesized that, the Banamathi (witch-craft) victims, are victims of caste-based oppression (Navayan N.p.). According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Andhra Pradesh is four hundred thirty six for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

Fig. 3.1 Reported witch-hunting cases in India (Source: NCRB)

3.2.2 Arunachal Pradesh
According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Arunachal Pradesh is two for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E]. However, relevant details on the aspect could not be traced out during the course of research.

### 3.2.3 Assam

Assam is referred to as a *Land of magic and sorcery* from the ancient times. The beliefs in evil spirits, magic, taboos and other supernatural elements are particularly widespread amongst the indigenous communities of Assam (Sultana 6). Such is the impact of this practice upon the common men that when Aurangzeb ordered his soldiers to suppress the Ahoms in Assam, the Mughals were more afraid of the black magic of Mayong than to be killed at the hands of the enemy (F Choudhury 6; J Choudhury 6). A total of one hundred sixteen people were killed in different parts of the state for allegedly practicing witchcraft during the period 2001 and 2011 (The Sentinel, 07.01.2014) and a total of four hundred twenty persons have been arrested in connection with witch-hunting (The Times of India, 19.07.2011). During the same period, ninety-six cases had been registered of which fifty-four resulted in charge-sheet, nineteen returned in FR and twenty three were pending cases (The Shillong Times, 19.07.2011). In no less than forty percent of the reported witch-hunting cases, men are targeted, the main causes being professional rivalry, property issues and jealousy (R. Choudhury N.p.). Interestingly enough, the Muslim majority districts do not show the preponderance of this crime (Kalita 6). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Assam is twenty-three for the period 1999-2014 [Appendix – E]. Earlier, the witch-hunt phenomenon was confined to the Adivasis and certain Lower Assam tribes like the Bodos and the Rabhas. But, of late,
many Upper Assam districts as well as non-tribal population have also come under its siege (A K Boro, pers. comm.). Details of one hundred eighty-six cases were obtained through the RTI mode from all the districts of Assam (excluding the case details for the period 1989 – 2012 in respect of three districts viz. Cachar, Kamrup and Lakhimpur). These cases involved two hundred sixty victims and more than one thousand two hundred thirty accused persons, from twenty-two districts. Out of the one hundred eighty-six cases, charge-sheets (C.S.) were submitted in respect of one hundred thirty cases, final reports (F.R.) submitted in thirty-three cases whereas in respect of twenty-three cases investigation is still pending. Witch-hunts incidents are reported to have occurred from twenty-two districts of Assam viz. Baksa, Biswanath, Bongaigaon, Cachar, Chirang, Darrang, Dhemaji, Goalpara, Golaghat, Jorhat, Kamrup, Kamrup Metropolitan, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Nalbari, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Udalguri and West Karbi Anglong (Fig. 3.2), whereas in eleven districts viz. Barpeta, Charaideo, Dhubri, Dibrugarh, Dima Hasao, Hailakandi, Hojai, Majuli, Morigaon, Karimganj and South Salmara-Mankachar there are so such reported incidents [Appendices – F & G]. In all these cases, there are victims with as many as seventy-five surnames, belonging mainly to five different tribal communities, viz. Bodos, Deoris, Karbis, Mising and Rabhas, and a few other non-tribal communities including the
Ahoms, Biharis, Islamic, Rajbongshis, Tea garden, etc [Appendix-L]. The Assam Police have booked the offenders under fifty different IPC Sections in different witch-hunting cases all across the state [Appendix – K].

### 3.2.4 Bihar

There are reports of witch-hunting from the Jamui district of Bihar in blocks like Sono and Khera (Agrawal and Mehra 4). All the facts and figures that are reported in the Jharkhand section may be considered to have occurred under the regime of undivided Bihar, prior to fifteenth November 2000. According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Bihar is one hundred twenty one for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

### 3.2.5 Chhattisgarh
In Chhattisgarh, the terms *dayan* and *tonhi* are used to refer to women witches whereas the corresponding male version of these terms is *baigha* (PLD Report 13). Since the *Chhattisgarh Witchcraft Atrocities (Prevention) Act, 2005* came into place, the State has witnessed one thousand two hundred sixty eight incidents of witch-hunting till 2015, including two hundred ten women, who were beaten to death. Women in the State are subjected to many forms of torture and humiliation. In Chhattisgarh, Korba has recorded the highest number of two hundred eight cases, followed by one hundred fourteen cases from Koriya district (Drolia N.p.). Cases of branding women as *tonhi* (women involved in witchcraft) are also reported cases from Balrampur, Bilaspur, Gariyaband, Janjgir-Champa, Raipur, Rajgarh and Rajnandgaon districts. Hundred of cases from different remote and inaccessible areas go unreported and the conviction rate in these cases is also very low, at around forty percent (Akula N.p.). There are also reported incidents from the Bemetera district (Daily Pioneer, 06 Oct. 2015). First-hand studies on the victims of witch-hunting have also been carried out in the Mahasamundra district of Chhattisgarh (Malik N.p.). Witch-hunts have also been reported from Lachkera district (PLD Report 15). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Chhattisgarh is one hundred thirty three for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

### 3.2.6 Gujarat

In the eastern tribal belt of Gujarat, hundreds of women has been harassed and ostracized by the society in the pretext of being witches over a long period of time. This is the case in the different tribal districts like Godhra, Narmada, Mahisagar, etc. Most of the cases of witch-branding have been reported from the Garbada Taluka of Dahod district and Ghoghamba Taluka of Godhra district. Earlier, police used to register complaints of
assaults only. However, in March 2014, the Vadodara IG (Rural) issued a circular in all the tribal districts under his range, which directed the police to register offence under IPC 506 (2) even if a woman is called witch by anyone. This step has led to boosting up of the morale amongst the tribal women. In 2014 alone, when twenty six women gathered courage to complain before the police, seventy persons got arrested (Tere N.p.). Witch-hunting has been reported amongst the Adivasis, which comprise instances when people want to eliminate certain categories of women in the community, with a motive to grab their properties. For this, local quacks known as bhuvas as employed. These persons are a respected and feared lot amongst the tribal people. Incidents have been reported from the Panchmahaals and Dahod districts. In these places, the women are not allowed to own or exercise their rights over property or land. However, the silver lining is that different organizations like the Devgadh Mahila Sangathan, Adivasi Kalakar Tukdi, Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI), etc have embarked on a mission of relentless awareness building efforts to minimize the witch-hunting episodes (Joshi N.p.).

Witch-hunting cases have also been reported from Chhota Udepur district. It has been reported that the incidents mostly occur due to instigation by local tantriks, whom the local people believe like the word of God. Although the police are prompt enough to prevent these incidents, the problem faced by the police is that the people do not reveal information about their local tantriks. Under community policing schemes, the police have begun awareness programmes for the people and counseling sessions for the village heads (Indian Express, 30 Jun. 2015). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Gujarat is forty for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.7 Haryana
The fact that the state of Haryana being also a party to the saga of witch-hunting has been widely reported (Sharma N.p.; Pathak N.p.; Masoodi N.p.). From 2008 to 2010, the number of witchcraft murders in the state rose from twenty five to fifty seven, while subsequently the number came down to zero during 2012 – 2013 (M.P. Singh N.p.). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Haryana is two hundred sixteen for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.8 Himachal Pradesh

In this State, single women are blamed for anything that goes wrong in the family or in the community. The non-governmental organization Social Uplift Through Rural Action (SUTRA) works in eight districts of Himachal Pradesh. There are instances where women who raised their voices and ask for their rights are branded as daains. Women who are widowed and childless are also called daains under the pretext of acquiring their properties (PLD Report 31). There are no records of witchcraft incidents in Himachal Pradesh according to the official records of the NCRB.

3.2.9 Jammu & Kashmir

According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Jammu & Kashmir is one for the period 1999 – 2014, which occurred in 2001 [Appendix – E].

3.2.10 Jharkhand

Witch-hunting practice is an age-old practice in Jharkhand. The women of the State are a disadvantaged lot; low literacy levels, poor health conditions, poor participation in organized sectors, female trafficking, domestic violence, etc are some of the dimensions that plague the women community of the State (Ahmed N.p.). The two periods of adivasi rebellion (the Santhal rebellion led by Sighu and Kanhu during the 1857 Mutiny and the
Birsa Munda–led rebellion at the end of the nineteenth century) in the State were the periods of intense witch-hunting (Nathan et. al. 3). There are reports of incidents occurring in Khunti district (Daily Pioneer, 06 Oct. 2015). In such a backdrop, it is not surprising why witch-hunting is prevalent in the State. In an instance that occurred in the Ranchi district, the matter amounted to domestic violence as the husband of the victim conspired to get his wife raped with hired goons on the pretext of being a witch as she had apparently tried to dissuade her husband from selling a plot of land (Rajalakshmi N.p.). There are reports of incidents from West Singhbhum district also (Masoodi N.p.).

Going by the data obtained from the NCRB, during the period from 2000 – 2012, around two thousand one hundred cases of witch-hunting have been registered across India, of which three hundred sixty three incidents were from Jharkhand alone. Despite the existence of an anti-witchcraft law in the State, incidences of witch-hunting continues to plague the State (Sarkar N.p.). The general conception of the people of the State is that after a witch dies, she is assumed to have taught her eldest daughter ‘the tricks of the trade’ i.e. the witch-craft. In case, the victim does not have any daughter, it is presumed that the eldest daughter-in-law must have learnt ‘the craft’ (PLD Report 16). Studies on witch-hunts have also been carried out in the Gumla district (Agrawal and Mehra 4). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Jharkhand is four hundred twenty four for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.11 Karnataka

A Zee Research Group (ZRG) analysis had revealed that Karnataka which reported zero murders in 2010 due to witch-craft has shown a disturbing increase within a span of just one year. The state reported an increase of seventy seven cases in 2011 (Ghosh N.p.). In
Karnataka, there are legislations like the *Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982* and the *Karnataka Koragas (Prohibition of Ajalu Practice) Act, 2000*. Following the example of Maharashtra, Karnataka came up with a bill in 2013 (*The Karnataka Prevention of Superstitious Practices Bill, 2013*), but it came under severe criticism from different groups of people (Das and Banerjee, 2015). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Karnataka is eighty for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E]. A record number of seventy seven incidents had been reported during 2011, against single incidents reported during the previous three years from 2008 – 2010.

### 3.2.12 Kerala

According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Kerala is only one for the period 1999-2014 [Appendix-E]. However, relevant details on the aspect could not be traced out during the course of research.

### 3.2.13 Madhya Pradesh

Witch-hunting is prevalent all across the Bhil-dominated tract, in the Jhabua and Dhar districts of western Madhya Pradesh. It is also present in the Chhattisgarh region of the State. The Bhil tribe is known to be very fierce and they can kill people at the slightest pretext. They commonly commit the crimes under the influence of alcohol. If the victims are accused of killing some other person in the community, he or she is required to revive the dead person and any failure on their part, means elimination of the victim. The cruelty in the witch-hunting cases is such that, people who oppose these case, they themselves have to face the music of the marauding crowds. Timely intervention by the police in many cases has prevented casualties, but police action in turn may also lead to social
ostracism of the victim’s families. The police believe that witch-hunting is simply a tool used by the community to settle personal scores (N.K. Singh N.p.). Stray incidents like those happened in Raipur district are pointer to the fact that witch-persecutions are not only confined to tribal communities, but also may occur under different circumstances. In one such incident, a Dalit woman (Lata Sahu) contested against a backward-caste woman in the panchayat elections and consequently the land-owning higher castes (Yadavs and Patels) conspired to brand the Dalit woman as a tonahi (witch) (Rajalakshmi N.p.). There are also reported incidents from four blocks of Sidhi district. The cases generally involved property issues and single women were being targeted (PLD Report 19). From 2009 onwards till 2013, the number of witchcraft murders has shown a declining trend from twenty three to eleven (M.P. Singh N.p.). All the facts that are reported in the Chhattisgarh section may be considered to have occurred under the regime of undivided Madhya Pradesh, prior to the one November 2000. According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Madhya Pradesh is two hundred thirty for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.14 Maharashtra

Witch-hunting in Maharashtra is common in many interior regions, which are dominated by native and tribal inhabitants. These tribal people are poor, uneducated and age-old rituals dominate their society and lifestyle. Not surprisingly, the womenfolk of these societies are put through inordinate humiliation, isolation and hardship due to trivial reasons like illness, lack of rains, food shortage, epidemic and an umpteen number of causes. The designated leaders of these tribes are merely puppets at the hands of certain rich traders or some local politicians, which is one of the major causes why witch-hunting
is prevalent. The only explanation forwarded is that the branded women harbours ill will and this affects the entire welfare of the tribe. The *Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS)* has been organizing awareness campaigns in different places to inform the people about the inappropriateness, illogicalness and futility of the practice of witch-hunting (Patil N.p). From 2003 – 2008, MANS found that about seventy five to one hundred witch-hunting cases were registered every year in Nandurbar district alone, which is a tribal dominated district (PLD Report 31). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Maharashtra is one hundred forty four for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

### 3.2.15 Meghalaya

There have been a number of instances of witch-hunting in Meghalaya, which has prompted the State government to seek specific suggestions from civil societies for framing appropriate laws to end curd the practice of branding people as witches and also their lynching. The *Meghalaya People’s Human Rights Council* had also asked the government to enact a special anti-superstition law for checking witch-hunting incidents (Times of India 21 Aug. 2013). Apart from instances of killing, there have also been instances of mass excommunication from villages, on the charges of being *Menshohnohs* (witches) under the orders of the Village Council (The Assam Tribune 20 Mar. 2006). There are instances of accusations made against certain persons for casting an evil eye and such persons are held responsible for the ill health of persons within the community. Many such reported cases are there in Garo Hills area and the Assam-Meghalaya border areas (PLD Report 42; Kalita 6). The existence of a village named *Dainigaon* (Witch Village), located at a distance of about sixty kilometers from Goalpara District in the
West Garo Hills District has also been reported. The original name of the area is Khasipara. There was a time when more than twenty five families, who were banished from their native villages, used to live in this village, but of presently families of only three witch-hunt victims are residing in Dainigaon viz., the family of Sironi Rabha (daughter of Late Prama Rabha), the family of Jitai Rabha (daughter of Late Jabra Rabha) and the family of Raheswari Rabha (daughter-in-law of Late Matham Rabha) (Rai 1). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Meghalaya is twenty-one for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E]. It is worth mentioning here that a number of witch-hunting cases that occurred amongst the Rabha community, fall within the administrative jurisdiction of Meghalaya, for which these were left out from the purview of the present research [Appendix – C].

3.2.16 Nagaland

According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Nagaland is only one for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E]. However, relevant details on the aspect could not be traced out during the course of research.

3.2.17 Odisha

In Odisha, out of thirty districts, witch-hunting is prevalent in about thirteen districts. Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar have reported the most murder cases related to witch-hunting. The main communities affected are the tribals, Dalits and Other Backward Classes (PLD Report 18 – 19). It is also rampant in the tribal-dominated districts like Ganjam, Gajpati, Kendarapara, Koraput, Malkanagiri and Sundargarh. Single women like widows and spinsters are most vulnerable to such practices. During the period 2010 – 2015, around four hundred sixteen casualties has been reported from the State (Daily Pioneer 24 Nov.
Reports of witch-hunting violence have also been reported from the Sambalpur district. The Maoist-affected districts bear the brunt of this practice. The members of the Dongria Kondh tribe perform rituals on women whom they suspect to be a witch. The victims accused of indulging in sorcery are brutally tortured, and in many instances fed excrement and had their teeth pulled out (defanged). Although lack of education and healthcare facilities may be cited as reasons for prevalence of this practice, similar incidents have also been reported from the prosperous coastal belt where the literacy rate is comparatively higher. *The Odisha Prevention of Witch-hunting Bill, 2013* was passed by the State Assembly in December 2013 which became an Act in February 2014. Every offence under this Act is cognizable and non-bailable. However, there is no perceptible change in the crime graph scenario regarding witch-hunting (Dixit N.p.). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Odisha is three hundred ninety-six for the period 1999–2014 [Appendix – E].

**3.2.18 Punjab**

There is mention of witch-hunting as a form of crime against women in Punjab (Punjab Human Development Report 136). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Punjab is only two for the period 1999–2014 [Appendix – E]. However, relevant details on the aspect could not be traced out during the course of research.

**3.2.19 Rajasthan**

In several districts across Rajasthan, e.g. Banswara, Bhilwara, Chittorgarh, Dungarpur, Kota, Sawai Madhopur, Tank and Udaipur, witch-hunting is prevalent. Most of the victims do not even lodge complaints with the police fearing retaliation, and hence
continue to live amidst fear, desperation and stigma for the rest of their lives. In Rajasthan, as many as one hundred thirty seven women were killed in witch-hunting cases during 2004 – 2009. The State Government indeed took up the matter seriously and due to non-existence of a law, the State Home Department issued a circular in 2004 for speedy action in matters of atrocities against women, particularly in witch-hunting and witch-labeling cases. It has directed higher officers to routinely review the investigation of such cases (Rakesh N.p.). The percentage of women who were dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry declined from 55.6% to 41.3% in a study, after they were labeled as witches by the community. The reason is either the community grabbed their land or they were not being allowed to cultivate in their fields anymore. The branded women are subjected to various forms of torture, including immolation, branding with hot iron rods, hurting of genitals, rape or even forcing to commit suicide (Mathur et.al. 190). The State finally passed *The Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015* in April 2015. The number of incidences in Rajasthan is comparatively low, as per NCRB statistics of 2008 – 2013 (N K Singh N.p.). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Rajasthan is three hundred ninety six for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

### 3.2.20 Sikkim

According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Sikkim is only one for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E]. However, relevant details on the aspect could not be traced out during the course of research.

### 3.2.21 Tamil Nadu
There is mention of witch-hunting as a form of violence against women in Tamil Nadu (Tamil Nadu Human Development Report 100). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Tamil Nadu is twenty for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E]. However, relevant details on the aspect were not found during the course of research. An abrupt rise of incidents had been reported during 2013.

3.2.22 Tripura

About thirty percent of the population in Tripura is scheduled tribes, of which the Kokborok-speaking Tripuri people are the major group. These tribal people have a deep-rooted belief in folk medicines for curing their illness and diseases for which they apply two methods viz. folk medicine and black magic. The specialists in the field of black magic are known as ochai4 who perform the role of the village physician (Causes.com N.d.). One of the major causes of witch-hunting in Tripura is because Tripuri women have the right to demand a share of their parent’s property. Thus, witch-hunting has become an extra-legal method to deprive these tribal women of control over land (Rajalakshmi N.p.). According to NCRB figures, the incidents of killings (murder and culpable homicide) due to witchcraft in Tripura are four (in 2006) and one (each in 2009, 2012 and 2013) (Nathan et.al. 17). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Tripura is seven for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.23 Uttar Pradesh

Witch-hunting mainly exists in the border/tribal areas of Uttar Pradesh (PLD Report 17). Almost every other day, women are victimized for witch-hunting in the hinterlands and rural parts of Uttar Pradesh (Shalz N.p.). There are reported occurrences from Mayourpur block of Dudhi Tehsil in Sonebhadra district (Nagvanshi & Khan N.p.). According to
NCRB figures, the incidents of killings (murder and culpable homicide) due to witchcraft in Uttar Pradesh are three (in 2006) and one (in 2008) (Nathan et.al. 17). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in Uttar Pradesh is six for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.24 West Bengal

During 1991-2000, the witch-craft related violence has been reported to be highest in the Jalpaiguri district. Witch killings were also reported from other districts like Burdwan, Darjeeling, Dinajpur North, Dinajpur South, Hooghly, Midnapore and Purulia, mainly amongst the Santhal community. The Santhals are the third largest tribal groups in India, after the Bhils and the Gonds. In the Santhal society, the widows had rights over their ancestral land and therefore the elimination of single women facilitates grabbing of their properties (Barman 188). Undeveloped areas with significant tribal population in districts like Paschim Medinipur and Malda in West Bengal has witnessed witch-hunting episodes. In most of the cases, ‘kangaroo courts’ hold trials of the victims, upon instigation by local witch doctors. Witch-hunting continues to occur, despite large organizations like the Paschim Banga Vigyan Mancha’s campaigning in these localities for the past twenty six years (The Hindu, 28 Oct. 2012). When any unfortunate person belonging to the Santhal community is pronounced by the sokha or mahan, he or she is put on trial by the village council and fines amounting to five hundred to five thousand rupees are levied. If the victim refuses or is unable to pay, death penalty is levied. The fines, in fact, only serve to meet the drinking costs of the villagers later on. The sokhas charge anything between two hundred fifty to two thousand rupees. It is however, seen that, in villages where anti-witch-hunting associations exists, branding of witch normally
does not take place. However, it is a matter of great concern that certain political figures have taken the advantage of the situation and gaining political mileage through their support of the witch-hunting custom (Banerjee N.p.). It may be mentioned here that, the Santhal community is also concentrated in other States like Assam, Bihar and Orissa. These people do not consider it to be a sin to kill a fuskin and whenever there is any misfortune amongst the tribals, they seek the advice of the mahans, who would then pinpoint to some weak and hapless woman to be a witch (Rajalakshmi N.p.). According to NCRB figures, the total number of witchcraft incidents in West Bengal is seventy-nine for the period 1999 – 2014 [Appendix – E].

3.2.25 Union Territories

According to NCRB figures, a total of four numbers of witchcraft incidents had been reported from three Union Territories for the period 1999 – 2014, viz. Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Daman & Diu and Delhi [Appendix – E].

3.3 Discussion

Although witch-craft and allied practices has been a world-wide phenomenon for many centuries amongst several principal religious sects, these practices has stopped in many developed nations across the globe. In the present day context, such practices are mostly confined to some African, Asian-Pacific and Middle-East nations. In Europe, although such practices have apparently stopped long back, recent incidents have been reported primarily amongst the immigrant communities. These practices are still continuing primarily amongst the tribal communities. In Assam, the practice is mostly prevalent amongst certain tribal communities and a few other non-tribal communities as well. It is to be remembered that whatever official knowledge and statistics exists or is available to
us, is merely the proverbial tip of a deep iceberg. The data that is available obscures much of the actual picture of the problem since many cases are unreported and unrecorded (McCoy N.p.). The reasons may be many. In many instances, the poor and illiterate women find it difficult to travel from isolated regions to the lodge complaints with the police or other social organizations (Nityanandam N.p.; Akula N.p.). Since police action might also fuel up social ostracism, many victims prefer to bear the agony in silence amidst their tormentors (N K Singh N.p.; Rakesh N.p.). Increasing NGO activism and intervention and media publicities have only led to many instances being brought to light during the recent past.

**Notes:**

**Gambaga Outcast Home**: It is traditionally believed that a witch’s power for practicing her craft/black magic gets neutralized by the local gods when such women come to Gambaga (Schnoebelen 21).

**Sudra**: It comprises the low castes like Gwala (Ahir, Yadav), Hajam, Mali, Teli (Shah) and Dhoobi, which are confined to the menial class of workers (Shrestha 15).

**Dalit**: It comprises the untouchable classes like Halkhors, Mester, Dom, Chamar and Mushar (Shrestha 15).

**Ochai**: These people practice the art of curing a diseased man through magical ways. They perform magical rites, by sacrificing animals like goats, pigeons, etc, to drive away the evil spirits that cause the illness. If even after the magical rites, the patient is not cured of the disease or illness, the *ochai* tries to identify the *daini* (an evil spirit inhabiting the human body) and at this point the villagers resort to elimination of this witch, upon the *ochai’s* advice (Causes.com N.d.).