

Witch Hunting



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Case Study 1

Bandhani Devi, a 55-year-old woman, and her 60-year-old husband Somra **Oraon**[1], lived along with their 35-year-old daughter-in-law, and their grandchildren in Gumla, Jharkhand. Bandhani Devi had two sons named Kishan and Pradeep. Kishan worked in Chennai as a migrant labourer and his wife and children lived in Gumla with his parents. Their younger son, Pradeep, worked in Kerala, also as a migrant labourer. Bandhani Devi used to work as a massage therapist or a 'Maalish Waali' and used to treat people who were suffering from nerve pain. A lot of people from the surrounding villages used to throng to her for treatment, as she had a good reputation in her field of occupation.

Bandhani Devi's husband had two brothers, whose families lived in the same compound as them. Somra's nephew, Bipta, whose parents had died in a fatal accident, used to work along with Kishan in Chennai. Once he had come home for **Karma Puja**[2]. Since the day Bipta had arrived, he was exhibiting unusual behaviour. Bipta used to specifically target Bandhani Devi, and blame her for random things, shout at her, and quarrelled with her all the time. Within a few days of his stay, he started calling Bandhani Devi as 'Dayan' or Witch. Strangely enough, Bipta blamed Bandhani Devi for his misbehaviour and insanity. He held Bandhani Devi responsible for all his odd behaviours, and accused her of Witchcraft. Bipta had planted a vegetable in the garden, and for some reason it had dried. Bipta accused Bandhani Devi for using her witchcraft to kill the plant.

On 25th September 2021, Bipta came home late at night, inebriated. He also had an altercation with his brother, who left the house in anger. Hearing all this mayhem, Bandhani Devi came running outside of her room to find out what the issue was. As soon as Bipta saw Bandhani Devi, he got infuriated, ran towards her, and hit her head with an iron rod. Bandhani Devi shrieked on getting hit, and died on the spot. Her husband and daughter in law rushed out hearing Bandhani devi's screams. Bipta attacked both of them as well with the same iron rod, and within a few seconds both- the husband of Bandhani Devi, and their daughter in law, were also dead. The children were away sleeping in their rooms, so they were saved from the mad spell of rage that gripped Bipta.

[1] The Oraons are a Dravidian language speaking people, representing the largest indigenous group in Jharkhand with roughly 19.60 percent of the total population. The Oraons are found in the districts of Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga, Latehar, Palamu, Garhwa, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Santhal Pargana and Singhbhum.

[2] Karma Puja is a well-known harvest festival of the Jharkhand and Bihar regions of India. The day is dedicated to the worship of Lord Karma, the God of power, youth and youthfulness. It is celebrated for good harvest and health. Also, on this day, girls pray for the long life and well being of their brothers.

Their neighbour Birasmuni's son saw this and came running back home to inform her mother of the killings. They rushed to their neighbor's house for help and saw all three lying on the floor, and Bipta sitting beside them. Birasmuni yelled at him, and broke down crying and yelling watching her friend Bandhani Devi lying dead. Bipta, at that moment, stood up, and ran into the village, shouting, "I killed all of them".

Another neighbour of Bandhani Devi, in the meanwhile, alerted the police and reported the incident. However, by the time the police reached, all three were dead. An **FIR[3]** was lodged at the Police station. IPC charges **302[4]**, and charges under **Section 3[5] and Section 4[6]** of The Prevention of Witch (DAAIN) Practices Act, 2001, Jharkhand were lodged against Bipta.

AALI came to know of the gruesome killings through a newspaper article. The team went to the village of late Bandhani Devi to conduct a fact-finding on the incident. Through the fact-finding process, it was discovered that the root cause behind the killings that took place was the age-old superstition of witchcraft. Bipta firmly believed that Bandhani Devi was a 'Witch' and that he had done nothing wrong by killing her. The Police showed a video to the fact-finding team of the accused accepting all the charges levelled against him.

AALI supported the victim's (Bandhani Devi's daughter in law) children and their father Kishan in getting compensation. Also, as the children had been left deprived of their mother, AALI team contacted the District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO). They suggested connecting with the Child Welfare Committee (CWC). After rounds of follow up with the Child Welfare Committee, they assured that the children would be taken care of. The Child Line team visited the children, and scholarships were to be provided to them under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). The team did many bilateral meetings with the District Legal Service Authorities (DLSA). It was assured by the authorities that interim compensation would be provided after receiving the investigation report by the trained para-legal volunteers. A continuous follow up with the officials was done by the team to make sure that compensation and scholarships are provided to the children. Within a few weeks children got scholarships from the government.

[3] First Information Report

[4] Punishment for Murder

[5] Identification of Witch

[6] Damages for causing harm

The macabre killing episode had wiped out almost an entire generation of the family. Kishan and Pradeep lost both their parents, and Kishan lost his wife too, as a fallout of the incident. The children lost their mother and grandparents as well, and were left devoid of their care and upbringing.

The archaic belief in witchcraft, it's apparent role in shaping the psyche of a boy like Bipta, ultimately snowballed into the impulsive gruesome killings in Gumla. Such incidents of witch hunting are prevalent, and are probably on a rise in Jharkhand. It is high time to bring such practices to an end, and build a society free of superstitions.

Case Study 2

On 2nd August 2015 in Kanjia village of Mandar, Jharkhand, a boy named Vipin died because of jaundice. Some people spread a rumour that five women from the village with the following names, Itwaria Khalkho, Madani Khalkho, Rakhiya Khalkho, Titri Khalkho, and Jasinta Khalkho, belonging to the Scheduled Tribe, were learning witchcraft, and because Vipin (the deceased) had found out about this, these five women conspired and used witchcraft on Vipin to extract his liver and ate it, because of which Vipin died. On the evening of 7th August 2015, a meeting was held in the village '**Akhara**'^[1] under the orchestration of about 46 people, who underwent trial, later in the case. A collective judgement was pronounced in this **kangaroo court**^[2] that these five women need to be killed, as they will continue to harm the villagers with their witchcraft. Later, around midnight a mob of around 100 people gathered and reached the houses of these five women with spears, javelins, and other weapons, and dragged them out of their houses. The mob tore their clothes and stripped the women of their clothing. The women were physically assaulted, beaten up, and dragged mercilessly towards the Akhara.

In all this brutal violence meted out to these women, all five of them were killed. Two daughters of Jasinta Khalkho (one of the five women attacked), somehow managed to flee from the mayhem that had been unleashed, to reach the Mandar police station and call for protection, but by the time the police reached the spot, it was already too late. All five women had perished in this mindless act of witch hunt.

The mob even started to assault the police as they arrived at the scene. The police were able to control the mob from further rampage only after mobilising more force from the nearby police stations. Of the five women killed, three came from different families, while Rakhiya Khalkho and Titri Khalkho belonged to the same family. Tetri Khalkho was the abandoned daughter of Rakhiya Khalkho.

AALI got information about this incident through the newspaper a day after the incident had taken place. The deceased, Jasinta Khalkho's daughter, Anima Khalkho, also sought help from AALI to support her in the court case.

[1] Akhara is an Indian word for a place of practice with facilities for boarding, lodging and training, both in the context of Indian martial arts or a monastery for religious renunciates in Guru-Shishya tradition.

[2] an unofficial court held by a group of people in order to try someone regarded, especially without good evidence, as guilty of a crime or misdemeanour.

An extensive fact finding was done by AALI to unearth the truth of what led to the incident that took place. During all this period psycho-social counselling of the victims' families was done by AALI Team. The team kept in constant touch with the four families by visiting them in the village regularly, so that the morale of the families remained intact.

In this case, all the accused, and the victims' families belonged to the same village. As a result, victims' families were concerned about their security. They were worried that such an incident may happen again. Two sons of one of the deceased, Itwaria Khalkho (50 years), had even fled away from the village in fear after the incident, and were only found about 15 days later with great difficulty.

Four **FIRs[3]** were registered for this incident, at Mandar police station, one by each of the victim's respective families, for which, initially, the police took a long time to frame the charge sheet in the court, even while it was said that the case would be taken up by a fast-track court. The trial stage was not without its own share of challenges. During the case, as the witnesses used to come to the court inebriated, it led to a lot of difficulty in their testimonies. The witnesses felt that without consuming liquor, they may not be able to talk about the incident where they saw a family member getting lynched in front of them and they failed to protect them. Despite preparing all the witnesses and information, the witnesses did not disclose in their statement certain names and identities of the perpetrators, as a result, few of the culprits in this vicious witch hunt remained free.

With AALI's intervention, the thirteen prime accused were convicted in all four cases put together, and were sentenced to life **imprisonment[4]**. An interim **compensation[5]** of Rs.50,000/- was given to the victims' families with the support of AALI Team.

In this case, the people of the village had executed the incident together. The family members of the deceased bravely fought the case in the court, but, despite the police security provided to these families in the village, it was a

[3] First Information Report

[4] Damages for causing harm - Under section 4, any person who causes any kind of physical or mental torture by identifying a person as a Witch shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to six months or fine of Rs. 2,000 or both.

[5] Identification of Witch - Under section 3 of the said act, whoever does any act towards identification either by words, actions or manners shall be punished with imprisonment of a term which may extend to three months or with fine of Rs. 1000 or with both.

daily challenge to live in that village any longer. It would have been beyond any possibility for the victim's families to fight the case in the court, had it not been for AALI's intervention in the case.

A baseless rumour led to the death of five women. This is a stark reminder of how superstition is rampant in Jharkhand.

Case Study 3

The tragic ordeal of Kairi Devi's family in Namkum, Ranchi district, Jharkhand, is a harrowing example of the prevalent issue of witch hunting in Jharkhand. The story sheds light on the devastating consequences of superstitions on innocent lives.

In May, a person called Hindu Munda experienced a heartbreaking loss when his son Bagal Munda, succumbed to illness. Tragically, Kairi Devi, 45 years old and her family became the target of blame, accused of practicing witchcraft as the supposed cause of the boy's death. This accusation set in motion a series of events that would forever change the lives of Kairi Devi's family.

Eleven individuals, driven by fear and superstition, summoned Kairi Devi and her husband to an isolated location. There, they brutally murdered the couple and buried their bodies in the Tukura jungle. The cruelty did not end there; even Kairi's son and his wife were not spared from the villagers' wrath. When Kairi's son tried to report this gruesome incident, he was met with violence and intimidation, compelling him and his wife to flee the village in fear for their lives.

This was not the first time the Devi family faced accusations of witchcraft. A decade earlier, they were falsely accused and coerced into paying a huge amount of 8,000 rupees as 'compensation'. However, the demands did not cease, and the family was extorted for an even larger amount of 20,000 rupees. Now, once again, a rumor was spread by one of the villagers, one week prior to the incident that Kairi Devi's family is still under the influence of witchcraft. To compensate for all the damages of the villagers they demanded one bull, one pig, six goats, two ducks, fifteen hens, eight pigeons and thirty-five thousand rupees. The family was tortured, mistreated and at the end they gave in to the pressure and the false allegations and gave the amount as well as the livestock. This situation illustrates the persistence of baseless superstitions and the vulnerability of individuals like Kairi Devi and her family to repeated witch hunting.

And now, the death of Hindu Munda's boy Bagal Munda in the village, only strengthened the belief of some of the villagers that ended up in the gruesome killing of Kairi Devi and her husband.

One week had passed after the incident, and few villagers were aware of the gross injustice that had happened to Kairi Devi and her family. They reported this cruel incident to the local Police Station.

Through the media reports, AALI came to know about this case of witch hunting. AALI took it upon themselves to get justice delivered to Kairi Devi's family. AALI team supported the late Kairi Devi's family in rehabilitation and helped them take safety measures. The family was also connected with the Jharkhand Legal Services Authority, for further support in the case. Due to AALI's support, food provision and an amount of 30,000 rupees were also given to the family.

The case is still pending in the Court, the result of the case depends upon the report of the Investigating Officer (IO). The tragic story of Kairi Devi and her family underscores the urgent need for awareness, education, and legal measures to combat the rampant issue of witch hunting in Jharkhand. The untimely and cruel deaths of the couple, serve as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences that unfounded beliefs and accusations can have on the lives of the innocent people. Late Kairi Devi's family came from a humble background and is facing a lot of difficulties to meet the basic necessities of life. They have been put through enough financial and emotional distress. Those eleven accused of killing Kairi Devi, are from the same village as the ones who reported the incident. It was indeed a very bold step taken by some of the villagers who realized that Kairi Devi's family had been wronged. Strength and power are what the family needs till justice is delivered to them.

Case Study 4

On 24th September 2019, Rudani Devi was killed by her relatives in a case of witch-hunting. Rudani Devi was a 55-year-old mother of five daughters who was living with her husband Chamra Munda in Hahap, Namkum village in Ranchi, Jharkhand. The Gotia Community always blamed her for giving birth to five daughters and no son and called her a witch for the same reason.

Chamra Munda had a brother called Fauda Munda who stayed in the same village. One night, Jadu Munda, one of Fauda's three sons, took ill, and his condition deteriorated. Instead of taking him to the doctor, the family members took him to an "Ojha" (a witch doctor). An 'ojha' is somewhat similar to a God-sent angel, who identifies people under the spell of a witch. The Ojha told them that Rudani Devi, who lives next to their house, is a witch, and potentially her spell is the cause of Jadu's sudden health concern. Following this incident, Fauda's family started accusing Rudani Devi of being a witch.

On 24th September 2019, at around 2 p.m., Rudani Devi left for the forest to collect firewood. After a while, Fauda Munda, and his three sons came to Chamra Munda's house and asked for Rudani Devi. Chamra informed that she had gone to the forest to collect firewood, after which Fauda left with his sons.

It was getting late in the evening, but Rudani had not returned home. Chamra Munda, then, along with his daughters, set out to look for Rudani Devi. When they reached towards the forest they saw Fauda Munda and his sons were trying to cover something. As soon as they saw Chamra and his daughters approaching, Fauda and his sons immediately fled from the scene. Upon reaching the same spot from where Fauda and his sons had fled, Chamra saw a slipper of his wife, and blood splattered all over the place. Chamra and his daughters got scared, and soon after discovered Rudani Devi's dead body lying in a pit a little ahead.

Chamra Munda informed the village Mukhiya about the incident. He alleged that his brother Fauda Munda, and Ganda Munda, belonging to another village Lavanga in Ranchi district, had conspired together to kill his wife. Ganda Munda had come to be with Fauda a day before the incident.

The Village Mukhiya informed the police who reached the spot where the alleged crime had occurred and exhumed the body.

The village Mukhiya also called up the former chairperson of the Child Protection Commission, Aarti Kujur as she belongs to the same village, and

told her about the murder of Rudani Devi in the name of 'Witch Hunting'. Aarti Kujur was familiar with AALI and its work, so she called the team to support the family and conduct a fact-finding. The Police had come into action immediately after the body of Rudani Devi was exhumed, and lodged an FIR against Fauda Munda, including his three sons and Ganda Munda from the neighboring village. However, there were no immediate arrests at that time.

As soon as AALI intervened, and questioned the police about why there had been no arrests so far, the Police got sensitized and all accused - Fauda, his three sons, and Ganda Munda were arrested. AALI also submitted an application to the District Legal Service Authority to provide interim compensation to the bereaved Chamra Munda's family. A few days later, interim compensation of Rs.25000/- was awarded to the victim's family. Currently, the case is pending in court at the trial stage.

This was one of the tough cases - both for the AALI team as well as the family, as the whole village community was against the victim and it was the relatives who had committed such a horrific act. The family lived in a lot of pain and fear because they could not find any support system around them. So, they relocated to a relative's place in a nearby village for self-protection as there were other girls in the family.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, since the year 2000, more than 2,500 women have been killed after being branded as a Witch. Activists and journalists say the number is much higher, also because most states don't list witchcraft as a motive of murder.

Case Study 5

Sumri Devi, a 62-year-old woman, led a peaceful life in the district of Gumla, Jharkhand. She had three sons. She lived with two of them, and a daughter-in-law. Maaghi Devi, a 60-year-old woman, lived close to her house along with her husband and children.

In the recent past, mysteriously, the village had lost four to five inhabitants. The village community was in the grip of fear and superstition. A rumor started doing the rounds that Sumri Devi's and Maaghi Devi's families are into practicing witchcraft, and the villagers held their families responsible for the otherwise inexplicable deaths in the villages. Although no one knew or had any information on how both the families were involved in the sudden deaths. The only basis of the allegations against them was the archaic beliefs of the villagers, and an environment marred by superstitions.

On 20th July 2019, the villagers gathered for a meeting that would change the lives of Sumri's and Maaghi's families forever. The entire village was present, including the families of Sumri and Maaghi. A majority of those villagers were those who believed that Sumri's and Maaghi's families caused the deaths. As an outcome of this meeting, an ultimatum was given to both the families to stop practicing witchcraft and Black Magic; while there was no evidence, or any facts to substantiate the villagers' accusations. Sumri's and Maaghi's families were taken aback by this local verdict, and were in great despair. They were completely baffled and clueless as to how to convince the villagers of their innocence, and that they are not responsible in any way for causing any of the bizarre deaths which had taken the village by surprise.

The villagers were paranoid and were driven by fear. The meeting ended with a warning to both the families. Later that night, an unruly mob of 16 men in an inebriated state attacked Sumri's and Maaghi's families. They beat Sumri and Maaghi Black and Blue, and both of their husbands were also attacked, relentlessly and mercilessly, until they succumbed to this abrupt and sudden episode of rage. Maaghi's son, a helpless witness to this horrifying ordeal, couldn't do anything to save his family.

Sumri, her husband Mangana, Maaghi Devi, and her husband Budhu, were all killed by the mob in this gruesome act of violence. Two families were ruined, victim to baseless accusations and blind fury. Maaghi's son, who was the witness to the killings, was left traumatized.

Later, Maaghi's son found the strength to speak out. He was haunted by the sight of the horrific killing of his family. He shared the harrowing account of the deaths of his parents, and this revelation reached the ears of those willing to bring justice. Through the media, AALI got to know about the terrible incident.

In the quest for justice, Maaghi's daughter and son bravely stepped forward, testifying against the 16 individuals responsible for the heinous act. AALI supported the family in lodging the **FIR[1]** in their local police station. **Sections 147[2], 149[3], and 302[4]** of the IPC were invoked against the accused.

It was a long and arduous journey towards justice, but it was a journey that aimed to rectify the wrongs of the horrific killings that took place in Gumla. The case serves as a reminder of the importance of upholding the principles of justice, even in the face of ignorance, and fear.

Killings centered around superstitions such as Black Magic and Witchcraft, are common in the State of Jharkhand. This case happened in 2019, and the State reported 27 such deaths related to allegations of Witchcraft in that entire year, as per the data provided by the State Police. There was a rise in such cases from the year 2018 to 2019, according to National Crime Records Bureau data.



[1] First Information Report

[2] Punishment for committing the offense of rioting.

[3] states that if an offense is committed by any member of unlawful assembly in prosecution of the common object of that assembly, every person who, at the time of that offense, is a member of the same assembly, is guilty of that offense."

[4] Punishment for murder: