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Witchcraft Accusations and Women Scapegoating: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre critiques the social and state practices that serve to oppress, subjugate and torment the gendered subalterns who are subsumed within the discourse of class. A grass-root political and social activist and writer, Devi, evinces how establishment, superstition and hegemonic patriarchal forces collude to engineer the subaltern position of poor, low-caste woman Chandidasi, who is denied basic socio-corporal agency after being falsely accused of being a bayen (witch). According to National Crime Records Bureau data, each year hundreds of people are murdered in rural India in the name of witch-hunt. Branded as daayan, dakan, chudail, tonhi or a bayen, both men and women are oppressed, humiliated, assaulted, ostracized and killed in the name of superstition in order to explain illness, sudden or unexplained death, epidemics, bad crops etc. It is noteworthy that most of the victims of such crimes in India are women. In majority of the cases

witch-hunts are ploy to settle personal scores, a mean to acquire the victim's land or property, and most often, a punishment for denying popular diktat of the patriarchal society. Just like Chandidasi, women are made scape-goats in the whole process of witch-hunts. The paper attempts to probe the mechanism and gendered pattern of witch-craft accusations in India in the light of predicament of Chandidasi in Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen*.

Keywords

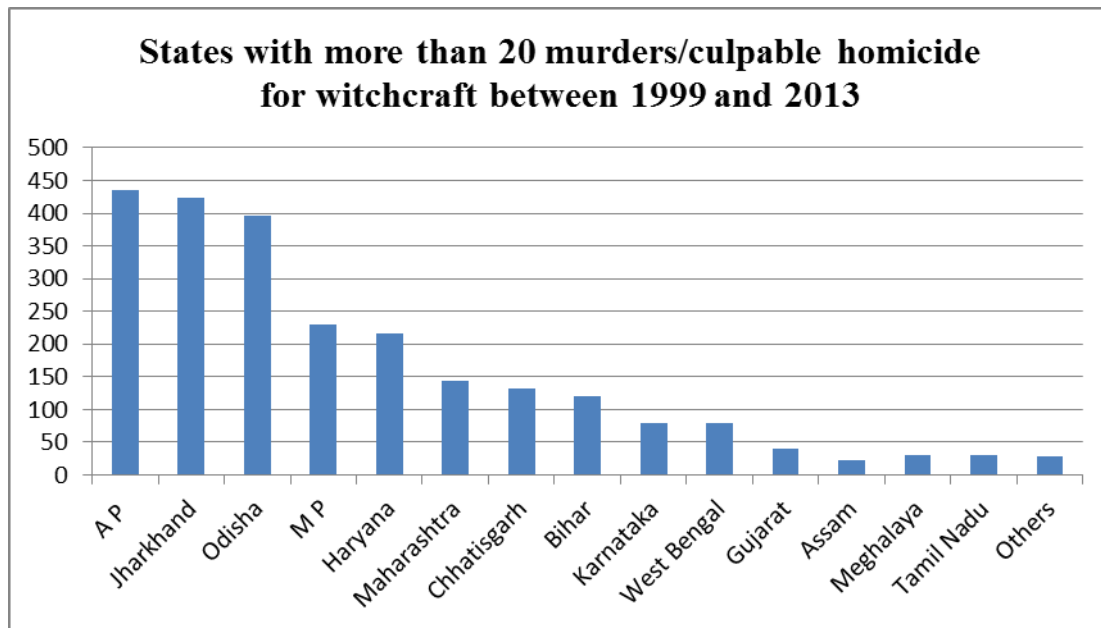
Witch-craft; Subaltern; Scape-goat; Gender; Violence.

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The politics of women's oppression and subjugation dominate the writings of the activist writer Mahasweta Devi. Transcending the boundaries of patriarchal and state hegemony, Devi foregrounds the struggle of the dispossessed tribal population, marginalized segment of the proletariat class of eastern India and the plight of the gendered subalterns in her works. Her stories "are often located in communities of the fringe, outside the dominant upper caste milieu" and 'this life on the fringes creates a culture of the fringe, a culture often defined...in terms of rituals, foods and practices that lie outside the pale of respectable existence" (Bandyopadhyaya 47). Her dramatic writings explain how social factors collude across classes to maneuver the position of the gendered subaltern, and hence forth provide a prototype for the adaptation of subaltern historiography into performance. *Bayen*, one of her most popular plays, portrays the transmogrification of a proletariat gendered subaltern into a public scapegoat and ultimately an ostracized wretch devoid of corporal and social agency. Through the character of Chandidasi, Devi highlights the spectrum of trauma related to witch-hunting – how a century old belief system is invoked to stigmatize and punish the woman who is labeled as a daayan, dakain, tonhi or bayen. A form of gender-based-violence, witch-hunting, forces the victim to lead a life of stigma, isolated and ostracized from their families

and often society. The present paper probes the mechanism and gendered pattern of witchcraft accusations in India in the light of predicament of Chandidasi in Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen*.

The practice of witch-hunt has been prevalent in India since time immemorial. Although there are no written records available to trace the origin of witch-hunt practice in India yet historical documents are replete with instances of the same in large parts of the country. Branded as daayan, chudail, dakan, tonhi or a bayen, both men and women have been oppressed, humiliated, assaulted, ostracized and killed in the name of superstition in order to explain illness, sudden death, epidemics, bad crops etc. But usually the witch-hunts are ploy to settle personal scores, a mean to acquire the accused's land or property, or even, and most often, a punishment for denying popular diktat of the patriarchal society. A number of studies have addressed the witch-craft related crime or homicide as a gender issue (Sakaria 1997, Roy 1998, Singh 2011, Chaudhary 2012, Nath 2014); as a result of socio-economic condition (Burman 2008, Macdonald 2009, Desai 2009); or as an issue related to ethnic revivalism (Baruah 2007, Sinha 2007, Fernandes 2007) etc. The studies also point to the fact that witch-craft related incidents are more common in those areas which have larger tribal populations as compared to other populations (Roy 1998, Adinkrah 2004, Macdonald 2009). According to the statistics compiled by National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) on crime concerning witch-hunting there have been 2391 murders or culpable homicides between 1999 and 2013 in India. The three Indian states, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha are among the worst hit, each accounting for about 400 deaths in the past 15 years, as per the NCRB study (<http://ncrb.gov.in/>).

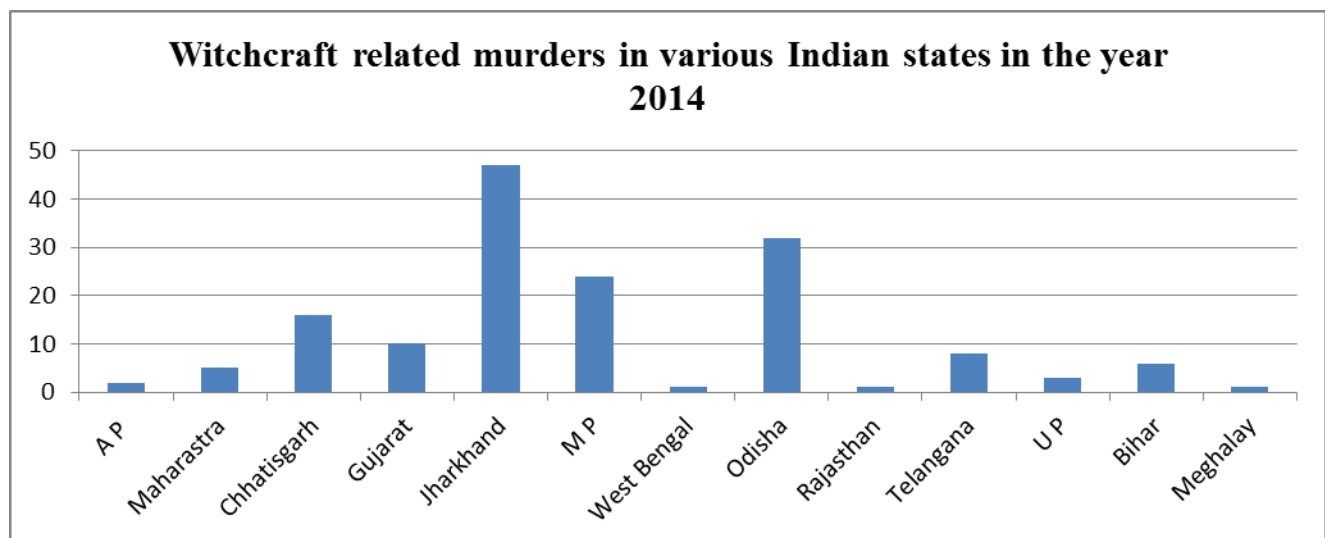


(Source: National Crime Records Bureau, Govt of India. <http://ncrb.gov.in/>)

It is noteworthy that more than half of the victims of witchcraft related murder/homicide in India are women which indicate gender aspect of the problem. Mostly it is women that too Dalit tribal women, who are branded as witches because stigmatizing such women as witches, help preserve not just the patriarchal supremacy but also the upper-caste hegemony. It is a useful tool to send a not-so-subtle message to women: docility and domesticity get rewarded, anything else gets punished (Singh 16). Tradition becomes a justification and a sanction for violence against women which in turn is used to gain control over their bodies and behaviour. Subaltern women are made scapegoats using rumor and conspiracy under the politics of accusation. In a calculated attack, witch hunts are preceded by 'clear' motives on the part of the accusers based on what accusers claim to be 'instigation' from the accused (Chaudhary 1219). This is followed by the manifestation of witchcraft in the form of some ill happening with an individual, a family or the village such as illness, unexplained death, bad crop etc. This leads to the identification or zeroing down of the witch and the beginning of the whispering campaign against the ill-fated victim. The ultimate step is the trial of the victim leading

to extreme physical and mental torture, naked parade, disfiguration, lynching, eviction and displacement from village, social boycott and censoring from the use of common water resources. Usually after inhuman physical and often sexual violence victims (mostly women) are left to either die or to be eaten by dogs and vultures. Sadly enough such incidents are performed not at isolated locations, but usually in large, accessible, central spaces surrounded by applauding masses. The perpetrators of such barbarities are fully convinced of their own righteousness and mostly “...the prevailing atmosphere is one of joyous triumph over evil...There is no doubt in the minds of the believers that the ‘hunt’ is necessary to wipe out evil” (Nath 57).

Witch hunting is more prevalent in 13 states of India including Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chhatisgarh, Bihar, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Meghalaya, Maharashtra and West Bengal. According of NCRB data 156 people have been murdered in 2014 in the name of witch-hunt.



(Source: National Crime Records Bureau, Govt of India. <http://ncrb.gov.in/>)

In the year 2015, till August 39 people have been killed across India due to witch-craft accusations. The sad part is there is no specific national level legislation that prevents witch-hunting. In the absence of specific law, the perpetrators are tried under Section 302 which charge for murder, Section 307

attempt for murder, Section 323 hurt, Section 376 which penalizes for rape and Section 354 which deals with outraging a woman's modesty. (<http://blog.ipleaders.in/laws-which-prevent-witch-hunting-in-india>) However, other than Indian Penal code, a number of states have instituted different legislations to address the problem of witch hunt.

- Bihar 'Prevention of Witch(Dayan) Practices Act' 1999
- Jharkhand 'Anti-Witchcraft Act' 2001
- Chhatisgarh 'Tonhi Pratama Bill' 2005
- Odisha 'Prevention of Witch-hunting Act' 2013
- Rajasthan 'Prevention of Witch-hunting Bill' 2015

But large number of victims of witch-hunt point towards the ineffectiveness of the existing laws. In 2014, national level athlete Debjani Bora, who had won several gold medals in Javelin, was accused of witchcraft in Assam and was brutally assaulted for the same by the villagers (<http://www.newsjs.com/url.php?p=www.carbonated.tv/news/witch-hunt-in-india>). In August 2015, four women in Jharkhand's village of Kanjia were pulled out of their homes, beaten and stabbed to death by the villagers who accused them for practicing witchcraft, due to the death of a severely jaundiced 17-year old boy a week before. Women in India are worst hit by this loathsome practice in the absence of national level legislation preventing witch-hunt, lack of evidence to book the perpetrators of such barbarities, ineffective implementation of existing acts, lack of will by Government, police, welfare departments, and above all the lack of sensitization amongst general public.

The life course of Chandidasi of Devi's *Bayen*, truthfully follows the four stages of panoptic disciplining of the gendered subaltern by the hegemonic oppressive patriarchal feudal masters. Chandi was the female dome who shouldered the ancestral caste-based responsibility of burying the dead children of the village and guarding their graves at night. Despite of the

trauma and travails of the unpleasant and bizarre task, Chandi scrupulously followed her duties. She did so because whenever she contemplated of giving up the same, she was reminded of her loyalty towards the ancestral orders:

I can't get over the scare. Whenever I seem to have made up my mind that I won't go back to the job, ever, I seem to have heard my father's voice roaring like thunder: If you opt out, it'll be my beat again, is that what you desire? Would you like me back on the job, guarding the graves...? (Devi 83)

Spivak observes in "Can the Subaltern Speak" that subaltern womanhood cannot distance itself from internalized gendering and thus tends to internalize sexism in the wake of willing reliance (Spivak 37). Chandi, indeed, followed the same track until the birth of her son, Bhagirath. She found it difficult to manage the new-born child, home-chores and ancestral duty all at once. She was supposed to guard the graves at night, look after the needs of the new-born and satisfy her husband's desires. She told her husband that she was unable to perform social, familial and ancestral duty of a dome as her young child needed her attention but Malinder, her husband, repressed and negated her concerns, representing, what Durgesh Rawande calls, 'patriarchal power strategy' (204). The rigorous duties took its toll on Chandi as her breasts swelled up and grew painful as she was unable to suckle the child at night. Frustrated, stressed and discontented, Chandi dared to express her problem to her husband,

Why do I think of throwing the job again and again? I guard the graves through the night, my breasts bursting with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by myself. I can't, can't stay away from him... (Devi 82)

But unfortunately, while Chandidasi was ruminating over her travails, she seemed to be totally oblivious of her own subjectivity which is either denied to her or defined according to phallocentric norms (Rawande 205). She was

equally amnesic to Pakhi and Shashi's (her sister-in-law and brother-in-law) displeasure of her 'queenly dignity' while commenting to Malinder, "Go. I'll come. And let the community know that this will be the last time that I'll do this job" (Devi 85). But Pakhi and Shashi considered her 'resistance' as transgression of customary laws. Thus, Chandi completes the first stage of her ultimate trial as bayen – she resisted the popular diktat of the hegemonic oppressive patriarchal society by refusing to carry out the duties of the dome. As a result the rumours of Chandi being in custody of demonic forces spread like miasma and cultivated an aura of doubt, distrust and dubiety around her. Her neighbours, both men and women, had got a chance to subordinate the spirited yet disobedient Chandidasi.

The second step leading to witch hunt involves, according to Soma Chaudhary, the manifestation of witchcraft that usually takes the form of illness or sudden death in the family of the accuser (1222). In the case of Chandidasi, it is the death of Tukni – the daughter of Shashi. Tukni who suffered from small pox and was taken "to the temple of Sheetala (the goddess of pox) and soaked her in the holy waters of the sacred water hole there, smeared her all over with the sacred mud, made her drink the sacred water" (Devi 84). It was superstition and administration of wrong prescriptions that killed Tukni, yet Chandi was accused to striking the little child with a "secret arrow" (Devi 84). Both Shashi and his neighbor, Gourdas, accuse Chandi of killing Tukni. Chandi, incensed and frustrated with false accusations, refused to bury the dead child, citing, "they say I have the evil eye; the little ones die of summer heat, intense cold, and small pox, don't they?" But she was tamed by reminding her of her lineage and ancestral duty. Chandi accepted to carry out her duty of the dome being deceived by fraudulent pretense of Gourdas and blind to the larger design. Thus, she conveniently entered the trap laid by the accusers, Gourdas and Shashi, who colluded with other neighbours to hatch a secret plot to punish her resistance and resilience. Invested with barbaric

perverseness, superstition and preposterous beliefs, the villagers collectively and secretly planned to punish her, thus fulfilling the third stage of witch hunt, which, as per Chaudhary, is identification of the witch and beginning of the whispering campaign (1222).

The fourth stage towards the witch hunt involves a trial, either formal or informal. The ordeal of Chandi was already set in motion through her acceptance to guard the grave of dead Tukni. Tired, sleepy and languorous due to the day's unpleasant and strenuous proceedings, Chandi tried to keep herself awake to guard the grave by errupting into a lullaby and talking with her absent son, Bhagirath (for whom her lactating breasts ooze with milk) and dead Tukni (whom she loved as her own child "...from before the time I had Bhagirath in my womb") (Devi 85).

...you needn't get scared. I've planted thorny bushes all around you; the jackals won't come at you. The jackals shy away from the light (she laughs), they're all scared of me, every one of them...My breasts ache at bursting point with all the milk and a suckling child at home...Bhagirath, my dear are you crying...I will gather you in my arms and suckle you. I'll sing you a lullaby. (then sings) 'My child god sleeps in my lap... (Devi 85-86)

She is accused of witchcraft by Malinder (who has joined her tormentors to set in motion her exclusion from the village) as he demanded from her, "With whom were you so lovey-dovey? (His voice mounts) Why is your sari dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling? For whom was this lullaby" (Devi 87)? Chandi pleaded, "I am no Bayen. I've a suckling child and that is why my breasts ooze milk all the time...You know it is true. Why don't you tell them" (Devi 87)? Divested of all her strength by Malinder's collusion with the frenzied mob and shorn of all her defenses, Chandidasi submitted to, what Vanashree calls, 'ceremony of punishment' (238). Her screams are silenced by the loud, ominous drumbeats. She is both physically and mentally abused by the

leering, mocking and maddening crowd. Through coercion, intimidation and violence, Chandi is suppressed, intimidated and victimized by the mob. The patriarchy triumphs in asserting its will against the gendered resistance. Chandi's branding and punishing is turned into a spectacle which according to Foucault is a strategy of control and subjugation (Vanashree 238). Chandi's fate was sealed forever – she would be called a Bayen/witch and would submit to the panoptic disciplining by foregoing all things dear to her, including her son, Bhagirath. In her case, inveterate gender bias collude with the need of a scapegoat to assist her transmogrification into a subaltern. It was her fear of violent retribution by the community that made her accept the constraints and restrictions. Her position as a subaltern was further sustained as she was denied access to her son and thus to fulfill the role of a mother. She was forced to separate from her family and live a life of desolation and ostracization as a result of scapegoating by power wielding patriarchs – which is also the final stage of witch-hunting: violent reprisal coupled with excommunication from community. Though at the end of the play, after her death, villagers accept that she was not a bayen, as her son publicly criticized her treatment yet it is too late. She got justice but posthumously.

It is beside the point that Chandidasi is shorn off the tag of bayen, though posthumously. The reason being the question is not to get justice but to understand the gendered pattern of scapegoating by the hegemonic patriarchy which feels threatened by an attempt of subaltern to transgress the boundaries of caste, class and gender. Ostracized and abused, yet Mahasweta Devi's subaltern subject does survive through the turmoils of mental, emotional and physical depredation. Refusing to be conquered by the discourse of power, Chandidasi triumphs over her gendered subalternity and like a phoenix emerges a resisting subject from the ashes of superstition, deceit and coercion. But her ordeal asserts the idea that women are easy prey in the patriarchal politics of accusation, hegemony and disciplining.

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