

CASE REPORT

Homicide over the superstition of practising black magic: A case report

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Killing of people practicing or suspected of practicing black magic which is also known as “witch-hunting” is not uncommon in India. People believe that any tragedy or misfortune that may befall them like, damaged crops, epidemics, sudden and unexplained deaths of children is the work of evil ‘witches’. We report a case where a person was murdered due to the belief that he was practicing black magic or witchcraft.

Case report: A dead body of a 60-year-old male was brought by the police for autopsy to a tertiary care center. It was alleged that he was assaulted by a sharp weapon. The alleged assailant was the neighbor of the deceased who believed that the deceased used black magic to cause the death of his four year old child a few months before. Autopsy revealed multiple incised wounds mainly on the back of the head, with compound fracture of occipital bone leading to intracranial and intracerebral bleeding.

Conclusion: This case illustrates a homicide caused by superstition as a motive. Multiple sharp blows to the head, proves adequate intention and knowledge by the accused to kill. As this kind of belief or superstition about black magic is more prevalent in less educated persons, the need arises to raise awareness about witchcraft and other superstitious activities. We propose that it can be included as a subject in schools to change the beliefs of society on superstition and related activities.

Keywords: *Delusions; homicide; magic; superstitions; witch*

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 07.08.2022 **Received in revised form:** 31.10.2022
Accepted: 22.11.2022 **Available online:** 16.12.2022



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INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft is a religious practice of using black magic or sorcery in which evil souls are called upon by carrying out some rituals sanctioned by religious scriptures. It is the practice and belief in magical abilities. The one who practices witchcraft is called a witch or wizard. Different regions of the world have

different beliefs and practices which are specific to these regions¹. The modern world has eliminated many of the dangers faced by previous generations, but basic human concerns about health, relationships and wealth remain. The origin of superstition can be ignorance and illiteracy when reality is replaced by false beliefs².

There is common conviction that sickness and other tragic events are related to witchcraft. As a result, persons who are identified as being responsible for such activity are at risk of being murdered. These practices and beliefs are mostly prevalent in rural areas where poor financial conditions lead to strained human relations, and where most illnesses cannot be explained³. Many individuals are inclined to believe that any catastrophe or incident that may befall them like, damaged crops, epidemics, sudden and the unexplained death of children are due the work of a ‘witch’. The killing of people practicing or suspected of using black magic is known as witch-hunting. The targets of witch-hunting are mostly

middle-aged widows, elderly women, single women, or sometimes lonely women who are left behind due to the death of men. Witch-hunting in India is not so uncommon¹.

Although India is a fast-growing economy, Most of the population is still poor, and Indians, whether educated or not, often rely on superstition to cure illness, find love, and rationalize disasters. Those who are accused of being "dayans" or witches in India can be tortured, raped, murdered or burned alive. Victims are often single elderly women, but can also be men or children⁴.

We hereby present a case in which a person was murdered in the belief that he is practicing black magic or witchcraft.

CASE REPORT

A body of a 60 year old male was brought by police for autopsy to a tertiary care center. It was alleged that deceased was physically assaulted by sharp weapons. As per the police inquest papers and history given by the relatives of the deceased the accused was the neighbour of the deceased. It was divulged that he believed that the deceased used witchcraft and black magic that caused illness of his four year old child who died after a few months. Acting on this belief, he was filled with rage which led him to murder of the victim a few days later. The incident took place in broad day light in a busy market where a heavy sharp weapon 'Gandasa' (Fig 1) was used for the assault.



Fig. 1: The "Gandasa"

The 'Gandasa' is an instrument which has a heavy weight metal blade with a sharp edge and wooden handle which is used in the cultivation of crops. Following the assault the accused and his accompanying friend fled from the scene. The victim was taken to a nearby hospital by bystanders, where he was declared dead in admission. Police was informed and the case was registered under section 302 of Indian penal code.

Autopsy revealed a, moderately built and moderately nourished male, wearing a full sleeved shirt, formal pants and underwear. Both pants and shirt were blood and mud stained. An old deformity of the left lower limb was present. On external examination it was observed that the main focus of the assailant was on the upper body parts mainly head and face. There were multiple deep incised wounds over back of head with tailing (Fig 2). The left ear pinna was cut (Fig 3).



Fig. 2: Back of head, showing multiple incised wounds (white arrows), tailing in different directions and crisscrossing of wounds



Fig. 3: Lateral view of head, showing cut injury to left pinna and haemorrhage from ear canal.

Deep incised wound extending to the bone was present over the outer aspect of left elbow joint (Fig. 4) and another incised wound was seen on the front of left wrist joint (Fig. 5)



Fig. 4: Posterior and outer aspect of left elbow joint, showing deep incised wound involving underlying bones.



Fig. 5: Anterior aspect of left wrist joint, showing deep slash cut, exposing bones (defense injury)

It was determined that all injuries were caused by a sharp blade of a heavy weapon. The head was the main target of violence and had received multiple slash cut injuries which were found to be overlapping each other and tailing in different directions. On dissection, the multiple fractures of the occipital bone were noted. Dura matter was intact and bulging, which on removal showed diffuse subdural and subarachnoid hemorrhage over left parietooccipital region. Petrous part of left temporal bone, left elbow and left wrist joint were exposed. On Internal examination visceral organs were pale and within the normal range in weight. The stomach contained about 100 ml of clear fluid with no peculiar odor. Multiple head injuries had resulted in death.

DISCUSSION

Lack of education is considered to be one of the main reasons of superstitions⁵. In India, however, educated people have also adhered to beliefs that

could be considered superstitions⁶. These superstitious beliefs can range from harmless practices to ward off the evil eye to serious issues like burning of so called witches⁷. A person, especially of the female gender, may be considered a witch who acquires some supernatural power. It is assumed that black magic or witchcraft is used for evil and selfish purposes and to perform superstitious practices to destroy someone physically or mentally. Today, despite human civilizations having progressed this far, some societies are riddled in ignorance and superstition. There has been change in the pattern of attacks on so called witches, where previously women were targeted. However, in recent years the attacks are focused on entire families, even if only one member is accused¹.

The belief of witchcraft took a violent turn into witch-hunting. Witch-hunting had been prevalent even in early modern Europe and colonial America. The worst was seen in Salem witch trials in United States and Suffolk trials of Europe during the fifteenth to eighteenth Centuries, when many women were put to death. The practice of witch-hunting is prevalent in India from ancient times and innumerable women have been killed. Caste and the Brahmanical patriarchal mindset of society are considered to be the cause of the phenomenon of witch-hunting in India⁸. The three-stage process of witch-hunting involves accusation, declaration, and persecution. Accusation involves 'accusing women of harm that occurred, such as the death of any person, child or animal, any disease in the village, natural disaster, or crop loss'. The woman is declared as a "witch" and persecuted⁹.

Throughout history "witches" have been executed by hanging, drowning and burning. Even today many persons around the globe are accused of "witchcraft" and persecuted with both genders being at risk¹⁰. Those who are identified as "witches" are therefore at risk of being murdered. It is mostly seen in poverty stricken rural areas where many bodily illnesses remain unexplained. Illiteracy is a key issue that is related to witchcraft and killing of "witches"¹¹.

The data published by the national crime bureau of India, revealed 29,272 cases of murders during the year of 2021 in India where the most common motive was 'disputes' (n=9,765, 33.3%) followed by 'personal vendetta or enmity' (n=3782, 12.9%). Disputes included land disputes, family dispute, petty disputes etc. However, only in 0.23% of cases the motive was an allegation of black magic or witchcraft¹². On the contrary in a study done by Das

Gupta et al. in 1983 reported revenge as the main reason for homicide¹³. Although there is an increased trend of using firearms¹⁴ in homicides earlier studies have shown that blunt and sharp weapons are more common for inflicting fatal injuries to head. Blunt weapon being the commonest weapon of choice¹⁵. In the case presented the back of the head was the main target. The assailant belonged to a poor socioeconomic background and came from a rural area where superstitions are more prevalent. He had a suspicion that his neighbor was using black magic to harm his child. The suspicion was confirmed the day his child died. Over time his superstitious beliefs led him to openly blame his neighbour for causing the death of his child. The father of the child used a heavy sharp weapon to assault the victim. The attack mutilated the head and face of the victim who sustained multiple incised wounds. The deformed limb of the victim made it difficult for him to escape and call for help. The assailant did not show any remorse when apprehended by the police and affirmed that he needed to take revenge for performing black magic. Delusions in the assailant were of the persecutory type which decreased inhibitions in order to perform horrendous criminal acts¹¹.

The apex court of India has recommended that in cases of offences carrying capital punishment material regarding psychiatric and psychological evaluation of the accused should be preferably collected beforehand. This type of psychological evaluation will provide a baseline, to evaluate the progress of the accused towards reformation, achieved amid imprisonment time and this will also help to establish proximity (in terms of timeline) by studying the accused person's frame of mind (or mental illness, if any). Besides this, the top court also recommended that trial courts should in a time-bound manner, collect additional information pertaining to the accused, which includes age, early and present family background, type and level of education, socioeconomic background, criminal antecedents, income and the kind of employment and other factors such as the history of unstable social behavior, or mental or psychological ailments. This information should mandatorily be available to the trial court.¹⁶

The psychological evaluation in this case is unfortunately not available as police failed to get the same done. The reason for this could be lack of knowledge on the part of the investigating officer.

CONCLUSION

Superstition is an irrational belief on an object, action and circumstances which is due to false interpretations of natural events. As this kind of belief or superstition about black magic is more prevalent in less educated and backward classes, there is need to raise awareness about superstitious behaviours. It may be prudent to include it as a subject in schools to change the perceptions and beliefs of society. "Witch-hunting" is a gross violation of human rights, which affects livelihoods, property, personal security, social dignity, and the right to life of victims and families. The intention of such malicious acts being delusions should not be overlooked by police and the psychological evaluation of such persons is an important aspect when investigating such crimes.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

ETHICAL ISSUES

None

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

None

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RS: Drafting of the manuscript, supervision and finalizing; **KP:** Editing manuscript and reporting autopsy findings.

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