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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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WITCHCRAFT AND WITCH-HUNTING IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPE AND INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Witchcraft has existed in different forms across the world from ancient civilization to the modern age. Belief in supernatural powers, magic, evil spirits, and occult practices developed in almost every early society as human beings attempted to explain disease, death, famine, natural disaster, and social misfortune. Ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome accepted magical rituals and supernatural beliefs as part of religion and social life. During the medieval and early modern periods, Europe experienced widespread witch-hunts in which thousands of people, especially women, were accused and executed for witchcraft. In India, witchcraft beliefs developed through tribal customs, folk religion, Vedic traditions, Tantric practices, and spirit worship. Belief in witches, black magic, evil spirits, and supernatural healing remains influential in many tribal and rural societies. The present paper attempts to examine the historical origin and development of witchcraft from a global comparative perspective with special reference to Europe and India. The study analyses the evolution of magical beliefs in Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, England, and India, and explores the relationship between witchcraft, patriarchy, religion, social fear, and political power. Special emphasis has been given to tribal society in India and the continuing problem of witch-hunting in modern times. The paper also analyses NCRB data and discusses the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations in tribal communities. The study is based on historical and qualitative methods using books, journal articles, reports, census documents, and government data.

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INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft is one of the oldest belief systems in human civilization. Since ancient times, human societies have believed in supernatural powers, magic, spirits, demons, and invisible forces capable of influencing human life and nature. Primitive people lacked scientific explanations for disease, death, natural disasters, infertility, crop failure, and sudden misfortune. As a result, they attempted to understand these events through magical and supernatural beliefs. Rituals, sacrifices, charms, and magical ceremonies gradually became important parts of religious and social life. Anthropologist James George Frazer explained in *The Golden Bough* that magic represented an early attempt by human beings to control nature and solve practical problems through supernatural means (Frazer, 1966). Magical beliefs therefore emerged as an important part of social organization, religion, and cultural practice. Magic was mainly divided into two types: white magic and black magic. White magic was believed to help people through healing, protection, fertility, and removal of evil spirits. Black magic was considered harmful and was believed to cause disease, death, crop failure, Witchcraft was mainly connected

with black magic because witches were believed to use evil supernatural powers to harm people and society. Belief in witchcraft existed in many ancient civilizations including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China, and Africa. Mesopotamian people believed that evil spirits and witches caused disease and disaster. Greek and Roman societies believed in curse tablets, evil eyes, magical healing, necromancy, and supernatural female powers. During the medieval period, Europe experienced one of the largest witch-hunting movements in world history. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, thousands of people were accused and executed for witchcraft. In India, witchcraft beliefs developed through tribal customs, folk traditions, Vedic religion, Tantra, and spirit worship. Tribal communities often believed that diseases, sudden death, infertility, crop failure, or social conflict were caused by witches and evil spirits. Traditional healers such as Ojhas, Gunins, Jangurus important figures in tribal society because they were believed to possess supernatural powers. Even today, witchcraft beliefs continue in several tribal and rural regions of India. Women accused of witchcraft often face social boycott, torture, sexual violence, displacement, and murder. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), thousands of people have been killed in India after

being accused of witchcraft and witch-hunting. NCRB reports indicate that more than 3,000 people were killed between 2000 and 2021 in witchcraft-related incidents. Most victims were women belonging to tribal, Dalit, backward, and economically poor communities. Witch-hunting therefore remains not only a matter of superstition but also an issue connected with patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy, social exclusion, and gender violence. The present study examines the historical development of witchcraft from a comparative perspective focusing on Europe and India. The paper analyses the origin of magical beliefs, the rise of witch-hunting, and the continuing influence of witchcraft in tribal society in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and feminist scholars have studied witchcraft and witch-hunting from different perspectives. Brian P. Levack in "The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe" provided one of the most important historical analyses of European witch-hunting. Levack examined how religion, politics, social fear, economic crisis, climate change, and patriarchy together contributed to the rise of witch persecutions in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. He argued that the Christian Church played a major role in spreading the belief that witches had made agreements with Satan and were enemies of Christian society. Levack also showed that judicial systems, torture, forced confession, and religious courts helped expand witch trials throughout Europe. He pointed out that nearly eighty percent of the accused were women, especially widows, elderly women, poor women, and socially isolated individuals. Ronald Hutton in "The Witch" examined the long historical evolution of magical beliefs from ancient civilizations to modern Europe. Hutton analysed how ideas about witches changed across different historical periods and cultures. He argued that belief in witchcraft existed long before the medieval European witch-hunts and was deeply connected with fear of disease, death, nature, spirits, and supernatural forces. Shashank Shekhar Sinha's work is important for understanding tribal society, gender relations, and social change in eastern India. In "Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters", Sinha examines how tribal women's lives were shaped by family, labour, community customs, colonial intervention, and social transformation. His study is useful for witch-hunting research because it shows that tribal women were not passive members of society; rather, they lived within complex structures of gender, work, kinship, and power. This helps us understand why women, especially widows, elderly women, and socially weak women, often become targets of witchcraft accusations in tribal communities. Soma Chaudhuri's "Witches, Tea Plantations, and Lives of Migrant Laborers in India: Tempest in a Teapot" provides an important sociological study of witchcraft accusations among marginalized labouring communities. Chaudhuri shows that witch-hunting is not only a matter of superstition but is also linked with poverty, labour exploitation, migration, social insecurity, and weak healthcare systems. Her work is important because it connects witchcraft accusations with everyday suffering, disease, economic pressure, and gender inequality. She explains how women in poor communities become vulnerable when illness, death, or family conflict is explained through supernatural beliefs. Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar's study, "Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation", is one of the most important works for analysing witch-hunting from a gender and social-structural perspective. Nathan and Kelkar argue that witch-hunting is closely connected with patriarchy, property relations, land conflict, and social change. According to them, women who are economically independent, widowed, landholding, or socially isolated are often accused of witchcraft. Their work shows that witch-hunting functions as a form of social control over women and marginalized groups.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the historical origin of witchcraft in ancient civilizations.

- To analyse witchcraft beliefs and practices in Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, England, and India.
- To examine witchcraft beliefs in tribal society in India.
- To analyse the gendered nature of witch-hunting.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on both historical and qualitative research methods. The research uses primary as well as secondary sources to examine the historical origin and development of witchcraft and witch-hunting in Europe and India, with special reference to tribal society. Primary data were collected through field-based interviews and discussions with local villagers, tribal people, traditional healers such as Ojhas and Gunins, and elderly community members from selected tribal regions. Informal interviews and oral narratives were used to understand local beliefs regarding witchcraft, evil spirits, supernatural powers, healing practices, and witch-hunting incidents. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, research papers, ethnographic studies, district gazetteers, missionary writings, government reports, census documents, and National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports. Ancient texts such as the Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Arthashastra, Rajatarangini, and medieval travel accounts of Ibn Battuta and Niccolò Manucci were also consulted to understand the historical background of magical beliefs and witchcraft practices in India.

Historical Origins of Witchcraft in Ancient Civilizations: Mesopotamia is considered one of the earliest centres of civilization where magical beliefs became closely connected with religion and daily life. Ancient Mesopotamians believed that disease, death, natural disaster, and misfortune were caused by evil spirits and witches. Protective rituals, magical chants, amulets, and priestly ceremonies were used to counter evil forces. The Maqlu ritual was one of the most important anti-witchcraft ceremonies in Mesopotamia. The ritual involved symbolic destruction of witches through fire and incantation. The Code of Hammurabi also mentioned punishment for sorcery and magical crimes, showing that witchcraft was treated as both a religious and legal issue. Ancient Greek society strongly believed in magical rituals, curse tablets, necromancy, divination, and supernatural female powers. Greek mythology contained several female figures associated with witchcraft such as Hecate, Circe, and Medea. Amulets and charms were widely used for protection against evil spirits. Greek people buried curse tablets near graves and wells because they believed supernatural spirits could carry magical messages to the underworld. Fear of female magical power later influenced European witchcraft traditions. The Romans strongly believed in supernatural powers, evil eyes, curses, omens, astrology, magical poisoning, and divination. Harmful magic was considered dangerous not only for individuals but also for the stability of the Roman state. Roman law therefore treated witchcraft as a serious social and political crime. Roman people believed that witches possessed the power to change weather, spread disease, poison enemies, control love and fertility, communicate with spirits, and bring death through magical spells. The Roman state introduced legal punishment against harmful magic from an early period. The Law of the Twelve Tables prohibited magical acts intended to damage crops or cause harm to another person. During the Roman Republic and Empire, political rulers frequently consulted astrologers, diviners, and magicians regarding war, succession, and future events. At the same time, emperors also feared magical conspiracies and often punished unauthorized magical practices. Emperor Augustus adopted a contradictory attitude toward magic and witchcraft. Although he employed astrologers and diviners in his court, he also attempted to regulate magical practices because he feared political conspiracy. Historical accounts mention that Augustus ordered the burning of thousands of prophetic and magical books written by unauthorized individuals. He believed that uncontrolled magical prophecy could encourage rebellion and political instability. Emperor Tiberius also feared astrologers and magicians and expelled many practitioners from Rome. During the reign of Emperor Nero, belief in witchcraft and astrology became even stronger. Nero frequently

consulted astrologers and magical experts regarding his future and political enemies. Historical sources suggest that Nero became deeply influenced by supernatural prophecy and magical fear. Therefore, witchcraft in Rome was not only a religious belief but also an important part of politics, medicine, law, and social fear.

Witchcraft and Witch-Hunting in Medieval Europe: During the medieval and early modern periods, Europe experienced one of the most violent witch-hunting movements in world history. Witchcraft gradually became associated with Satan, devil worship, heresy, and anti-Christian activity under the influence of the Christian Church. Medieval Christian theologians argued that witches entered into agreements with the Devil and used supernatural powers to destroy Christian society. The spread of witch-hunting in Europe was closely connected with religious conflict, political instability, disease, famine, climate crisis, and social fear. During periods of plague, crop failure, war, and economic hardship, ordinary people searched for explanations for suffering and misfortune. Women accused of witchcraft became easy targets for social anger and fear. The medieval Church believed that witches secretly gathered at night, worshipped Satan, performed black magic, caused storms, spread disease, destroyed crops, and harmed children. These beliefs intensified fear throughout European society. Church authorities and secular rulers therefore attempted to identify and punish witches through organized trials. One of the most important developments in European witch-hunting was the establishment of the Inquisition. The Church created special religious courts to investigate heresy and witchcraft. Suspected witches were arrested, interrogated, tortured, and forced to confess. Torture became a common method during witch trials because authorities believed that witches concealed their crimes through supernatural power.

The publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in 1486 intensified witch persecution throughout Europe. The book described methods for identifying witches, conducting trials, extracting confessions, and punishing accused individuals. It portrayed women as morally weak and naturally connected with Satanic temptation. The book became an influential guide for judges and religious authorities. Germany became one of the main centres of witch-hunting in Europe. Historians estimate that nearly one-third of all European witch trials occurred in German-speaking regions. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europe experienced severe climate disturbances known as the "Little Ice Age." Harsh winters, crop failure, and famine increased fear among rural communities. Many villagers blamed witches for natural disasters and agricultural destruction. The first major English Witchcraft Act was introduced during the reign of King Henry VIII in 1542. Although the law was later repealed, witchcraft again became a punishable offence under Queen Elizabeth I through the Witchcraft Act of 1563. The fear of witchcraft increased further during the reign of King James I, who strongly believed in the existence of witches and demonic conspiracy. James wrote a book titled *Daemonologie* in 1597 in which he defended the reality of witchcraft and supported severe punishment against witches. One of the most infamous figures in English witch-hunting history was Matthew Hopkins, known as the "Witchfinder General." During the English Civil War, Hopkins and his assistants travelled across eastern England investigating suspected witches. Hundreds of women were accused, tortured, and executed after forced confessions. Unlike continental Europe, where burning was common, most convicted witches in England were executed by hanging. Communities frequently used witchcraft accusations to settle personal disputes, family conflict, property disagreement, and social tension. Historians estimate that between 1450 and 1750 nearly 100,000 witchcraft trials took place in Europe and around 40,000 to 50,000 people were executed. Approximately eighty percent of the victims were women. Widows, elderly women, poor women, healers, and socially isolated individuals were particularly vulnerable. English witch-hunting gradually declined during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries because of scientific development, legal reform, and growing skepticism regarding supernatural accusations. The Witchcraft Act of 1735 officially ended prosecution for witchcraft in Great Britain.

Witchcraft in Ancient and Medieval India: The history of witchcraft in India is deeply connected with tribal traditions, folk religion, spirit worship, and magical beliefs. Scholars believe that magical practices existed among pre-Aryan tribal communities before becoming part of mainstream Indian religion. The Harappan or Indus Valley Civilization, one of the earliest urban civilizations in the world, also appears to have possessed strong belief in supernatural powers, spirits, magical protection, and ritual practices. Archaeologist Richard H. Meadow and other scholars have argued that certain ritual masks, symbolic figures, and ceremonial objects discovered from Harappan sites may indicate the practice of magical rituals or spirit-related ceremonies. During the Vedic period, belief in supernatural powers, magical rituals, charms, and sacred incantations occupied an important place in religious and social life. The Atharvaveda provides the most detailed evidence regarding magical beliefs and occult practices during the Vedic period. The Atharvaveda contains numerous references to magical chants, healing rituals, charms, curses, protection against evil spirits, destruction of enemies, fertility rituals, and exorcism. Because of its strong association with magical and supernatural practices, many scholars have described the Atharvaveda as the "Veda of charms and spells." Thus, the Atharvaveda represents not only a religious text but also an important historical source for understanding the development of witchcraft, magic, and supernatural belief in ancient Indian society. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* discussed magical practices in the context of governance and statecraft. Kautilya advised rulers to honour people skilled in magical arts and use supernatural practices for intelligence gathering and political control. The *Arthashastra* also referred to magical rituals connected with love, loyalty, punishment, and political conspiracy.

Kalhana's **Rajatarangini**, is one of the earliest historical chronicles of Kashmir. Kalhana described several incidents in which magical rituals, sorcery, and supernatural practices became connected with royal politics, conspiracy, and power struggles. According to Kalhana, witchcraft practices became influential in Kashmir particularly between the eighth and tenth centuries. Royal courts, ministers, and political elites frequently depended on astrologers, Tantric practitioners, and magical experts. Sorcery was often used as a political weapon during succession disputes and conspiracies.

Rajatarangini mentions that Tarapida allegedly employed a Brahmin expert in witchcraft and magical rituals in an attempt to seize political power. Kalhana's description demonstrates that magical beliefs were not limited to tribal or rural communities but were also influential within elite political structures. The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta, who visited India during the fourteenth century, also provided important observations regarding supernatural beliefs and magical practices in medieval Indian society. During his travels under the Delhi Sultanate, Ibn Battuta described the presence of saints, ascetics, magicians, Tantric practitioners, astrologers, and miracle workers. Ibn Battuta observed that many people in India strongly believed in supernatural powers, magical healing, spirit possession, charms, and occult rituals. Magical practitioners often claimed to control spirits, predict the future, cure disease, or influence human behaviour through supernatural means. The Italian traveller Niccolao Manucci, who lived in Mughal India during the seventeenth century, also provided detailed observations regarding witchcraft, magic, astrology, and supernatural beliefs in Indian society. According to Manucci, fear of evil spirits, curses, and magical attack remained widespread in many parts of India. Protective amulets, charms, and ritual practices were commonly used to prevent disease and misfortune. Manucci also described how rulers and nobles frequently consulted astrologers before military campaigns, royal ceremonies, and political decisions. Astrology and magical prediction therefore became closely connected with political culture during the Mughal period.

Witchcraft Beliefs in Tribal Society in India: During the British colonial period, witchcraft beliefs and witch-hunting practices continued in many tribal and rural regions of India despite the spread of colonial administration, missionary activity, and modern legal systems. British officials frequently recorded incidents of witch

accusations, magical rituals, spirit worship, and violence against alleged witches in district gazetteers, administrative reports, missionary writings, and ethnographic studies. Belief in witchcraft remains deeply rooted in several tribal communities of India. Tribal groups such as Santals, Oraons, Mundas, Hos, Bhumij, and other Adivasi communities believe in spirits, supernatural forces, and magical healing. In tribal society, diseases, infertility, sudden death, crop failure, and social conflict are often explained through supernatural beliefs. Traditional healers such as Ojhas, Gunins, Jangurus, Baigas, and Tantric practitioners are believed to possess powers to identify witches and remove evil spirits. The Norwegian missionary and scholar Paul Olaf Bodding made important contributions to the study of supernatural beliefs among the Santals. In his work *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore*, Bodding described how the Santals believed that disease, misfortune, and death were often caused by evil spirits and witchcraft. He observed that Ojhas and spiritual healers played a major role in diagnosing supernatural causes of illness and conducting rituals to remove harmful spirits. Bodding's writings provide valuable historical evidence regarding magical belief systems in tribal society. Anthropologist Sarat Chandra Roy also discussed witchcraft beliefs among tribal communities such as the Oraons and Mundas. Roy observed that tribal societies strongly believed in spirits, ancestor worship, magical rituals, and supernatural healing practices. According to Roy, fear of witches and evil spirits influenced social relationships, religious ceremonies, and community justice systems. British colonial writers and ethnographers such as William George Archer and L. S. S. O'Malley also recorded the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs in tribal regions of eastern and central India. Their writings described how accusations of witchcraft often emerged during periods of disease, famine, crop failure, or social conflict. Shashank Shekhar Sinha have argued that witch-hunting in tribal society reflects the combined influence of patriarchy, poverty, social transformation, lack of education, and weak healthcare systems. Therefore, witchcraft in tribal India should be understood not only as a supernatural belief but also as a social, economic, cultural, and gender-related phenomenon.

Witch-Hunting and Gender Violence: Witch-hunting is one of the most violent forms of gender-based violence in India. Most victims belong to tribal, Dalit, backward, and economically marginalized communities. Women accused of witchcraft are often publicly humiliated, beaten, tortured, displaced from villages, sexually assaulted, or murdered. In several cases, accusations are used to grab property or settle family disputes. Feminist scholars have argued that witch-hunting reflects patriarchal social structures where women lacking male protection become easy targets. Elderly widows and socially isolated women are particularly vulnerable. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan have argued that witch-hunting is closely connected with patriarchy, structural inequality, and economic transformation in rural society. According to Kelkar, women who possess land, challenge male authority, refuse exploitation, or lack male protection often become targets of witchcraft accusations. Witch-hunting therefore becomes a mechanism for controlling women socially and economically. Soma Chaudhuri also examined the relationship between gender, labour exploitation, and witchcraft accusations in India. In her study *Witches, Tea Plantations, and Lives of Migrant Laborers in India: Tempest in a Teapot*, Chaudhuri demonstrated how women from economically marginalized communities become vulnerable to accusations because of poverty, migration, lack of social protection, and unequal power relations. Feminist scholars have therefore interpreted witch-hunting as a form of "gender terrorism" and structural violence against women. The practice reflects deep-rooted inequality within society where women's bodies, labour, sexuality, and social position remain controlled through violence and fear.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study demonstrates that witchcraft beliefs developed in almost every early civilization as human societies attempted to explain natural and social problems through supernatural means.

Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, Europe, and India all developed magical systems connected with religion, fear, healing, protection, and social control. Although forms of witchcraft differed across civilizations, certain common features existed everywhere, including belief in evil spirits, magical healing, curses, and supernatural female powers. The study also reveals that witchcraft became closely connected with patriarchy and gender control. In both Europe and India, women formed the majority of victims during witch persecutions. In Europe, the Christian Church transformed witchcraft into a major religious and political issue. Fear of Satan and heresy contributed to mass witch trials. In India, witchcraft beliefs remained strongly connected with tribal customs, spirit worship, folk religion, and social superstition. Contemporary witch-hunting in India reflects the combined influence of poverty, patriarchy, illiteracy, poor healthcare, and social inequality. Another major finding is that witch-hunting continues despite modernization and scientific development. Supernatural beliefs remain influential in several tribal and rural regions because social and economic conditions continue to support them.

CONCLUSION

Witchcraft has remained an important part of human civilization from ancient times to the modern period. Belief in supernatural forces emerged as early societies attempted to explain disease, death, natural disaster, and uncertainty. Ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome accepted magical practices as part of social and religious life, while medieval Europe transformed witchcraft into a major religious and political issue through organized witch-hunting. In India, witchcraft beliefs developed through tribal customs, folk religion, Vedic traditions, and Tantric practices. Even today, belief in witches and supernatural forces remains influential in many tribal and rural societies. The continuation of witch-hunting in modern India demonstrates that superstition, patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy, and social inequality remain deeply rooted social problems. Women from marginalized communities continue to become victims of violence in the name of witchcraft. The study therefore argues that witch-hunting should not be understood only as superstition or religious belief. It is also a form of structural violence connected with patriarchy, economic conflict, and social power. Legal punishment alone cannot eliminate witch-hunting. Scientific awareness, women's empowerment, healthcare access, tribal development, education, and social reform are equally necessary. Greater cooperation between government institutions, educational organizations, civil society groups, and tribal communities is essential for reducing witch-hunting and protecting vulnerable women.

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