

Research Article

Analysis of the Cases of Witch Hunting and its Reporting in Two Regional Newspapers of Jharkhand

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A B S T R A C T

In India, murders under the pretext of witchcraft is reported every third day as per the report of National Crime Report Bureau (NCRB). Among various states, the situation is worst in Jharkhand as it tops the list with 575 murders between 2001 to 2019. Being the fourth pillar of democracy, media holds a responsibility to guide the process of social change. The onus is on media to objectively and truthfully report the cases of witch-hunting to facilitate awareness and draw the attention of public and the government towards such heinous acts. However, as generally observed, the discussion and coverage of such issues in print media are often scarce. Therefore, the present study explores the cases of crimes of witchcraft and witch hunting. It analyzes the content and reporting style of the news reports on the same in two leading newspapers of Jharkhand. To achieve these goals, the research employed the method of content analysis while dealing with various important variables including regions of crimes, information regarding victims, action against culprits, space dedicated to such reports in newspapers, page of news publication, etc. The findings after the analysis of the NCRB reports of eastern states from 2001-2019 demonstrates that Jharkhand constitutes 20.55% of the total witch hunting murders in India, with the maximum number of cases in the districts of Gumla, Khunti and Giridih. Besides, it was also found out that the reporting of such cases in the local newspapers of Jharkhand is mostly shallow and insufficient, with only 50% of the cases being reported on inner pages (i.e, page 8, 10 and 12) with very little space dedicated to these news stories. The study is instrumental to estimate the role of media, especially newspapers in addressing and eradicating the crimes pertaining to witchcraft.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Witch Hunting, Newspaper Reporting of Witchcraft, NCRB Report on Witch-hunting

Introduction

Science, inventions and technologies have long been used by men, not merely for the sake of survival, but also to gain control over others including nature. But, in spite of

his greatest scientific discoveries, he failed to gain control over certain natural phenomenon like deaths, droughts, famines, etc. Hence, the places where logic and science lost their ground and power, faith in supernatural powers, religion, superstitions and magic started to bloom and

flourish. (Alam & Raj, 2018). Witchcraft, also termed as daayanpratha in India, is one of such primitive superstitions or black magic, “practiced through incorporating certain rites and rituals like spell-casting, divination, sorcery, enchantment, necromancy, shamanism, demonology and mysticism” (Kallestrup & Toivo, 2017) and is perceived to inflict malevolent influences like “possessing an evil eye, destroying crops, causing illness, changing minds of people, etc.”(Sahu, 2018). This is the reason why the society sees them as threats and gets them searched and hunted. As defined by Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, a witch hunt is “an attempt to find and punish people who hold opinions that are thought to be unacceptable or dangerous to society.” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary) The alleged witches are usually “tortured, lynched, tied and publicly set on fire” (Alam & Raj, 2017).

As suggested by the data of National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), a murder under the pretext of witchcraft is reported every third day in India (Srivastava, 2016) . According to NCRB 2019, Jharkhand was ranked third, in the list of the number of murders pertaining to witchcraft and witch-hunting (Sahay, 2020). Jharkhand is a tribal dominated state with as many as 32 tribal groups. Although it accounts for 40% of the mineral resources in India, but it still has a widespread poverty, illiteracy, epidemics, superstitious beliefs as well as lack of healthcare and communication facilities (Census of India: Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe, 2011). The social and cultural conditions provide a suitable environment for the superstitions like witchcraft to grow and flourish in the state. The National Crime Report Bureau (NCRB) report maintains that as many as 523 women are lynched between 2001- 2016. Following are the numbers of witch-hunting murders in Jharkhand from 2013 to 2019:

Table I.No. of cases of witch-hunting from 2013 to 2019

Year	Cases of Witch-Hunting Murders
2013	54
2014	47
2015	32
2016	27
2017	19
2018	18
2019	15

However, according to NGOs working in these areas, the records of NCRB is unlikely to show the exact figures and it is estimated that the figures of deaths are even worse in the practical scenario. Jharkhand Police’s figure of women killed in the guise of witch craft is also higher than the figures cited in crime statistics maintained by NCRB. According

to the data of Police, 44 women were murdered in 2016 as against 27 murders cited in NCRB (183 women killed in Jharkhand in last 4 Years over Witchcraft Allegations, December 27, 2017).

Jharkhand is the second state after Bihar to adopt laws against the practice of witch-hunting by establishing “Anti Witchcraft Act, 2001” (Alam & Raj, 2018). However, the success and effectiveness of such laws remains in question until the laws are implemented properly and social awareness is given priority.

Witchcraft and the Role of Media

Being the fourth pillar of democracy, media holds a great responsibility to mirror and guide the process of social change. It is a duty of media to objectively and truthfully report the cases of witch-hunting in order to spread awareness and draw public and government attention towards such heinous acts. However, as generally observed, the coverage of the cases of witch-hunting in print media is inadequate. Also the portrayal of the characters of witches in mainstream entertainment audio-visual content is still under question and stands in contradiction to the empowerment of women and elimination of regressive notions like witchcraft. In spite of the scaring scenario of witch-hunting in India, it still appears trivial due to the ignorance by media and failure of enforcement of laws. (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016)

The mass media have long been appreciated as the watch dog of the society. It has been entrusted with the responsibility to fearlessly exposing the wrong doings of the society and ensuring social justice. At the time where the figures of witch-hunting are so alarming, it becomes imperative for media to go pro-active and start questioning rather than just narrating (Pathak, 2013). Therefore, the current research analyzes the coverage of the cases of witch-hunting in the context of Jharkhand in a selective print media to trace how far it lies from the real adversity of the situation.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to

- Ascertain the cases of crimes associated with witchcraft in Jharkhand and
- Analyze the reporting of the cases of crimes of witchcraft and witch hunting in regional newspapers of Jharkhand

Literature Review

Prior to conducting the study, multiple sources of literature pertaining to witchcraft and witch-hunting are read and reviewed, essentially for two underlying reasons. Firstly, to develop a complete understanding about the phenomenon of witch-hunting and various aspects associated with it and

secondly, to ascertain the present role of numerous forms of mass media in addressing and eradication of the same.

Witch-Hunt and its Causes

Alam & Raj (2018) presents a comprehensive picture of the scenario of witch hunting in India, encompassing the concepts related to witchcraft, the severity of the crimes pertaining to the same in India, types and causes of such crimes and practical implementation of laws made for its regulation. The scholars argue that witchcraft per se, is typically considered to be feminine in an Indian society. Hence, the victims of most of the crimes committed under the pretext of such superstitions are women. Women are often trashed, lynched, paraded naked, made bald, made to eat excreta and burned alive under the suspicion of practicing witchcraft that is believed to bring misfortune to the people. The prime causes behind such crimes are usually gender conflict, conspiracy against women, especially widows, to either settle old grudges with them/their family or for their property.

Sahu (2018), further explains the prevalence of witchcraft and witch-hunting in the special context of Jharkhand, where he asserts that the “unique magico-religious practices or way of life” (Sahu, 2018, p. 86) of tribal communities combined with low literacy rates, economic instability and widespread diseases, especially among those residing in rural set-up could be seen as a possible explanation to the pervasiveness of these superstitions in Jharkhand.

Mediated Contents of Witchcraft

In the context of western countries, Baker (Mogra & Ahuja, 2019) (2109) asserts that western literature of 20th century depicts witches as a female villain who are essentially “manipulative and power-hungry”, conducive in vilifying those women who are ambitious or aspire to acquire the power of position. These witches were maligned for lacking desirable physical feminine traits, explicitly devaluing all those women who are unable to or wilfully deny meeting the standard notion of beauty. He critically argued that the vilification of women through the images of witches, was used to counter the progressive social changes for women taking place in war years as well as from 1960s to 1980s. This influenced to punish women who did not conform to the conservative norms and expectations of the society in the Great Britain.

Rabia (2017) assesses the potential of fairy tales, literature, TV shows and films (a primary source of cultural information) in the indoctrination of ideologies and body which is significant to understand the image of witch. Rabia (2017) contends that such sources are significant to set an image and general perception of witch in the society. The study provides a distinction between perception of old and new witch. The old witch was the stereotyped image, portrayed

as a hideously disfigured woman with pale skin, known for being cannibal and jealous possessing supernatural powers. She often lives in forests as she has to face social ostracization and alienation. However, new witches are now shown as a good human, mostly as a symbol of girl power. They are shown as someone equally affected by emotion, needs and a will to survive.

Mogra and Ahuja (2019) sheds light on the portrayal of black magic on Indian television and reveals how such distorted descriptions are breeding stereotypical notions about women. The study contends that the many news and entertainment channels blatantly violates the laws criminalizing the promotion of superstitions, which are only concerned about gaining popularity and TRP; and not remotely bothered to provide awareness or right kind of information about the same.

Besides, Pathak (2014) critically analyses the role of media regarding witchcraft and witch-hunting in Assam, wherein, she acknowledges the reporting of the cases of the crimes pertaining to witchcraft but deems such reports to be shallow and insufficient. Based on her analysis of the media reporting and other mediated contents she suggests measures including detailed analysis of the cases with explicit mention of actual reasons (that can be found out by teaming up with local police), emphasis on reporting the real figures of such cases to aware people and draw attention of the government and run systematic campaigns.

Upon going through the literature review, it was observed that there is an acute shortage of works and researches, when it comes to unveil the role played by the newspapers, especially in the context of Jharkhand. Hence, identifying this gap and considering the adversity of the situation in Jharkhand, the present research analyses the contents and reporting style of the news reports regarding witchcraft and witch-hunting in the local newspapers of Jharkhand.

Methodology

To conduct this study, the methods of content analysis was used which takes the quantitative approach. Before analyzing the reporting of the crimes of witchcraft or witch hunting, it seemed crucial to have a fair idea about the severity of the issue in various districts of Jharkhand as well as the details of the cases of the crimes regarding witchcraft and witch hunting in the selected regions.

Hence, firstly, the analysis of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports from 2001-2019 was done to evaluate the trends of the crimes related to witchcraft and witch hunting taking place in eastern states including Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha. To do so, the study takes into consideration various parameters including the number of cases in the course of 19 years, average number of cases per year as well as the rising and falling frequencies of cases from

2001-2019 in three (3) eastern states of India, Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha.

Thereafter, the survey of top 10 news websites were done to find the details of the cases of crimes related to witchcraft in various districts of Jharkhand. As a result of this, the details of 20 cases of crimes that took place in just six (6) months i.e., from November 2018 to April 2019 were found and examined as per the decided variables including district-wise distribution of cases of crime regarding witchcraft in Jharkhand, information about the victims of the crime, types of crimes regarding witchcraft and action taken against the culprits or accused of crime.

After getting familiar with the severity of the crimes regarding witchcraft and witch hunting, the study heads toward analyzing witchcraft reporting in the two major regional newspapers of the Jharkhand, i.e., Prabhat Khabar and Dainik Jagran. For this, five (5) most brutal cases among the 20 cases (studied while the survey of top 10 news websites) were shortlisted and searched in the above stated newspapers and their reporting style was analyzed in terms of its placement in the newspaper, space dedicated to such news, availability of photographs, description of the cases and any special comments made to aware people against the superstitions.

Result and Discussion

The findings of the study are put below in different sub-sections as per the objectives:

Number of Witch-Hunting Murders in Eastern States: Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar

The analysis of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports from 2001-2019, it was found that in the span of 19 years, there had been 2797 cases of witch-hunting in India. Jharkhand witnessed the highest number of cases in the eastern region, with 575 cases of murders in the suspicion of witch-craft. Jharkhand is immediately followed by Odisha with 492 cases of witch-hunting in the provided time duration. However, another eastern state, Bihar has as much as 56 cases in the period of 19 years, which is much lesser than the other two states.



Figure 1. Percentage of Witch-hunting Murders in India

Percentage of witch-hunting murders in Eastern states: Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar from 2001-2019

The cases of witch-hunting in Jharkhand constitute 20.55% of the total witch hunting murders in India. Besides, 17.59 % and 1.97% of such murders take place in Odisha and Bihar respectively. Also, the three eastern states, i.e., Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar together are responsible for 40.11% of the witch hunting murders in India.

Average Number of Cases per Year

An average of 30 cases of witch-hunting had been taking place every year from 2001-2019 in the state of Jharkhand. Similarly, an average of 26 witch hunting murders occurred every year from 2001 to 2019 in Odisha. However, in the state of Bihar, the average number of cases per year is comparatively low with three (3) cases. Overall, in India, an average of 147 witch hunting cases happened every year in a time span of 19 years from 2001 to 2019.

Trends of Witch-Hunting Cases in Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar

Figure 2, illustrates the rise and fall of cases of witch-hunting in the states of Jharkhand and Odisha from 2001 to 2019. The vertical or y-axis represents the number of cases, whereas the horizontal or x-axis represents the years.

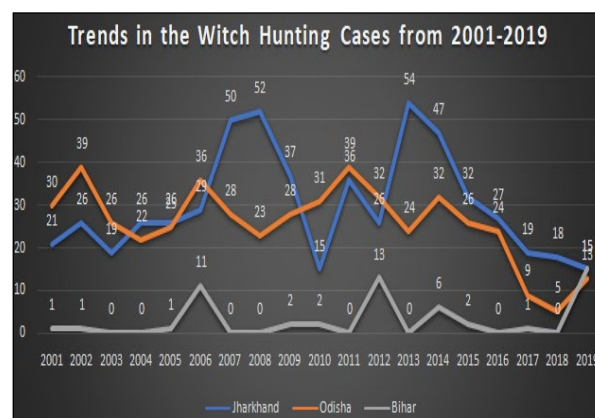


Figure 2. Trends of Witch-Hunting Cases from 2001 to 2019 in Eastern Region

Figure 3, illustrates the rising and falling frequency of cases in India from the 2001 to 2019.

Number of Cases of Crimes Regarding Witchcraft in various districts of Jharkhand

According to the analysis of news reports of 20 cases on top 10 websites from November 2018 to April 2019, the cases of witchcraft have taken place in 12 districts of Jharkhand. The maximum number of cases of crimes regarding witchcraft is registered in the districts of Gumla (7 cases), Khunti (2 cases) and Giridih (2 cases).

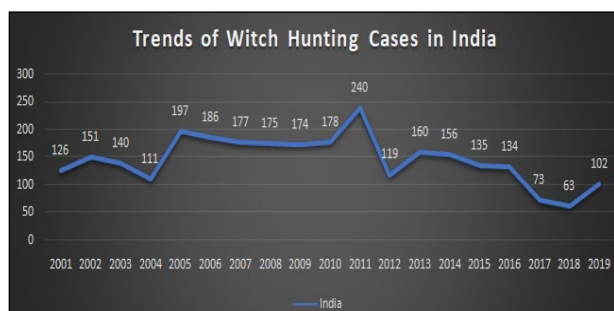


Figure 3. Trends of Witch- Hunting Cases in India

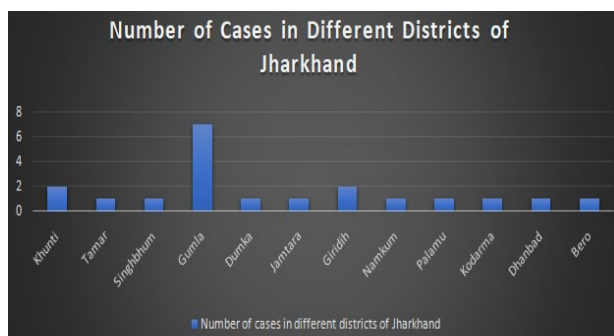


Figure 4. Number of Cases in Different Districts of Jharkhand

Victims of Crime Regarding Witchcraft

Upon analysis of the cases different deeper perspectives related to the victims of crime related to witchcraft is being reported below:

Age of the Victims

The analysis of all the 20 cases shows that all the victims were between the ages of 30 to 70. It also suggests that most of the victims fall under the range of 45-50 years and 51-55 years. Amongst 20 cases registered above, the age of victims in five (5) cases were not available. In rest 15 cases, there were 17 victims whose range of age is put below in the form of a graph:

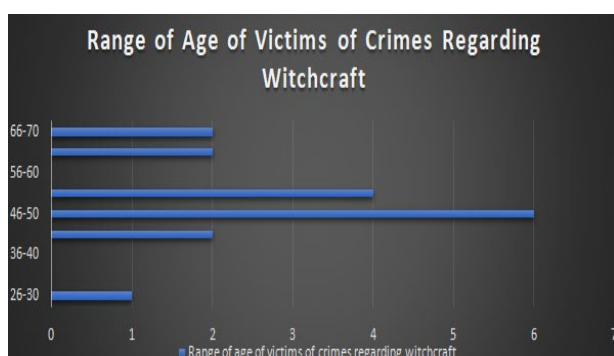


Figure 5. Range of Age of Victims of Crimes Regarding Witchcraft

Sex of Victims

Out of 20 cases of crimes related to witchcraft, the information about the sex of the victim is provided in 19

cases. In these, 19 cases, 22 victims have been registered out of which 15 were women and seven (7) are men. That implies 68.18 % of the victims are women and rest are men.

Types of Crimes

There are 28 victims identified in 20 cases of crimes mentioned in above mentioned table. In most of the cases of crimes related to witchcraft, victims have been murdered. In rest of the cases, they are either attempted to be murdered or stripped or fined.

Types of Murders

Seventeen (17) victims have been murdered by various means and methods. Four victims were beheaded, six were beaten to death and three were attacked by a sharp weapon, whereas one victim each was murdered by strangulation, gunshot and crushing of head. This largely shows the extent of brutality in which the murder happened.

Actions Taken Against Those Who Committed the Crime

In 19 out of 20 identified cases of crimes, due to suspicion of witchcraft, the actions were taken against those who committed the crime. In 12 cases, First Information Report (FIR) had been lodged. In five (5) cases, arrests had been done. In one case, First Information Report (FIR) had been lodged and the accused had surrendered. In rest of the cases, investigation is still under process.

Reporting of Cases of Witch-Hunting in Regional Newspapers

The analysis is based on the reporting of five (5) most brutal cases among the 20 cases (studied while the survey of top 10 news websites) of witchcraft in two major regional newspapers of the Jharkhand, i.e., Prabhat Khabar and Dainik Jagran. The details of the five (5) identified cases are the following: The news reporting and the space given to the above cases in the mentioned newspapers are put below.

Number of cases reported in Dainik Jagran and Prabhat Khabar

- Out of 5 cases identified, only 3 cases have been reported in Dainik Jagran
- Out of 5 cases identified, only 2 cases have been reported in Prabhat Khabar

Pages on which cases and crimes regarding witchcrafts were reported

In Dainik Jagran, cases regarding witchcrafts were reported on Page no.8 (Ranchi Aaspaas Jagran), page no.10 (Bihar Jagran) and Page no.12 (Jharkhand Jagran). Despite being the brutal cases of murders, none of the three-news reported in the Ranchi edition of Dainik Jagran was given space in initial pages. Similarly, in Ranchi edition of Prabhat

Table 2.Details of the Most Brutal Cases Reported in Regional Newspapers

Case No.	Case Name	Summary of the Crime	Date of Crime	Place of Crime	Type of Crime
1.	Sukhdev Pahan Murder Case	A man named Sukhdev Pahan murdered a 70-year-old woman by attacking her by an iron wrecking bar in a suspicion of practising witchcraft	March 21, 2019	Chamratoli, Murhu, Khunti	Murder
2.	Vidhumukhi Kumari Murder Case	A 47-year old woman who was believed to be responsible for the sickness of villagers was strangled to death by a group of unidentified people	March 12, 2019	Tamaar	Murder
3.	Phulmani Devi Murder Case	The brother duo beheaded Phulmani Devi while she was returning from the market suspecting her to be a witch	March 2, 2019	Sonwa, West Singhbhum	Murder
4.	Naru Khadiya Murder Case	Four young boys barged into the victim's home and thrashed him to death	March 22, 2019	Bela Village, Gumla	Murder
5.	Body Cut into Pieces case	A 65-year-old man was killed and his body was cut into pieces and further thrown into a river	February 3, 2019	Gumla	Murder

Table 3.Space Dedicated to the Cases of witchcraft in Prabhat Khabar Vs Dainik Jagran

Case No.	Area Dedicated in Prabhat Khabar (in cm ²)	Area Dedicated in Dainik Jagran (in cm ²)
1.	24	144
2.	140	0
3.	0	20
4.	0	52
5.	0	0

Khabar cases were reported on Page no. 8 and 10.

Space Dedicated to the News of Witchcraft or Witch Hunting

The following chart represents the space provided for the selected most brutal five (5) cases of witchcraft in the two regional newspapers. Out of the five (5) identified cases, only three (3) and two (2) cases were reported in Dainik Jagran and Prabhat Khabar respectively, a total of only five (5) news reports were available for the analysis.

Photographs Available in the News Reports

Out of five (5) news reported in both Dainik Jagran and Prabhat Khabar, only two (2) reports had photographs, one each in both the newspapers.

Age of the Victim and Place of the Crime Related to Witchcraft

Four out of five news reported in newspapers had the information about the age of the victims. The age of the victims reported were 47, 50 and 75 years. Besides, all the five reports have the place of the crime mentioned.

Types of Crime

All the five-news clipping available in Dainik Jagran and Prabhat Khabar has mentioned the type of crime. However, the newspapers have only reported the cases of murder happened due to the suspicion of witchcraft and have not a single case dealing with other types of crime like stripping, beating or harassment have been reported.

Information about the Person Committed the Crime and Reason of Committing the Crime

In all the five (5) news reports, the person committing the crime is/are either a neighbour or a villager or group of villagers who believed that the victim was involved in practicing

witchcraft and was responsible for either the deaths of family members or was bringing bad health to the villagers.

Comments/ Messages to Aware People against the Practice of Superstition

All the five (5) news have been reported in a plain format without any special comments to make people aware against the malpractice of superstitions related to witchcraft and witch hunting.

Conclusion

The study reflects that the issue of witch-hunting is severe in eastern regions especially in Jharkhand and Odisha. Only three eastern states of India, i.e., Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar are responsible for 40.11% of witch-hunting murders in India. The crimes generally happen to women and people above the age of 45 (82.35%). In the districts of Gumla, Khunti and Giridih with female literacy rates as low as 56.97%, 53.71 % and 50.33% respectively suggests that such crimes generally targets the most vulnerable sections of the society. The low percentage of literacy rates in the most prevalent areas of witch-hunting in Jharkhand can also be considered as one of the reasons of the crime against them. Illiteracy leads to the irrational beliefs which eventually provide the perfect environment to foster superstitions.

The fact that at least half of the cases of witch-hunting are not reported in regional newspapers of Jharkhand depicts the failure of journalism. Besides, the absence of such reports in initial pages of newspapers, lack of enough dedicated space and the plain format of these news reports without exact reasons (like conspiracy against women and any message to aware people against the practice of witchcraft and witch hunting) shows that the quality of such reports which are still far from its ideal state.

Recommendation

- More concerted interventions are required to be taken by the concerned authorities, i.e., Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India for awareness against the malpractice of witchcraft and witch hunting
- Education can play a crucial role in the endeavour to eliminate the practice of witchcraft and witch hunting from its roots as it would lead to the spread of scientific temper among people. The process of awareness must be started from initial levels. For example, a chapter along with the audio-visual content dealing with the myths and facts related to the superstitions can be added as a part of the school curriculum
- Besides, the problem can't be solved without women empowerment. Being the prime victims of crime related to witchcraft, it is vital for women of the society to know their rights in order to take stand for themselves. For this purpose, government workers like Shiksha

Mitra, ASHA workers and school teachers should be trained and entrusted with the responsibility to spread awareness regarding the same among the people of the most affected areas like Gumla, Khunti and Giridih

- Easy availability of healthcare facilities can lead to the lesser number of cases of bad health and untimely deaths. Hence, it would be capable in minimizing the cases of crimes related to witchcraft as most of the victims in such cases are held responsible for the bad health or early demise of people. Also, awareness drives like rallies, campaigns and street plays can be done to generate alertness among the rural populations of Gumla, Khunti and Giridih where the situation is worst
- Regional newspapers can play a central part in terms of garnering attention of both the people as well as the government towards the severity of an issue of witchcraft and witch hunting. Hence, priority should be given to the cases of witch hunting both in the national and regional newspapers and should be reported on their initial pages, even on the front page if it necessitates. Not just the adequate space should be allotted to the cases of the crimes of witchcraft and witch hunting in the states where condition is severe but attempts and appeals should also be made through comments and opinions of an editor of the newspapers to aware people. Photographs in the newspapers help to draw an attention of the readers towards the particular news. Therefore, newspapers should also add photographs and captions with the news regarding witchcraft and witch hunting

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