

Friday Faculty Research Seminar Series
(A MAC-IQAC Initiative)

Report of the 3rd Talk by Anu Jaidev

The sensitive subject “**Myth, Misogyny and Marginalization: Understanding Witch-hunts through the Lens of Literature**” was presented by Anu Jaidev within the framework of the origin of witch-hunting practices to highlight the brutality perpetrated on women branded as witches. The presentation explored how collective irrationality, myth, misogyny, superstition and random chance events can lead to transforming hapless women’s lives to precarious states. There is historical testimony about this rampant practice in several parts of the Eastern and the Western world. The magnitude and degree of brutality against the unfortunate women singled out as witches were presented in a most candid and touching manner while tracing evidence of witch hunts in geographically and culturally separated cultures. ‘Witches’ were hanged, burnt alive or drowned to death. All such horrific executions were public events. Violence of this magnitude and degree against women generally happens in cultures that are misogynistic. Witch hunting and witch craft are always shrouded in myth.



The classical period of witch-hunt in the North Western world coincides with the early modern period, between 1450 to 1750, beginning with the Reformation and continuing up to the Thirty Years’ War, resulting in an estimated execution of 35,000 to 100,000 witches.

The presenter emphatically provided statistical evidence regarding prevalence of this practice in modern times. A review of witch hunt in modern times through reported cases reveals that this barbaric practice remains in at least 12 states of Indian subcontinent having a stature of a democratic nation state. The practice also pervades in the neighbouring country, Nepal. It is ubiquitous primarily in tribal and Dalit communities in India. A glimpse of Indian fact file on witch hunts is astonishingly scary. During the period between 2002 to 2014, more than 2100 Indian women from tribal and Dalit communities were killed on accusations of

witchcraft. Only five states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam and Rajasthan) of India have promulgated laws against this ghastly practice. However, there is no specific legislation at the national level against the practice. Witch-hunts in contemporary times are also reported in Sub-Saharan Africa. Witch-craft or sorcery remains a punishable offence in Islamic Countries like Cameroon and Saudi Arabia. The commonality and distinctiveness in looks of the witches- ‘the ugly old hag with twisted talon, toiling and troubling, spinning and weaving’ that pervades the narratives and imagery in different cultures was also highlighted at length.



The significance of the narratives in forging and consolidating collective memories cannot be overlooked. There is a suffusion of witches' stories in our collective cultural imagination, most of which are sexist, ageist and horribly misogynistic. Their cumulative effect is to normalise irrational notions of magic, divination and of deviance and demonic evil, which are the flip side of the former. The touching narrative of 'Bayen' by Maheshweta Devi was presented with such intensity that it brought to the fore the entire sequence of witch hunt and its consequences. The narrative was beautifully summed up as "It is less than 'real', it has no truth value per se, but it is also more than 'real' as it spills across the boundaries of the real, the discursive and the imaginary."

