

REPORT ON LEGAL AWARENESS GENERATION PROGRAM: ABATING THE TRADITION OF WITCH-HUNTING IN ODISHA

Event Overview:

A Legal Awareness Generation Program on the theme “Abating the Tradition of Witch-Hunting in the State of Odisha” was conducted on 22nd November ,2025 by CDOE, MSCBU, Baripada, to sensitize citizens about the social, legal, and human rights aspects of witch-hunting practices. In the beginning The program aimed to empower participants with knowledge of relevant laws, citizens’ rights and responsibilities, and the socio-cultural dynamics that perpetuate witch-hunting.

Inaugural Session:

The programme began at 10:30 am in the Convention Hall of the university. The Vice Chancellor Professor Pramod Kumar Satpathy, the Chairman, Post- Graduation Council, Professor Kamala Lochan Barik; Convener Professor Sukanta Kumar Nayak, Director, CDOE; Co-Convenor Dr. Pratap Kumar Jena, Deputy Director, CDOE, Professor Indrajit Naik, Coordinator PM-USHA , Chief Guest, Ms Sashiprava Bindhani, Former State Information Commissioner, Odisha; Keynote Speaker, Ms Rajashree Pattnayak, Secretary, DLSA and Officer of Senior Civil Judge, Mayurbhanj; Shri Varun Guntupalli (IPS), Superintendent of Police, Mayurbhanj; Chief Guest, Mr. Dayasindhu Parida, Sub-collector, Baripada; Mr. Deepak Kumar Gochhayat, Additional SP, Mayurbhanj and Organising Secretary Dr. Sujoy Kundu, Asst. Professor of Social Work, CDOE were seated on the dais. The event was hosted by Abhipsa Pattanayak, Assistant Professor, Dept of English, CDOE, MSCBU. All the dignitaries watered the sapling as a mark for the auspicious beginning of the programme The Vice Chancellor felicitated them all with memento. In total there were 217 participants including faculties and students from Fakir Mohan University, Balasore, Maharaja Purna Chandra Autonomous College, Baripada, etc and some members of Mission Shakti Self-Help Group.

Words by Prof. Sukanta Kumar Nayak, Convenor cum Director, CDOE

The Convenor of the programme Professor Sukanta Kumar Nayak, Director, CDOE delivered the welcome address by welcoming dignitaries, legal experts, faculty members, community

representatives, and students to the workshop on “Legal Awareness Generation: Abating the Tradition of Witch-Hunting in Odisha.” He emphasized that despite progress in the state, witch-hunting remains a grave social issue requiring sustained awareness and legal literacy. The workshop aims to provide practical understanding of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, along with case studies and community strategies. He highlighted the university’s responsibility to promote rational thinking, empower communities, and encourage active participation to combat superstition-driven violence. The speech concluded with a call for collective responsibility and meaningful engagement throughout the sessions.

Organising Secretary Dr. Sujoy Kundu, Asst. Professor of Social Work, CDOE, introduced the guests to the dais. Shortly after this the Souvenir including all the write-ups and abstracts by the participants was released by Vice Chancellor.

Words by Prof. Indrajit Naik, Coordinator of PM-USHA, MSCB University,

The Coordinator of the PM-USHA, Professor Indrajit Naik initiative highlighted that witch-hunting is still a serious issue in Odisha, especially affecting vulnerable women. He explained the legal protections such as the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, and related IPC and SC/ST Act provisions that punish such crimes. Despite strong laws, witch-hunting continues due to lack of awareness, fear, superstition, and social pressure. He emphasized that awareness at the grassroots level is essential and urged everyone to work together to create an Odisha free from violence and injustice in the name of witchcraft.

Words by Ms. Sashiprava Bindhani, Former SIC, Odisha

Ms. Sashiprava Bindhani hails from Mayurbhanj, the last princely state merged into the Indian Union in 1949, and was born and brought up in Baripada, Mayurbhanj district. She completed her Postgraduate degree in Philosophy at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, and earned a Bachelor’s degree in Legislative Law before joining the Bar in Baripada in 1985. With over 37 years of experience, Ms. Bindhani has worked with grassroots, national, and international organizations, including CARE India, Indo-Swiss Project, *Wada Na Todo Abhiyan*, NAWO, and the National Alliance for Maternal Health and Human Rights. She has been instrumental in filing cases related to discrimination, access to health services, and protection of marginalized communities.

Ms. Bindhani's address highlighted her extensive experience in human rights advocacy, having served as State Director of HRLN Odisha, Country Programme Director of CCF–Great Britain in Cambodia, and State Information Commissioner of the Odisha State Information Commission. Her pioneering groundwork on witch-hunting played a crucial role in the formulation of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, where she examined the issue through the lenses of power relations, community behaviour, belief systems, and social psychology. Currently working as an independent researcher, policy analyst, trainer, and human rights defender, she also runs a blog on witch-hunting prevention. As a former Syndicate member of MSCB University (2021–2025), she continues to contribute to public discourse on law and rights. In her speech, she stressed the need for legal literacy, recognised witch-hunting as a complex socio-legal problem tied to gender and power dynamics, and underscored the responsibility of citizens in combating misinformation and strengthening the Rule of Law. She further emphasized that awareness campaigns and educational initiatives are vital to safeguarding women and marginalized groups from violence and exploitation.

Words by Ms. Rajashree Pattnayak, Senior Civil Judge, Odisha

Ms. Rajashree Pattnayak, Senior Civil Judge, joined the Odisha Judicial Service in 2016 and took charge as Secretary, District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Mayurbhanj on 30 January 2025. She oversees legal aid services, implementation of NALSA and OSLSA schemes, organization of Lok Adalats, and promotion of mediation. Under her leadership, DLSA Mayurbhanj works to ensure access to justice, legal empowerment, and outreach for marginalized communities.

She talked about the eradication of blind beliefs, empower the victims. How witch hunting continues to be a grave social problem in parts of Odisha, deeply connected to superstition, lack of healthcare, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Women—especially widows, single, elderly, tribal, and Dalit women—are the most frequent victims, facing violence, humiliation, social exclusion, and even death, often instigated by “witch doctors” or *gunias*. The Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013 makes such offenses cognizable and non-bailable, defining witch-hunting, witchcraft practices, and *gunias*. The Act prescribes stringent punishments, ranging from three to seven years of imprisonment and fines, especially for repeat offenders or severe violence. Courts may also direct fines to be paid as compensation to victims. Victims can seek further compensation and rehabilitation under the Odisha Victim Compensation Scheme through the

DLSA, which provides legal aid, counselling, shelter, medical assistance, and vocational support. Eliminating witch hunting requires strict legal enforcement, community awareness, participation of local leaders, and strengthening education to promote scientific temper. Improved healthcare and development in vulnerable areas are essential to prevent reliance on superstition. Victims need justice, support, and dignity—not stigma.

Words by Shri Varun Guntupalli, IPS, Superintendent of Police, Mayurbhanj

Shri Varun Guntupalli, IPS, Superintendent of Police, Mayurbhanj, joined the Indian Police Service on 19 December 2016. He has served in key positions such as SDPO Jeypore, SP Koraput, and SP Bhadrak. His notable achievements include receiving the DGP's Disc (2021) for leading a successful Anti-Naxal operation and the DGP's Commendation Roll for ensuring peaceful and incident-free Simultaneous General Elections 2024 in Bhadrak. His career reflects dedication, professionalism, and strong leadership.

Witch hunting remains a serious social problem in rural and tribal Odisha, rooted in superstition, illiteracy and lack of healthcare. Single, widowed, and divorced women—especially from Dalit and Tribal communities—are often the most vulnerable, facing humiliation, violence, social boycott, and displacement. Mayurbhanj, with over 57% tribal population, has long been affected, though cases have reduced by about 41% between 2020 and 2024. Addressing witch hunting requires combined efforts of government agencies, NGOs, community leaders, women's groups, PRIs, ASHA workers, and schools to promote awareness, scientific temper, and rational thinking. Strict enforcement of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, along with speedy trials and rehabilitation of survivors, is essential. Improving education, healthcare, and socio-economic conditions will further help eliminate this harmful practice.

Words by Mr. Dayasindhu Parida, Sub-Collector of Baripada

Mr. Dayasindhu Parida, Sub-Collector of Baripada, delivered an insightful and grounded address during the workshop on witch-hunting and superstition. In his speech, he emphasized that witch-hunting is not merely a social evil but a persistent developmental challenge that reflects deeper gaps in healthcare access, education, and institutional trust at the grassroots level. He noted that despite the existence of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, incidents continue to occur because communities lack timely information, scientific awareness, and reliable support

systems. Mr. Parida stressed the crucial role of district administration in ensuring swift intervention, community counselling, and law enforcement when allegations arise. He highlighted the need for coordinated efforts between health workers, police, panchayat bodies, and social welfare departments to identify vulnerable individuals—especially women, widows, and the elderly—who are most at risk of being targeted. He also underscored the importance of sensitizing frontline officers so that cases of superstition-related violence are handled with firmness, empathy, and legal accuracy.

Calling for a long-term strategy, he urged institutions and universities to work closely with local communities through awareness campaigns, school-level education, and door-to-door outreach to dispel myths surrounding illness, death, and misfortune. He appreciated the initiative of organizing such a workshop and acknowledged that platforms like Bhamati Ra Swara can play a transformative role by bringing together researchers, administrators, activists, and students to build a rational, informed, and inclusive society. He concluded by reaffirming the administration's commitment to protecting vulnerable citizens and ensuring that no individual suffers humiliation, violence, or displacement due to superstition or fabricated allegations.

Words by Mr. Deepak Kumar Gochhayat, Additional Superintendent of Police, Mayurbhanj

Mr. Deepak Kumar Gochhayat, Additional Superintendent of Police, Mayurbhanj, addressed the workshop with a strong focus on the law-enforcement perspective surrounding witch-hunting practices in the district. He emphasized that cases of *dahani* accusations are not merely acts of superstition but serious criminal offences that must be addressed with firmness, sensitivity, and timely intervention. In his remarks, Mr. Gochhayat explained how most witch-hunting incidents arise in remote pockets where misinformation, fear, and lack of medical awareness create an environment conducive to violence. He noted that victims—mostly women, widows, and marginalized individuals—often face social isolation, intimidation, and physical assault before the matter even reaches the police. This makes early detection and community vigilance essential.

He highlighted several challenges in policing such cases, including delayed reporting, community silence, pressure from local influencers, and the reliance on self-styled healers (*gunia or ojha*), whose claims often escalate suspicion into violence. To counter this, the district police have been working on strengthening village-level awareness, deploying beat officers more strategically, and coordinating with ASHAs, ANMs, and panchayat representatives to identify potential risks at an

early stage. Mr. Gochhayat stressed that the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013 provides strong legal provisions, but its effectiveness depends on public cooperation. He urged citizens to rely on scientific understanding and verified medical information rather than superstition. The police, he assured, are fully committed to ensuring immediate rescue, protection, and legal action in every allegation-based case. He appreciated the workshop for creating a collective platform where academia, administration, law enforcement, and civil society discuss workable strategies to curb the menace. He concluded by reiterating the police department's dedication to safeguarding vulnerable individuals and fostering a society where no person is harmed, stigmatized, or ostracized in the name of witchcraft.

Words by Prof. Pramod Kumar Satapathy, Vice Chancellor, MSCB University

The Vice Chancellor extended warm greetings and expressed his satisfaction as Chief Patron of the One-Day National Workshop on “Legal Awareness Generation Program: Abating the Tradition of Witch-Hunting in Odisha”, organized by the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo University, Baripada. He emphasized that universities must step beyond academics to address societal issues, noting that witch-hunting is not only a legal violation but a moral one, rooted in fear, superstition, and marginalization, primarily affecting women. The university, he said, should act as a moral compass, promoting awareness and justice. Appreciating the efforts of CDOE and the university's inclusion under the PM-USHA scheme, he highlighted the importance of legal literacy, progressive thought, and community engagement. While the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, provides legal protection, its effectiveness depends on public awareness and societal change. He concluded by expressing hope that the workshop would generate insights, inspire policy recommendations, and foster a collective commitment to safer, informed, and compassionate communities, and extended his best wishes for a fruitful session.

Words by Prof. Kamala Lochan Barik, Chairman, PG Council, MSCB University

The Chairman of the PG Council highlighted that universities are not only centres of academic learning but also spaces to address societal issues. He emphasized that witch-hunting is a violation of human dignity, justice, and humanity, and affects real communities and families. He noted that ending the tradition of witch-hunting requires more than legal literacy; it demands emotional awareness, empathy, and the courage to challenge deep-rooted prejudices. The Chairman

expressed pride in the university's commitment to social responsibility through this workshop, which goes beyond intellectual discussion to focus on legal responsibilities, ethical concerns, community behaviour, and preventive strategies. He encouraged participants to engage actively, learn, and carry Insights back to their communities, stressing that awareness programs can be transformative, helping build safe, informed, and rights-conscious communities. The speech concluded with a call to stand against superstition, protect human rights, and strengthen the legal and moral foundations of Odisha. The program commenced with an inaugural address by the Chief Guest, Ms. Sashiprava Bindhani, a distinguished legal expert and human rights advocate.

A formal vote of thanks was delivered by Dr. Pratap Kumar Jena, Deputy Director, CDOE and Co-Convenor of the programme. He expressed his gratitude to all distinguished guests, speakers, and resource persons for their valuable contributions. He thanked the District Administration, Police Department, DLSA Mayurbhanj, faculty members, coordinators, and student volunteers for their support in making the event successful. He also acknowledged the guidance of the Honourable Vice-Chancellor and Director, CDOE, and appreciated the active participation of attendees, which added meaning and purpose to the programme.

First Lecture

The first lecture of the workshop was delivered by Ms Sashiprava Bindhani. The lecture highlighted the growing concern over violence related to *Dahani* (witch-hunting) in Odisha, underscoring that despite the enactment of the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, the State remains behind in addressing the deep-rooted social and health-related factors that fuel such crimes. The speaker emphasized that most incidents occur in remote rural regions with limited healthcare infrastructure, where communities rely heavily on local healers and traditional practices. These practices often emerge from a rationale—a community's explanation of disease and death—rather than scientific rationality. Misinterpretations of illnesses such as tuberculosis, malaria, diarrhoea, and even genetic conditions have led to severe forms of violence, including branding, ostracization, and murder. Several real-life cases from districts such as Mayurbhanj, Ganjam, Kandhamal, and Rairangpur were cited to illustrate the gravity of the issue.

The lecture stressed that branding anyone as *Dahani* is a punishable crime, yet continues due to persistent superstition, lack of medical awareness, and absence of accessible, trustworthy health services. During crises like COVID-19, such beliefs intensified, with women often being blamed

for misfortunes or deaths within families. To address this, the speaker called for coordinated action among state institutions, improved dissemination of public health information, and stronger trust-building between communities and formal healthcare providers. Public health data, if shared timely and transparently—such as post-mortem reports—can dispel myths and prevent violence. Introducing *Bhamati Ra Swara* (The Voice of Bhamati), the speaker described it as a platform aimed at raising awareness, generating informed public discourse, and mobilizing collective efforts against witch-hunting. The initiative will bring together academicians, activists, media professionals, researchers, and students to challenge misinformation and promote scientific understanding.

The lecture concluded with the message that Right Information at the Right Time is essential for preventing victimization and eradicating this social evil.

Second Lecture

Prof. Sujit Kumar Choudhary, Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Head of the Department of Sociology & Social Work at Mahatma Gandhi Central University, delivered an insightful lecture on the persistence of witch hunting in contemporary India. Drawing on his extensive academic background and research experience, he examined the historical, sociological, and legal dimensions of this deeply rooted social evil. The lecture explained that witch hunting—locally known as *dayan pratha* or *tonahi pratha*—remains prevalent in rural and tribal areas across states such as Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Assam, and Rajasthan. Prof. Choudhary traced its origins to pre-colonial tribal customs, where unexplained misfortunes like crop failure or unexpected deaths were attributed to “witches.” He highlighted the influential role of *ojhas* and *bhagats*, traditional healers who often identify alleged witches for personal or economic gain.

Prof. Choudhary emphasized that witch hunting is not merely superstition but a manifestation of deeper structural issues—gender discrimination, caste oppression, poverty, land disputes, and lack of healthcare. He noted that 80–90% of victims are women from marginalized communities, reflecting the intersection of gender, caste, and class vulnerabilities. Citing NCRB data from 2000–2022, the lecture revealed over 2,500 murders linked to witch hunting, with Jharkhand reporting nearly 1,000 cases. Despite state-specific laws such as those in Jharkhand (2001, amended 2019),

Chhattisgarh (2005), and Bihar, enforcement remains weak due to low literacy, police inaction, fear among witnesses, and social pressure. Underreporting remains a major challenge, with the actual number of incidents estimated to be significantly higher.

Prof. Choudhary also discussed recent cases from Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, showing that witch-hunting-related violence continues even in 2024–2025. He noted that government initiatives like Jharkhand's Project *Garima* and NGO interventions by Action Aid and Oxfam have helped raise awareness and support survivors. Empirical studies indicate that improved electrification, education, and youth-led campaigns have contributed to a decline in incidents.

In conclusion, Prof. Choudhary argued for stronger national legislation, community-based awareness programmes, rational and scientific education, women's land rights, and accessible healthcare. He emphasized that tackling witch hunting requires not only law enforcement but also long-term social transformation to dismantle superstition, patriarchy, and economic exploitation at the grassroots level.

Third Lecture

Dr. Lhamu Tshering Dukpa, Head and Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Work at HNB Garhwal University, delivered a compelling lecture on the persistent and gendered violence of witch-hunting in the tribal regions of Jharkhand and Odisha. Drawing on sociological research and field-based insights, she highlighted how witch-hunting continues despite legal reforms and increasing public awareness. Dr. Dukpa explained that witch-hunting is not merely a matter of superstition but a complex social practice shaped by gender discrimination, property disputes, poor healthcare access, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Most victims are marginalized women—particularly childless widows—who become targets due to property-related conflicts or because their behaviour challenges expected social norms. She emphasized that labelling a woman as a “witch” often serves as a strategic tool to dispossess her of land or settle personal rivalries.

The lecture outlined the critical role played by ojhas or witch doctors, whose authority is strengthened by widespread illiteracy, inadequate medical facilities, and local belief systems. These figures often legitimize accusations, resulting in severe punishments ranging from public humiliation and eviction to brutal assaults and lynching. Dr. Dukpa framed witch-hunting as a

form of structural violence that reflects deeper anxieties about women's autonomy and the mechanisms of social control operating within tribal communities. Although states such as Jharkhand have enacted anti-witch-hunting legislation, Dr. Dukpa noted that weak enforcement and prevailing social attitudes limit the law's effectiveness. She proposed a multi-layered approach to combating this violence, including protection cells for vulnerable women, rehabilitation and livelihood programmes for survivors, widespread awareness initiatives, training for local governance bodies, and regulation of witch doctors. She also stressed the need for qualified social workers and NGOs to lead intervention efforts at the grassroots level.

In conclusion, Dr. Dukpa asserted that the continued existence of witch-hunting in contemporary India challenges the nation's commitment to equality and human rights. Ending this practice requires not only legal reform but a fundamental shift in social attitudes, improved healthcare access, and sustained institutional support to protect women from violence disguised as tradition.

Valedictory Session

The workshop highlighted the urgent need to address witch-hunting as a grave violation of human rights and emphasized the collective responsibility of academic institutions, policymakers, social workers, and communities in combating superstition-driven violence. Participants reflected on the key learnings from the lectures—gendered vulnerabilities, property-related conflicts, the role of healthcare access, and the importance of legal awareness. In the valedictory session, Director, Deputy Director, Prof. Choudhary and Dr. Dukpa were present on the dais, giving feedback and distributing the certificates to the participants.

The programme concluded with expressions of gratitude to all speakers, organizers, participants, and supporting institutions for their meaningful engagement. Some of the members from Mission Shakti expressed their gratitude and shared their experiences on this topic. Certificates were distributed to acknowledge active participation and commitment to advancing awareness, research, and social action aimed at eradicating witch-hunting practices.

Gallery :

