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Anaben Pawar as a Symbol of Witch-Hunting: A Critical Analysis of Patriarchy, Misogyny, and the Power of Documentary Film

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Abstract

This paper examines the entrenched patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes perpetuating violence against tribal women in India, focusing on witch-hunting as a form of gendered oppression. Through Anaben Pawar's story, as depicted in Sachin Dheeraj Mudigonda's documentary *Testimony of Ana*, the study explores how such narratives expose systemic marginalisation. Witch-hunting, rooted in superstition and patriarchal power, targets women who inherit property or challenge norms, disempowering them through violence and ostracisation (The Hindu, 2021). The documentary uses vivid imagery and survivor testimony to highlight this brutality, raising questions about societal complicity, legal inefficacy, and cultural reform needs. The paper will argue that Anaben Pawar's ordeal, where she was branded a "witch" and brutally tortured, is a potent symbol of the violence and humiliation tribal women face today. At the same time, the paper will pose questions about the role of media in challenging established power structures, the effectiveness of documentary filmmaking in provoking social change, and how cinematic imagery and symbolism can create a lasting impact on audiences. Key questions will include: How does *Testimony of Ana* challenge dominant narratives? Can cinematic storytelling influence policy and public perception? How can such documentaries advocate for justice? By analysing the film's impact, this paper underscores the urgency of addressing witch-hunting as a human rights issue, advocating for media-driven awareness to dismantle misogynistic practices and empower tribal women. The documentary is a documentation of the epic battle lone women fight against systemic exploitation that dehumanises them at both a physical and mental level.

Keywords: Witch-hunting, tribal women, patriarchy, documentary filmmaking, gendered violence

Introduction

Tribal women in India face systemic atrocities rooted in patriarchal structures that erode their dignity and autonomy. Witch-hunting, prevalent in rural and tribal areas, exemplifies the intersection of superstition, misogyny, and socio-economic exploitation. Women like Anaben Pawar, an elderly tribal woman from Gujarat's Dang district, are branded as witches to justify violent attacks, social exclusion, and property dispossession (Homegrown, 2022). This practice reinforces male dominance and controls resources, particularly land inherited by women (The

Hindu, 2021). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports over 2,500 witch-hunt-related deaths between 2000 and 2016, with states like Jharkhand, Odisha, and Gujarat being hotspots (The Print, 2021). These figures likely underreport the issue due to social stigma and weak legal enforcement.

NGOs like Mission Birubala in Assam document socio-economic motivations behind witch-hunting, noting that accusations often target women challenging patriarchal norms or holding assets (The Quint, 2022). The 2015 Assam Witch Hunting Act marks progress, yet only 11 convictions occurred between 2015 and 2020 despite hundreds of cases (The Print, 2021). The 2006 Forest Rights Act aims to protect tribal land rights but fails to safeguard women from community violence (NCRB, 2016). Anaben's experience, depicted in *Testimony of Ana*, involves brutal assaults, including beatings with heated rods and rituals using chili powder, orchestrated by a village "Bhagat" (Homegrown, 2022). This reflects a pattern where tribal women face dehumanization to uphold male authority. In Jharkhand, 68% of witch-hunt cases involve property disputes, per the Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA) (The Quint, 2022). The government's response remains inadequate, with anti-witch-hunting laws in only six states and no national legislation (The Print, 2021). Anaben's resilience in staying in her village despite threats highlights both her strength and the lack of systemic support, emphasizing the need for legal, social, and cultural interventions (The Hindu, 2021).

Supporting Data:

- **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Data:** While specific data for "witch-hunting of tribal women" is not consistently available, the NCRB has recorded thousands of murders linked to witchcraft accusations. For example, a Lok Sabha Unstarred Question from 2017 provided data from the NCRB showing a total of 161 cases in 2013, 160 in 2014, and 136 in 2015 where people were killed due to witchcraft. This data, while not exclusive to tribal women, highlights the widespread nature of the issue. A study cited in a PubMed Central article states that from 2000 to 2020, over 2,500 people were murdered on alleged charges of witchcraft.
- **NGO and Research Data:** Reports from NGOs and academic studies indicate that witch-hunting is a form of gender-based violence that disproportionately targets women, particularly those who are poor, elderly, widowed, or single. A report from the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) for the GARIMA project revealed that over 1 lakh women in Jharkhand have survived witch-hunting. A study from the International Journal of Law, Management & Humanities notes that witch-hunting crimes predominantly occur in rural and forest areas of states with significant tribal populations, such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and Assam.
- **Legislative Efforts:** The introduction can also touch upon the legislative measures in place. Six states in India (Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam) have laws specifically targeting witch-hunting. The ineffectiveness of this legislation and the lack of a comprehensive national law, as highlighted by a 2016 parliamentary bill that is still pending, can also be mentioned.

Literature Review

Research on witch-hunting in India highlights its roots in patriarchal and socio-economic structures. Nathan et al. (1996) argue that witch-hunting targets women defying traditional roles or inheriting property, as seen in Anaben's case. Sundar (2001) notes tribal women's vulnerability due to their marginal status and limited legal access. Superstition and patriarchy create a cycle where witchcraft accusations justify violence (Barstow, 1994). The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) reports that 70% of Jharkhand's witch-hunt cases involve land disputes, targeting women to seize assets (NCDHR, 2018). Patel (2016) critiques the Forest Rights Act's failure to protect women, while Sharma (2015) highlights low conviction rates due to societal complicity.

Cinema studies provide insights into documentaries' role in advocacy. Nichols (2010) emphasises "evidentiary editing" in survivor testimonies, fostering empathy. Rangan (2017) warns against sensationalising trauma, a consideration for *Testimony of Ana*. Mulvey's (1975) visual pleasure theory suggests that contrasting serene imagery with violent narratives provokes reflection. Research gaps include a limited focus on survivor agency and the media's influence on policy. Longitudinal data on witch-hunting's socio-economic impact is also lacking, hindering interventions. These gaps highlight the need to explore how documentaries can bridge grassroots realities and policy advocacy.

Research Question and Content Analysis

Research Question: How can documentaries like *Testimony of Ana* raise awareness about witch-hunting and patriarchal violence against tribal women, and what cinematic techniques amplify their impact?

Understanding the subject of *Testimony of Ana*

In the vast and often-silenced landscape of India's tribal heartlands, the brutal practice of witch-hunting persists, a phenomenon largely driven by patriarchal domination and a misogynistic worldview that sees a woman's body and her property as objects to be controlled. In his award-winning documentary, *Testimony of Ana*, filmmaker Sachin Dheeraj Mudigonda does not merely report on this issue; he constructs a powerful cinematic experience that functions as an unflinching witness to the lived horror of one such survivor, Anaben Pawar. Through a critical lens and a cinematographer's eye, the film transcends mere reportage, using imagery and a singular, powerful voice to dismantle the insidious narratives that perpetuate this violence.

The film's most striking artistic choice is its minimalist, observational style. Mudigonda and his cinematographer, rather than employing a fast-paced, sensationalist approach, allow the camera to become an empathetic observer. The film is a long monologue, a sustained, raw testament from Anaben herself. This choice is deeply significant from a film theory perspective. In an act of radical agency, the camera's gaze is not one of a detached observer but of a patient confidante. This technique empowers Anaben, shifting her from a passive victim in a news story to the central protagonist of her own narrative. Her voice, unedited and unadorned by a third-person narrator, becomes the film's core aural element, forcing the audience to confront the unfiltered reality of her pain and resilience. The silence and space between her words become as significant as the words themselves, allowing the weight of her trauma to settle on the viewer.

The cinematic power of *Testimony of Ana* lies in its potent use of symbolism, transforming everyday objects into charged emblems of her ordeal and her spirit. The most significant of these is the potli, a small cloth bag Anaben keeps. Inside this bag are the physical remnants of her assault: broken glass bangles, a lump of her hair, and beads. A critic analysing this imagery would see this not as a mere collection of evidence, but as a deeply metaphorical act of reclamation. The bag is her archive, her personal museum of a crime that society might prefer to forget. The bangles, symbols of marriage and femininity, are now shattered, representing the brutal destruction of her dignity. The lump of hair, torn from her scalp, is a visceral representation of the violence inflicted upon her. By keeping these items, Anaben refuses to let her past become an invisible scar; she has made her pain tangible and her survival an undeniable fact. The cinematographer's choice to focus on this object, to show her hands carefully handling these fragments of her past, creates an intimate, almost sacred, moment. This is not just a story of an event; it's a story of how one woman carries her history.

The film's exploration of patriarchy is not through overt political speeches but through the quiet subtext of Anaben's experience. Her being labeled a "witch" is not a random act of superstition but a calculated move within a misogynistic system. The documentary implies that the witch-hunting was a pretext for land-grabbing—a common motive in such cases. Anaben, as a woman who inherited land from her father, represents a direct challenge to the patriarchal power structure that dictates land should remain in male hands. Her refusal to leave her village despite immense pressure and torture is an act of defiance against a system designed to dispossess and displace her. The film shows how, in these rural settings, the "witch" label is a powerful weapon used to ostracize, humiliate, and ultimately disempower women who do not conform to or who challenge male authority. The character of the 'Bhagat' (witch hunter), who is called in to torture and sexually assault her, serves as a chilling symbol of this system's sanctioned violence, where male figures are given license to brutalize women under the guise of ritual and tradition.

Anaben's relationship with her granddaughter, Aarushi, offers another layer of cinematic symbolism: the power of hope and the promise of a different future. The article notes that the only time Anaben smiles is when she is with Aarushi. This is a crucial moment for a cinematographer. A close-up shot of her face, with the rare smile, contrasted with the weary lines etched by her suffering, would be a profound juxtaposition. By encouraging Aarushi to get an education and seek a better life, Anaben is not just offering a personal wish; she is articulating a vision for a future free from the cycle of violence she endured. Aarushi represents the possibility of a world where women are not judged by superstition or their proximity to land but by their own merits and education. This final image, of an elder passing on her hard-won wisdom to a new generation, provides the film with a powerful, forward-looking conclusion that is both a critique of the past and a hopeful plea for the future.

In conclusion, *Testimony of Ana* is a vital piece of cinema because it uses the medium's unique strengths to elevate a personal story into a universal commentary on social injustice. It employs a research-driven, critical perspective by focusing on the underlying patriarchal motives of the crime. At the same time, it uses a cinematographer's deliberate eye to create a visual language of symbolism and intimacy. By allowing Anaben to tell her story in her own words, and by centering the narrative on her resilience rather than her victimization, Mudigonda creates a film that does not just document an issue but actively participates in the discourse of change. It serves as a powerful argument for why more such films are necessary in India—to move

discussions beyond political platitudes and bring them into the realm of human experience, demanding not just awareness but empathy and, ultimately, justice.

Content Analysis

Testimony of Ana, a 24-minute documentary by Sachin Dheeraj Mudigonda, centres on Anaben Pawar's experience in Gujarat's Dang district. Using a long monologue, it prioritises Anaben's voice, aligning with Nichols' (2010) participatory documentary approach. This

emphasises survivor agency, presenting Anaben as resilient and self-articulating. As Mudigonda noted in an interview, his choice of subject was deeply personal:

"The seed for Testimony of Ana was planted almost more than a decade ago, when I came across a short article in a Gujarati newspaper... I realised this wasn't just a random incident—it was part of a pattern deeply tied to caste, patriarchy, and land ownership. Witch-hunting wasn't folklore—it was structural violence."

This statement strengthens the analytical position of the study that the documentary transcends reportage and becomes a cinematic argument against structural patriarchy. Mudigonda's reflection that Ana's story was one of resistance rather than victimhood situates the film within feminist documentary practice, where testimony functions as both evidence and defiance.

The film opens with serene village landscapes, described as "aesthetically tranquil" yet "nightmarish" as her story unfolds (Homegrown, 2022). This aligns with Mulvey's (1975) concept of visual disruption, where idyllic imagery juxtaposed with trauma provokes the audience to question societal normalcy. Mudigonda clarified this artistic intention:

"Through Testimony of Ana, I wanted to preserve her testimony not just as an account but as living resistance—a way to channel her rage and resilience beyond courtrooms and news cycles."

His aesthetic choice to let Anaben's voice be the only voice directly corresponds to Bazin's (1967) notion of cinematic realism and Rangan's (2017) ethical representation of trauma. By abstaining from narration or dramatised reconstruction, the filmmaker ensures Ana's agency remains intact, challenging the traditional "voice-of-God" approach that dominates mainstream documentary.

The director's field experience also reinforces the methodological rigour discussed in this paper. He recalls:

"The hardest part was navigating the emotional and ethical weight of Ana's story... As a filmmaker, you carry the responsibility of not just documenting that pain, but doing it in a way that's honest, non-exploitative, and respectful. We didn't start filming right away. I spent days with her—doing chores, fetching water, just being present."

This statement mirrors the theoretical framework of participatory cinema (Nichols, 2010), where building trust is essential to reclaiming subjectivity. His decision to integrate everyday interactions and ambient village sounds reflects the sound design strategy highlighted by Kinostreet (2020), where the sonic texture of the environment becomes a political space of empathy.

The documentary's restraint also reflects Rangan's (2017) ethics of non-spectacle. Rather than visually re-enacting violence, *Testimony of Ana* allows sound, silence, and space to embody trauma. This aligns with Eisenstein's (1925) montage theory, where tension between narration and visual calm produces cognitive and emotional dissonance. The viewer is not permitted to look away but is also denied voyeuristic satisfaction—a balancing act between confrontation and respect.

Mudigonda's discovery of the issue—through NGOs like Mission Birubala in Assam and local human rights groups in Gujarat, connects his artistic impulse to broader activist and academic networks. His statement that “witch-hunting wasn't isolated to one region but a widespread social structure of control” echoes the data cited from NCRB (2016) and *The Print* (2021), affirming that documentary cinema can act as a bridge between grassroots evidence and public consciousness.

Conclusion

Documentaries like *Testimony of Ana* are vital in India, where social issues like witch-hunting often receive only superficial attention or “lip service” from authorities and society. Mudigonda's reflections strengthen this paper's conclusion that cinema can humanise data and dismantle patriarchal silence. He observed:

“Stories like Ana's are either ignored or totally misrepresented in mainstream media. When they do show up, they're often dramatised or made to fit into some neat, shocking headline, but the real people behind those stories are rarely given space to speak for themselves.”

This aligns with the paper's argument that documentaries fill a representational vacuum left by mainstream storytelling. By centering Ana's voice and rejecting narrative intrusion, *Testimony of Ana* becomes a counter-narrative to patriarchal violence, positioning Ana not as a victim but as a symbol of endurance. The juxtaposition of tranquil visuals with her harrowing monologue—described by Homegrown (2022) as both “haunting and meditative”—aligns with Mulvey's (1975) visual disruption and Brecht's (1964) alienation effect, compelling viewers to confront the contradictions of rural life and systemic misogyny.

The filmmaker's belief that “cinema holds onto real human voice and memory” reaffirms Nichols' (2010) notion of documentary as moral testimony. His participatory process—spending time with Ana, listening before filming, transforms ethnographic observation into collaborative authorship, restoring dignity to marginalised experience. This approach connects directly to feminist ethnographic practices, where storytelling becomes resistance.

In India, where legal frameworks falter, only 11 convictions under Assam's 2015 Witch Hunting Act from 2015 to 2020, despite hundreds of cases (*The Print*, 2021). Documentaries like *Testimony of Ana* function as cinematic interventions in social justice. The film's National Award and Oscar qualification amplify its visibility, translating a local struggle into a global conversation. Mudigonda's statement that he wanted the film to “channel Ana's rage and resistance beyond courtrooms and news cycles” positions the documentary as a continuum of activism, not just art.

By using Dangi language and subtitles, the film ensures cultural authenticity while broadening accessibility, echoing Nichols' (2010) global advocacy model. The visual motif of Ana's

potli—a bag containing her broken bangles and hair—is given new depth when contextualised by the filmmaker’s remarks about memory as resistance. These cinematic fragments, ordinary yet sacred, represent Ana’s refusal to let trauma disappear into silence.

Ultimately, both the interview and this analysis converge on one critical understanding: documentary cinema, when ethically and empathetically crafted, becomes a political act of witnessing. Testimony of Ana transforms an individual story into a universal indictment of patriarchy and superstition, bridging scholarship, activism, and art. Mudigonda’s film and his process affirm that visual storytelling can not only record injustice but also redefine the discourse of justice itself.

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