Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Gender, Culture and Capital in Tripura, India

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Social belief systems connected with the agency of women (or the lack thereof) have been retained to their disadvantage, over centuries, without enough concern raised about persecution within traditional and transitional societies. The development of productive forces under burgeoning capitalism has only minimally acknowledged the impact had by women and their contributions to knowledge, economy, and society. Surprisingly, this transition towards capitalist development has rendered women even more susceptible to cultural marginalization and violence. This study intends to engage with this difficult reality in the context of certain social beliefs and cultural norms among specific indigenous populations in Tripura, Northeast India.

Over the past 25 years, we have been engaged in the analysis and production of knowledge about witch hunts, cultural belief systems across transitioning and underserved societies in India, and forging connections with structural transformations in Asia, Africa and early modern Europe. In 2020 Cambridge University Press published our book: 'Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation'.

Largely based on the conceptualisation of our study of 2020, we tried to explore social beliefs in witches and related ritual attacks on a large number of women, some men and wherever possible, trans persons in the eight states of Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. This study is a contained analysis of witch hunts and social belief systems that allude to *swkals /witches* in the state of Tripura.

Research support for immersive fieldwork and crucially; the translation of local languages to English was provided by indigenous scholars, Prof. Sukhendu Debbarma and Jonomti Reang. We are grateful for the tremendous help we received in conducting this study through identifying and engaging with contact persons for fieldwork while identifying villages in the Northeastern countryside to locate our research within.

We conducted 14 in-depth interviews with academics, social activists, women and men, shamans/ healers/herbalists, *ochais,* village leaders, and common people in Tripura. We are grateful to them for sharing their knowledge with us in a frank, empathetic and open manner. Our learnings find their source in several group and individual discussions and a series of candid interviews with academics, local women, and social activists.

Closer home - there are several individuals to thank. In his discussions, Prof. Muchkund Dubey conveyed to us his view that the production of knowledge can transform social and gender relations as it tends to give rise to justice movements. Prof. Nitya Nanda welcomed the idea of

this study and provided continued support for our work at the Council for Social Development, New Delhi. We would like to acknowledge the inputs made by Poornima M. of CSD.

In writing this study, we received unlimited support in sifting through complex ideas from Pallavi Govindnathan, who also designed our cover page. We want to appreciate and thank Anant Pandey who in addition to research inputs, helped shape the writing process. We wrote this study in friendship with three non-human beings, our cat and two dogs Gulgul, Kunnu and Jampa. We owe much gratitude to Silvia and Bahadur who plied us with coffee and tea and offered us their support. Asha Ramachandran willingly extended her help in the copy-editing process of this study, for which we thank her.

It is our hope that this study will help initiate dialogue, inquiry and much needed conversations on the damaging consequences of witch hunts on the agency of girls, women and sexual and gender minorities in Northeast India. In keeping with several difficult contexts elsewhere, we see this as a necessary step towards questioning and condemning the practice of witch persecution while upholding indigeneity for deep rooted wisdom and knowledge systems. Significantly, we have noted the slow but steady chipping away at harmful and gender unjust practices among youth and emerging feminist groups within the state. This makes us all the more confident that a steadily growing need for safe spaces (that are actively supportive of human rights and gender justice within culture and practices) is being both felt and gradually acted upon within Tripura.

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The responsibility for opinions and interpretations expressed in this study rests solely with the two authors and does not necessarily reflect the position of RLS or CSD.

Table of Contents

WITCH HUNTS AND RITUAL ATTACKS: GENDER, CULTURE AND CAPITAL IN TRIPURA, INDIA

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

Research Team: Sukhendu Debbarma, Jonomti Reang, Poornima M.

Introduction

There is a growing interest in research on women's rights to dignity and equality in societies worldwide. Our study on **'Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Culture and Capital Across Northeast India'** critically engages with specific indigenous belief systems and the practices of witch hunts and ritual attacks - going beyond the dominant tradition of anthropological writings on related works.

After working with indigenous peoples' movements for more than 25 years, we embarked on this ambitious research project on the rights of women and marginalized men in indigenous societies from human rights and feminist perspectives. In our work, we attempted to engage with certain belief systems and ritual practices in matrilineal and patriarchal societies in Northeast India that are fertile grounds for discrimination and witch violence. We explore the directions of changes within these belief systems at the nexus of patriarchy, culture and capitalist trajectories. Our understanding of witch hunts represents the persecution, even killings, of women and some men who are understood to have acquired supernatural powers that they allegedly use to hurt their communities. These also include households and individuals that are perceived as possessing the evil eye. They are stigmatized, sometimes brutalized and often isolated for allegedly causing physical harm, making others sick and purportedly robbing persons of their resources.

It is to be noted that our line of inquiry is not intended to devalue the many ways and positive aspects of indigenous cultures - their communitarian way of life, their rich and varied knowledge systems, the nurturing of forests and the conservation of natural resources. What we have intended to examine are beliefs and practices that have a negative impact on the agency and autonomy of women and indigenous societies.

This study finds its source material in Tripura, which is a small hilly state in Northeast India, with a population of 3,671,032 according to the 2011 Census of India. Indigenous people account for 31.78 percent of the state population. Of the 19 indigenous communities in Tripura: Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Uchai, Kuki, Lushai, Halam, Chakma, Mog and Garo are considered as the original settlers (Saha 1987). Each community represents a distinct culture, language, social tradition and religion. In our work in these parts, we have tried to focus on social belief systems that lend themselves to instances of witch hunts and violence against women and girls.

While we proceed to explore social beliefs and cultural practices (as well as economic concerns that give rise to witch violence and ritual attacks) - our writings acknowledge the efforts of women and allies in the Northeast of India working to co-create the space for human rights-based discourses, legal recourse to action against violence and questioning the impact of witch hunts and ritual attacks from a gender just lens.

Background

This study proposes to look at the interrelated factors of the transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of an agricultural economy and a technology-oriented society with patriarchal state control over resources and governance. This transition is marked by new inequalities, largely caused by new consumption patterns, emergent communication technologies and new forms of mobility, leading to an increase in social-gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes caused by capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a large percentage of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

Northeast India comprises over 130 major indigenous communities and eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Next to Assam, Tripura is a state with the highest number of witch hunt cases. The important tribes in Tripura, such as the Tripuris, Reanges, Jamatias, Noatians and Halams, are Hindu tribes, and like other Hindus, they too have belief in religious rites and practices. They also believe in the existence of the spirit possessing supernatural power of doing harm (Wahal, 2016, p. 91). There is a belief among the Tripuri society that the illness or death of children is due to women who were witches.

In his 2016 study called National Mission for Manuscripts, Poddar noted:

> *Like many other human societies some women were taken for witches in Tripuri society also. It was a common belief that illness or death of children or boys or girls was due to the women who were witches. In Tripuri society there was fear among many about this type of women and they tried to avoid them. The villagers sometimes offered pujas by sacrificing tortoises or cocks in order to appease the witch. There was not a single village where someone or the other was not suspected to be a witch. The common people are used to utilize the services of ojjah (sorcerer) to identify which woman was a witch and thereafter she was killed. This inhuman treatment was purely based on superstition (2016:91).*

Tripura is considered one of the most literate states, according to the 71st round of NSSO 2014, 91 per cent of its population is literate and it has a sizeable percentage of literate women. The economy of Tripura is agrarian, and about 44 per cent of its population depends upon agriculture and allied activities. Since the introduction of rubber in 1963, Tripura has become the second largest producer of natural rubber in the country, after Kerala, accounting for about 9 per cent of the total production of India. A household income from rubber ranges from Rs 400 to Rs 10,000 - 30,000 per month. However, the state is characterized by a high rate of poverty, low per-capita income, low capital formation, inadequate infrastructure facilities, geographical isolation and communication bottleneck, under-developed industrialisation, and a high level of unemployment (Government of Tripura, 2021).

A large number of the indigenous peoples in Tripura have lost their land and are being compelled to take up employment as labourers in nearby quarries, coal fields, and the emerging towns as unskilled/semi-skilled workers or move elsewhere for work in the plantations. Only a small section of

Rubber sheets being dried in a village

the population is able to take advantage of the market forces, and this is determined by various criteria such as education, occupation, income, wealth etc. There is intense inter-community conflict between the indigenous and the non-indigenous peoples in Tripura and the non-indigenous are seen as outsiders (Mishra & Dubey, 2019).

Earlier studies point to struggles to capture land and related property by male relatives, social stresses and change, reactions to growing inequality and uneven development through neo-liberalism, and reaffirmation of male domination as causes of witch accusations and persecutions. Most important, however, is the effect of witch persecution on the formation of culture and social norms that are not conducive to the development of women and their communities.

This study intends to explore social beliefs and cultural practices as well as economic concerns that give rise to witch violence and ritual attacks, yet at the same time create social and legal spaces for human rights–based discourses questioning the practice of witch hunts and ritual attacks. As an outcome, we would like to see the social systems of Northeast India, where witch hunts will not be seen as a normal part of indigenous cultures.

Methodology

A systemic literature review that is considered unbiased and more political and scientific in approach than a traditional narrative review was employed to explore people's belief in witches and ritual attacks. In the first phase of the research, we identified two local researchers who would collaborate

with us. This was followed by research of news clips about witch hunts and ritualistic practices in English and local language sources. Search by Google Scholar was of great help in seeking some relevant books, studies, papers, and archival sources. We decided to focus on the period from 1990 to 2021, keeping in view the opening of the Indian economy, with attention to the accumulation process in indigenous societies. We wanted to know if this accumulation process has played a role in changing traditional cultural beliefs and social practices. After the systematic literature review of the subject, fieldwork was conducted in villages surrounding Agartala and west Tripura district.

Our discussions in the field centered on the following points:

1. The belief system
2. Healers/priests in the community
3. Who do they heal? For what?
4. How can we end witch hunt practices and ritual attacks on women?

S. No.	Participant Names	Occupation/Field
1.	Mother and 2 aunts of the late alleged witch (*swkal*)	Discussion with the mother and 2 aunts of the woman who was burnt alive in the toilet. She was accused of practicing witchcraft and killing a child of her extended family.
2.	Police Sub-Inspector	Discussion on how he handled the case of the woman who was buried alive for practicing witchcraft
3.	*Ochai* (healer/shaman)	Discussion on the witch identifying and healing practices
4.	Michael a villager	A local villager who took us to the house of the witch affected woman, and discussion with her mother and husband.
5.	Jian Debbarma	An *ochai* (healer or shaman)
6.	Muktojoi	*Ochai* from Monwkarmi village
7.	Another *ochai* in the same area	Explained his practice of healing
8.	Airate Reang	From Hachupada, who often gets affected by a witch and cures herself
9.	An MLA from the local area (60 km from Agartala) and his associate	Discussion on the practice of witchcraft
10.	A woman MLA	Discussion meeting with a women MLA who did not believe in Skal or in *ochai*
	Total	**14 (5 Women and 9 Men)**

Research support both for the fieldwork and for the translation of the local language to English was provided by local scholars and activists in the areas. We are grateful to the women and men of the villages of Tripura society. We are grateful to Prof. Sukhendu Debbarma for his research support and to research scholar Jonomti Reang for finding villagers and *ochai* (healer or shaman) in the Tripura countryside under a difficult situation. We appreciate women and men, who took the time to frankly discuss their daily lives full of rituals and related problems.

Qualitative research is generally characterized by voice-based discussions and an

observation-based inductive approach to building knowledge. To understand the role of social beliefs and practices about witch hunts and ritual attacks, we engaged with our field research through individual interactive discussions with community-thought leaders, women, men, *ochai*/shamans/herbalists and affected persons. Through our previous knowledge on the subject of witch hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understand that a hierarchal social order provides different perspectives and worldviews on gender, ethnicity and class. These result in frequent, even contradictory, answers to social beliefs and practices related to marginalized voices, a lack of resource control and political representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As research analysts, our challenge lies in presenting a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field, and a dismantling of dualisms and contradictions in field discussions.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The definition of a witch is "one who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Needham 1978, 26); later in 2004, it was modified to "a person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to other humans" (R. Hutton 2004: 421). These definitions imply that there are people who use mystical or supernatural means to cause harm to others. Therefore, they suggest a justified belief in witchcraft that there are people who exist to cause harm to others through supernatural or mystical means. What is important to note is that such a social belief results in a discourse that creates a reality that is manifested in practices of witch persecution or witch hunting. Based on a recent study, we would like to define a witch as "a person who is perceived to cause harm by supernatural means" (Kelkar and Nathan 2020: 4). In reality, people may not actually possess such occult power to cause harm to others.

We noted three major streams of thought on witch persecution and witch hunts. The first can be seen in anthropological studies on misfortune and the community role of witch accusations within the cultural context of indigenous and rural societies [see, for example, E. E. Evans-Prichard (1934/1976) and Mary Douglas (1970)]. They account for the development of the notion of witchcraft as a prominent occult praxis that occurs as part of conflict resolution systems in human existence. These notions are part of indigenous peoples' faith in supernatural powers, which were supposedly superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women, living in the margins of the community, would be blamed for causing crop loss, harsh weather conditions, natural disasters, diseases, deaths and so on. Accused of causing these detrimental events, violence against the accused, such as flogging, rape, burning alive and otherwise murdering them, was seen as socially acceptable tools for weeding out anti-social elements (witches) from the society.

The second stream of thought, as seen in post-modernist studies, is in the context of contact between indigenous societies and capitalist modernism, as seen in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches as modernity's malcontents and Peter Geschiere's (2013) work on Africa's capitalist modernism. Silvia Federici's (2018) new book 'Witches, Witch Hunting and Women' explains that capitalism and patriarchy together produce witches, who were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children. The capitalist society made women's bodies the fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women such as midwives, abortionists and herbalists with the knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal power and create generations of subjugated women with domestic labour class, a condition for capitalism. Older women were attacked because they could no longer provide children or sexual services and, therefore,

were considered a drain on the creation of wealth in the social system. They were seen as engaged in a demonic conspiracy and, therefore, thought to deserve a brutalized physical elimination.

The third stream is that, in agreement with an earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan 2020), this research combines a political economy approach with an analysis of culture and patriarchy. We relate cultural aspects of witch persecution and witch hunt to economic, social, and political processes of change, as well as to the creation or strengthening of patriarchy within indigenous and rural societies. This is an attempt to explain what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the paradox of doxa", the historical structures of masculine order, with its associated social relations of privileges and injustice. The most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu 2001: 1–4). There are, however, processes of dismantling the power structures, which bring transformation to the social-economic order. We often tend to ignore that the androcentric principle is necessary for an objective analysis of the social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we saw a crucial role played by men's monopolization of productive resources, such as land and housing, and ritual knowledge, which is socially valued knowledge. We have tried to understand the pathways through which witch persecution and witch hunting "either support or oppose the structural transformation from subsistence to accumulative economies" (Kelkar and Nathan 2020: 3). As explained in the preceding pages, we follow the standpoint of women persecuted or hunted as witches in indigenous and rural societies of India.

Gender Relations in Tripura Society

Inheritance in Tripura devolves in the male line, father to son and the eldest son gets the major share (Barooah, 2009). The male is the absolute owner of family property, whether self-acquired or inherited and he holds the right to dispose of any such property. In some instances, however, it was seen that after the death of the father, his sons inherited two-thirds of the property and the remaining one-third was distributed between the mother and daughters. If the mother's property was registered, then the daughter became the legal inheritor of her mother's property (Bhowmik, 2003; Shil and Jangir 2021). Like in other parts of India, social norms prevent women from claiming a legitimate share of their ancestral property. If a woman tries to claim her right to inherit property, she is likely to be blamed for not being a "good sister" and a selfish human being. Only sons need property to take care of their parents. In social beliefs, the expenses incurred in a girl's marriage are counted as the cost of property that she would get otherwise. The traditional gender performance and social norms have been preserved in modern-day Tripura, despite the State's adherence to the Hindu Succession Amendment Act of 2005. There are deeply entrenched values against women, which perpetuate the notion that a woman should not have property.

The division of work between women and men in the hukba or shifting cultivation is well-defined in the Tripura society. Clearing bushes for the hukba site, setting fire to the collected bushes in the swidden fields, basket making, bamboo-hut construction and hunting animals are exclusive male tasks. The women's specific tasks include husking rice, pressing oil seeds for extracting oil, collecting firewood, fetching water, carding cotton, cooking and cleaning the house and brewing rice wine at home (Jamatia, 2007). Besides these, a woman raises domestic pigs, goats, and fowl and earns her own income to support the family. All these tasks do not give her the household status of an equal partner; the male head of the family has the right to support the house and make decisions, implicitly enforcing the duties of women to be more tolerant and compliant in carrying out their duties within the family.

However, she has the right to resist, leave her husband and go back to her parental house or remarry. Interestingly, like the caste Hindu society, a girl child is not unwanted. There is a belief among the indigenous people in Tripura that a household is blessed if the first child in the family is a daughter (Kalai 2011). However, a woman cannot be a priest or shaman (*ochai* or aukchai).

The Belief Systems

The worship of nature as a supernatural power is a dominant feature of the belief system of the indigenous people in Tripura. It is believed that the deserted homestead, joining of paths or road crossing Lampra, some of the hills, forest, and towering trees like charua buphang are some of the abodes of the spirits. One of the most dominating beliefs is that if a particular plot of land is the abode of the evil spirits, then cultivation in that plot is to be abandoned. No one takes the risk of displeasing the spirit and avoiding cultivation in such plots. Ceremonial offerings and sacrifices of animals and birds also form part of the rituals and most of these are done to appease the spirits. They believe that the fear of displeasure of the spirits will bring curses and misfortune. It is here that the role of the traditional priest *ochai* / aukchai becomes significant. It is he who decides which spirits have been displeased and what is to be done to appease the spirit. In fact, every village will have one *ochai* / aukchai. During the function, the *ochai* /aukchai also acts as the traditional physician called Boido (Debbarma, 2008:286). It must be mentioned that in the past, a woman could not become a traditional priest.

People believe in two kinds of deities, which are categorized mostly by their patterns of interaction with human beings: i) benevolent and (ii) malevolent deities. Benevolent deities are said to be good spirits who provide humans with blessings and protection. They are known as *Mtai ktor* or *Mwtai Kotor* -- a deity who is recognised as the supreme God and is the source of all other deities and things. *Mainouhma* or *Malima* and *Khuluma* are two female goddesses of paddy and cotton respectively (Bhowmik, 2003:33). They are

Tripura God Goriya worshipped for the protection, prosperity and well-being of the households and the community.

ascribed as the source of all blessings, wealth and prosperity. The two deities are kept in every household in two different earthen pots, which is filled with rice. *Tuibuma* or *Twima* is a water goddess who is worshipped and prayed to for the purity of village water, streams and rivers. She becomes more important in the villages and communities in times of outbreak of water-borne diseases such as cholera. *Noksu Mwtai* is a female deity who acts as the guardian of the household. She is worshipped at the homestead to recover from illness. *Saklakmwtai* is another deity of health/ witches. It is worshipped in the courtyard with different types of homemade cakes. In the evening, a male goat is sacrificed inside the house to appease the deity. *Goriya* is the god of success. This deity is usually worshipped in April and worshipped by all in the community, and everyone takes part in it.

Malevolent deities are said to be those that make humankind sick or injure them by sending them something bad. Fearful of them, the people worship them and give sacrifices to please and propitiate them. They are a male deity (Buraha or Burasa) which relates to evil. The suffering in the family and, more particularly children of fever and any kind of acute pain is supposed to be caused by this deity. Mkhusning Broirao refers to seven female malevolent deities who produce fever and various illnesses, e.g., food poisoning, stomach aches, oedema, etc. (Reang, 2021). Thumnairok and Bonirok are the deities of all diseases and the messengers of death. People worship these deities to escape from diseases and death.

Swkalmwtai is the deity of witches. To be cured of illness caused by witches, this witch is worshipped. In order to appease this spirit, cooked meat or tortoise and pork are offered outside the village, mostly in jungles during the nighttime (Debbarma,2008). She is the guardian deity of witches. In the village, different kinds of illnesses are supposed to be caused by her. The spirits of this deity may enter any one of the women, and she, in turn, acts on behalf of the deity. When someone gets ill in the village, usually a woman is suspected of causing that sickness. There are also instances where such women are socially boycotted or even killed (Debbarma, 2012). Evil eye happens while eating. Some people are believed to have evil eye. If such people cast any look on anyone while eating, which some of them would like to cast, the person suffers from Khuanango, which would give rise to a set of different ailments. It is believed that only the priest can undo this adverse effect and cure a victim of such suffering.

The village priests (*ochai* / aukchai) were primarily in charge of ritual performances. The essential issue in this regard is the sacrifice to appease the deities. While making the offering, suitable utterances made by the village priest propitiate the respective gods and invoke their blessings and good wishes for health, happiness, and a rich harvest. Purity is strictly observed otherwise, the spirit may become displeased, resulting in disaster for the person, family and village concerned. They use different plants and animals in their rituals, like flowers, leaves, fruits, liquor, water, cotton, rice, mustard seeds, turmeric, eggs, pigs, chicken, goat, buffalo, etc. are some the usual sacrificial elements used in worship. Different items are necessary for different ceremonies, hence not all the rites use the same items. In the indigenous traditional religion, sacrifices are significant, it is performed from the time the child is in the womb until a person's death. These rituals revolve around their life cycle.

Our interview with Jay (name changed), who spent seven days driving us around in the narrated his story of belief in the witches:

> *Jay believes in the existence of swkal (the witch) since he and his family experienced it. The family believes that swkal was the reason of his grandfather's death in the summer of 2013. Because he informed his family*

Meeting with a village *ochai*

what had happened to him before he died. When he was sleeping, he had a dream about a cat sitting on his chest and telling him that he would devour him. Out of panic, he woke up to see a cat sitting on his chest for real. He had an uneasy feeling that something horrible was about to happen to him. He informed his family that one of his neighbour's wives had been looking at him every time he walked by her home. After recounting everything, he fell asleep at 8 p.m. that night, when his family members were still up. Suddenly, the family heard a commotion in the bedroom, so they went to check and discovered that he couldn't move his body, so they rushed him to the GB hospital in Agartala. He got paralysed and was hospitalised for a while, yet he could still communicate despite his inability to move. They took him home since his health was not improving. He claimed this when he was lying in bed and said that there were three women sitting around him on his bed and hurting him. They caused him to rot from the inside out. Because of this, he sought consultation from a priest known as ochai.

The ochai said that there were three women who were responsible for his illness. Sadly, the man passed away not long after. The family eventually came to the conclusion that one of the women from their village and her daughters were responsible for it. Therefore, one of that man's sons attempted to retaliate against them, but the auchai prevented him from doing so on the grounds that their actions may be harmful to the entire family.

Jay also encountered Swkal at one point later in the year 2016. He once saw a stunning woman standing by the side of the road while riding his bike through the woods at night. When he got closer to her, he tried to see her

face but could not because she was covering it, but at that exact moment, his bike light went off, and he realised that the bike had become extremely heavy, and he couldn't see the woman any longer. He tried to accelerate his bike but was unable to do so since it had become so heavy. But thankfully, a villager who was passing through the forest stopped to inquire about his condition. He explained to the guy about his bike conditions, and the man offered to help him. When Jay finally arrived at his house, he was convinced that what had happened to him on his way was caused by Swkal. As a result of his own experiences and those of his family, he believes in the existence of Swkal.

In our interview with a woman political leader (who said that she was a good Christian and did not believe in the witches), she narrated a mythical story in explaining the social belief in the witches.

'A long time ago, there was a brother and sister who lived in a village in this area. People reported to the bother that his sister was eating or killing many villagers. The brother promised the villagers that he would find out if this was true. So, he invited his sister for a meal and served her three dishes – one bowl of pig blood, one bowl of red rice, and a bowl of red rice-bloody colour soup. The sister, as she came drank the bowl of pig blood. The brother realizing this explained to the sister not to do so. But she did not pay any attention to the brother's advice. It is said that the brother became ochai and the sister swkal, witch. The brother or ochai knows all about the intentions and activities of the witch. Earlier ochais were good and sincere in their treatment, but now they function business-like with fake treatment. Nowadays ochai is not to be trusted; they have become very greedy for money.

Persecution of Witches

In the traditional religion of the Indigenous people in Tripura, most of the spirits they believed were invisible except one spirit which is visible to the eye and that is *Swkal* or witch. Because this spirit is said to have entered the human form and is the perpetrator of evil among the people. The male witch is called Bedua and the female witch is called Swkaljwk. A Swkaljwk always gets what she asks from the villagers because no one denies anything to her. This is because they believe denying anything to Swkaljwk is inviting her wrath. Once any woman is suspected to be a *Swkal*, everyone in the village is careful in dealing with her. It is believed that a witch usually passes on her knowledge of witchcraft to her daughter. Thus, marriage relation with such a family's daughter is avoided as far as possible. In the case of male witch Bedua, it is quite different. The male witch does not undergo any change in his physical appearance. Mostly they are believed to cause harm with a lump in the stomach. It is believed that because of the injury caused by it, the person would die. In order to confirm their belief after the death of the person during cremation, they cut open his stomach and usually find a lump. The Bedua is considered superior to the Swkaljwk and is considered to be more dangerous (Debbarma, 2012:144-145).

The practice of witch branding is deeply engrained in the culture and tradition of indigenous people in Tripura. In most cases, women, who are identified as witches, are assaulted, beaten up, murdered, sexually abused, dragged into public places and ostracized from the community. In some cases, the family is asked to leave the village. The peculiar thing about the violence is that most victims are widows, aged women and women

who are closely related to the accusers, having enmity in one form or the other (Debbarma 2012:145).

There are two types of priests: *ochai*/aukchai kotor and *ochai*/aukchai chikon. The function of the priest is multiple like diagnosing illness as well as suggesting remedies, giving medicines, performing rituals etc. Priests are responsible for identifying the entities that possess a person and devising means to appease them. If it is *ochai* kotor, he has the ability to show the shadow of the swkaljwk in a bamboo sieve. When the ritual of determining the source of an illness is performed, if the disease is caused by a *swkal*, the face of the *swkal* will appear in the water while the ritual is being performed.

Our discussions and interviews with several *Ochai* and the key political leaders in Agartala and West Tripura (reported for the highest number of witch hunt cases in the state) indicated:

- In most cases women were the victims of witch hunts; men of the family suffered as secondary victims.
- Generally, women of senior age were the target of witch hunts, though in some cases women in their thirties or forties were also identified as witches.
- Majority of the victims had some land, were engaged in farming and had some income from newly introduced rubber trees.
- The alleged witches were blamed for the spread of disease or causing ill-health or deaths in the village.
- In the majority of the cases, close relatives and neighbours were involved in branding the woman as a witch.
- The victimised woman did not resist or run away, she remained in a state of helplessness before the community accusations.
- When an *ochai* identified a woman as a witch, and, therefore, was punished or brutalised in public by the villagers, she felt forced to confess that she was a witch in order to save her life from the potential threat of being killed.
- In most cases, the latent motive of the witch hunt was economic or material gain.
- The accuser's jealousy of the woman's economic well-being or her family's resources was another cause of identifying her as a witch.
- A woman's assertion of her rights in the family or community, the expression of her agency or status was seen a threat and she, therefore, was branded a witch.

The nature of brutal punishment to an identified witch included physical and mental abuse in most inhuman terms; she would be thrashed, dragged by the hair, raped and at times forced to eat human excreta and drink urine. A couple of months before our arrival to the field, a woman was buried alive in a dry toilet in the village Lengtibari on April 08, 2023. The perpetrators were eight men, her husband's brother, his two sons and other members of the family.

> *The family has three brothers. The oldest brother has four sons, one of whom lost a one-and-a-half-month-old infant due to an illness. In accordance with their custom, if a member of their community passed away, they observe a 13-day period of mourning. On the thirteenth day, they hold a final day of mourning ceremony and eat and drink with the rest of the villagers. So, even for this little infant such mourning ceremony rituals were performed on the 13th day of his death. In the evening, everyone returned home, and one of the younger brothers of the three brothers passed away after few days of returning from that place. We learned from the interview that he had died of fever.*

However, suspicion arouse among the family that out of three brothers one of the brother's wife must be the cause of such death in the family. During the interview the villagers also mentioned that the brothers were not getting along, they often had a dispute among themselves especially during the time when they drank together. From one of the sources we also came to know that the family went and consulted the ochai (priest) to confirm the suspicion of the woman as Swkal.

As a result, some of the family members were convinced and decided that if that woman was not killed many people will keep on dying in the village. They went to Ronjon Kondo house and search for his wife. The suspect family members were of three, the husband, wife and their 10 years old son. Earlier they had even threatened to kill all the three members of the family. So, the family was in a hideout. The villagers had continued to look for them and got hold of the woman. They dragged her and beat her brutally almost to the point of considering her dead, then they dumped her alive in the latrine pit and to make sure that she was dead they hit her head with a spade. In the meanwhile her husband ran away to the police station, which was at a distance of 4-5 Kms. When the police arrived, they learned that she was already dead and was buried in the latrine pit. The police took out her body, allowed other funeral rites to be performed and she was buried in a clean place. Those who were involved in such brutal killing were identified as they were part of the family. So there were one brother and some nephews probably their wives were also involved. Eight male members were arrested. The police officer-in-charge told us that the woman was killed because they thought she was a swkal.

In another village, we met a woman, who had been possessed/attacked by a witch and her family (the mother and husband). The woman, Sukhi (name changed), in her 30s, was extremely weak and was not able to breathe or talk to us. The mother described to us the story of her daughter's illness caused by the witch.

A women who was accused as a witch

Sukhi's husband lives in his wife's home, he does not have any land of his own, so he cannot take her with him and go elsewhere. Sukhi's mother is advised by the *ochai* and some villagers to take her daughter for treatment to Agartala or another faraway place. The mother thought that Sukhi would recover soon after some more rituals (Three months later after our fieldwork-related meeting, we learnt from our local research team that Sukhi died).

A year and three months ago, the Ochai told us that Sukhi is possessed. We did all kinds of things to get rid of the spirit – sacrificed food and goats. The sacrificed animals were consumed by all those who went to the priest, along with the priest and his helper. As a ritual, they all went to the cremation ground to cook and consume the food. Later they also went to the medical doctor – but could not be cured (Later they told us that whenever they went to the doctor she got better. However, they could not afford to continue that treatment, they found it expensive and at a distance). There are two witches (one man and one woman) in this village who have caused this. Her older sister was also possessed and died. Another son and daughter also had died. We do not discuss the suspect witches for fear of repercussions.

The ochai is from far away village, we pay him Rs.1,150 for treatment each time he visits. He is also from our community of Jamatias. The mother added that "the witch comes in the night. She has seen her shadow walking in the dark. "I have sold two plots and fishpond and cattle to get ritual done" to drive away the evil spirit. The evil spirit does not want her to prosper, she has more land and rubber trees than others in the village.

An *ochai* explains the use of sup and scissors to identify the witches

Later in a discussion with three men in the same village we were told there are two witches in the village. People depend on *ochai* to identify the witches. The *ochai* does not name the witches. But people gossip about the two witches. They would not take food from these two persons (gossiped about being witches). There is an avoidance of the two, people would not marry into their families. It is believed that the mother passes on the *swkal* to the daughters.

In a meeting with an *ochai* in another village, he showed the way to identify a witch. He uses sup and scissors, with help from his assistant, called barua. If the person is possessed by an evil spirit, the sup will move. After identifying a *swkal*, he would ask her "How can I appease you?" He does not disclose the name of the person, otherwise, people will kill that person immediately. But the village is a closed community, and people gossip about the *swkal*, generally a woman with strange behaviour. He confirmed that there is at least one *swkal* in every village/ "A girl or woman can be a *swkal* at any age, as soon as a girl can use a broom, she can become a *swkal*. Usually, girls learn from their mother, could also be from their mother-in-law". He uses special water called "suipora" (water purified with chant) to treat a woman possessed of *swkal*. He also sacrifices an animal to appease the evil spirit; he takes the animal to the forest for the sacrifice ritual and shares the sacrificed meat with both women and men present there.

Another way of identifying a *swkal* was the use of water. The *ochai* would put flowers in the water and that would tell him if a particular sickness was caused by a *swkal*, and this water would reflect the face of the *swkal*, "a face with mouth open and fierce looking eyes". He would not name the *swkal* but would indicate the direction and place where she lives. "The news spreads and people gather, then they do water divination to find out a *swkal*; they would put two persons in the water, and the one who comes out first loses, and is identified as the *swkal*".

In the Reang Hachupada villages, we met a woman and her adult son who narrated the experience of his mother being possessed periodically by a *swkal*:

> *We live in a joint family of 25 people. We were told to use Muslim mantras. We did not suspect anyone of having done this. We were told that if we did not leave this place, all 5 family members will die. Before they could leave the village, two members of my family died, his grandmother and her daughter. Then they shifted to another place, after staying there for 5 years and then came back. Our land is here, so we came back. My mother still has problems, she faints. She had this problem even in the past 5 years we were away. We do not think that someone from the family had done this, thought it was an outsider. There is jealousy in the village. They would help others in sickness. People had put a Tabeez (a metal charm) in the pond. The mother still cannot eat fish from that pond.*
>
> *In 1998, when she was cleaning rice husk, she felt something on her forehead – it was not going away. After that, she could not recognize her children. The husk was on her forehead. She didn't feel like eating or drinking anything and could not even feed her children. She did not feel shy – she used to sing without opening her mouth. She would faint, and her body would become hard and stiff. Her fingers could not be prized open. Two doctors came to treat her. They did all the tests and could not find anything wrong.*
>
> *Then she went to see ochai and baidyo. They predicted her death due to a problem caused by someone. They consulted another baidyo – he said she would not die and treated her. He would chant mantras, place his hands on her*

head and pour water on her head. She started recovering after being sick for 12 years. He did not tell her who was causing the problem.

She faints even in the swidden fields; this happens in the evening. She sometimes sings we do not understand what she sings. Sometimes she recovers on her own; sometimes, we have to give her a massage. Now she goes for a check-up. She hears a loud noise in her head, but nothing shows up in the check-up. Others said when she sings, they are touched and even cry.

Conclusion: Structural Changes and Beliefs

Generally, witch hunt is used as a customary practice and extra-legal measure to enforce patriarchal norms and discrimination against women in their right to resources and social existence with dignity. As pointed out in a study of West Tripura district, the root cause of witch hunts is to grab the landed property of women (Dasgupta, 1993). This is compounded by the state agency's silence on witch hunts in the state of Tripura (Shil and Jangir, 2021). The question of cultural identity has been a central concern in the Northeast region of India. There have been questions formed by the constants in indigenous cultures and the witch question was overlooked as a matter of human rights of women and men. Any attempt at change in the women's position or suggested measures for the dignity and equality of women were likely to be interpreted as interference in the sacred spaces of indigenous societies.

Notwithstanding the above sensitivity, there have been some reform measures although with limited progress. For instance, the Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad (established in 1948), at its inception launched a mission of social and cultural reforms of the Tripuri Tribal society, which was instrumental in curbing social abuses and practices, including witch hunts. The Parishad also championed the cause of women, especially their right to paternal property (Wahal, 2016, p. 99).

The former Principal Scientific Officer to the state government of Tripura, Mihir Lal Roy, stated that many NGOs involving both indigenous and non-indigenous people have been at the forefront against the beliefs in witchcraft, witch hunts and black magic. He further stated that with the literacy and awareness campaigns launched by the Tripura Upajati Ganamukti Parishad since the 1940s, many beliefs and unscientific practices among the indigenous peoples and non-indigenous people have been successfully eradicated. He further reiterated that a holistic approach to continuing the campaign against witch violence and improvement of education and health services are also essential to prevent any kind of unscientific practices (Chakraborty, 2022).

We also noted that perpetrators of witch hunts in Tripura have been penalized as per various sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). However, there is no special law to deal with the crimes of witch hunts. The state agencies and police officials are of the view that IPC is sufficient to deal with such crimes. There is no realization on the part of law enforcement agencies that the crimes of witch hunts are qualitatively different from other crimes contemplated under IPC (Mishra & Dubey, 2019). Witch violence and the belief about witchcraft are undoubtedly grounded in patriarchal cultures and are considered part of the institutional, cultural structures of the indigenous peoples in Tripura.

At a general level, we have raised four policy and social action concerns required to eventually eliminate the witch branding and witch hunt practices. These include 1) the role of civil society, including women's organisations and media, to bring change in patriarchal mindsets and masculine attitudes; 2) effective legal measures and the state mechanisms

against witch branding, witch persecution and witch hunt practices; 3) distribution of land, property, knowledge and further productive resources under women's unmediated control and ownership right (not through household and its head); and 4) concrete evidence of witchcraft and building community support to dismantle power and authority of *ochai* and his ideological support system.

We noted in earlier studies that the witch prevention laws in several states of India have brought some changes in the earlier fearless persecution and hunting of women as witches. Both the ojhas/*ochai* and the community or family actors engaged in witch hunts have a sense of fear about legal punitive actions by the police and judiciary. This sense of fear, with some additional measures, can act as a deterrent to witch persecution and witch hunting. There is a need for stringent laws, including a central law against witch persecution. An effective implementation of the law can reportedly change hesitant and timid action by police and socio-cultural scepticism, leading to a potential change in justifiable norms and practices of witch hunts.

Any legal change by itself may not work in ending the violence against supposed witches. Two simultaneous policy measures are required to reduce and eventually end the practice of belief in witches and justification of violence related to such a belief. First, the introduction of a well-functioning decentralised healthcare system in rural and indigenous areas, second, a policy change in the belief and the related cultural rituals about the existence of witches and witchcraft practices. There is historical proof from European countries and the United States of America that norms and practices related to such a belief can change; also, in the case of "sati" (widow burning) in the caste society of India or, more recently "honour killings" of women, who got married against the traditional norms of their family and community. There is an urgent need and a morally sound economic imperative to build a human rights-respecting culture in indigenous societies or elsewhere in the country.

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