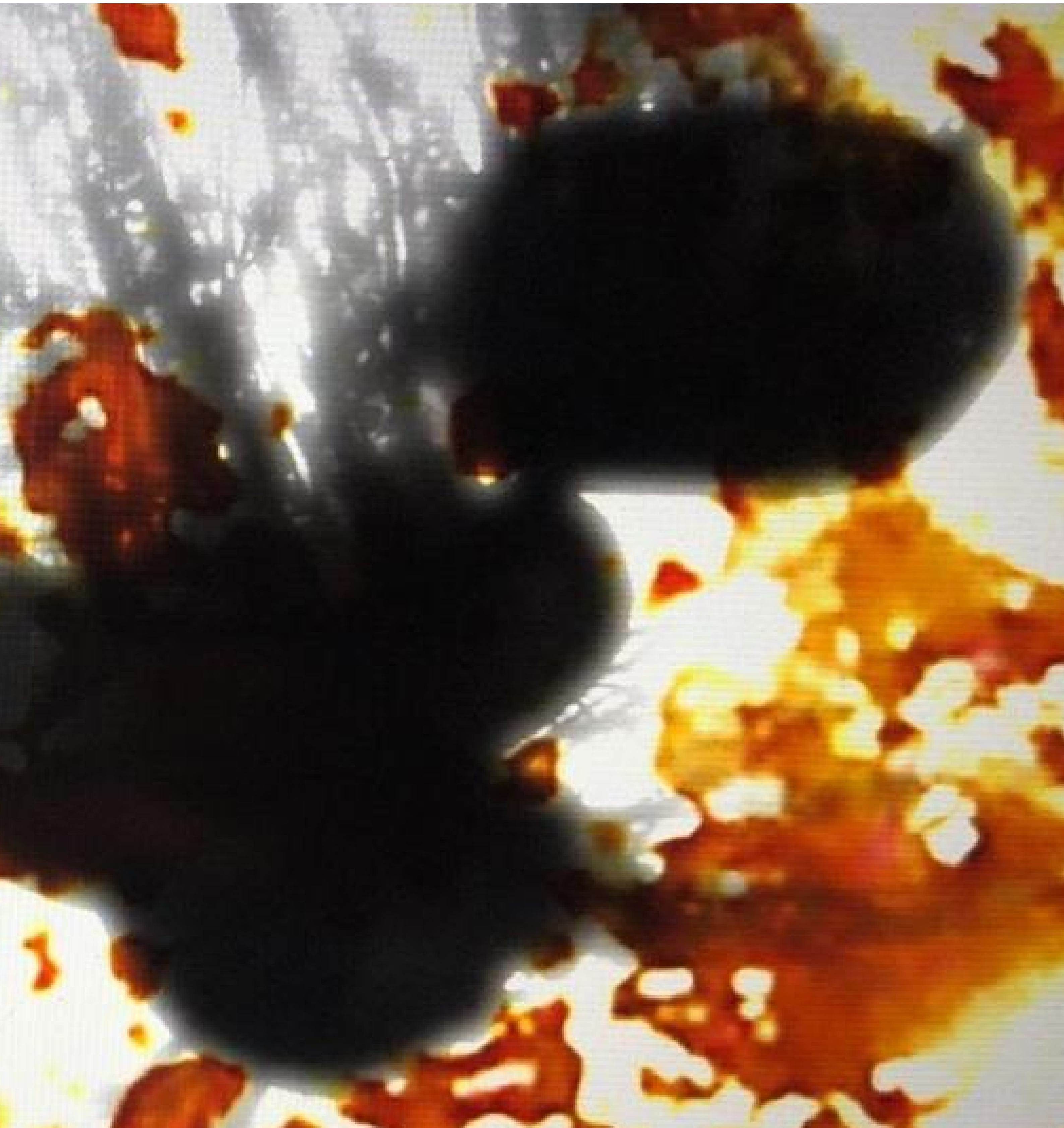
Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Gender, Culture and Capital in Meghalaya, India

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan



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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 Meghalaya, Northeast India.

Over the past 25 years, we have been engaged in the analysis and production of knowledge about witch hunts and 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 conceptualization 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.

Research support for immersive fieldwork and, crucially; the translation of local languages to English was provided by indigenous scholars Gazania Phira, Marba Syiem, and Daniel Ingty. 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 26 in-depth individual interviews with academics, social activists, women and men, shamans/healers/herbalists, village leaders, and common people in Meghalaya. 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.

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 Meghalaya.

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Introduction

In continuation of the conceptualization of our earlier study on 'Culture, Capital and Witch Hunts in Assam', this study has tried to explore the social beliefs and ritual practices of witch-hunts in indigenous societies of Meghalaya in Northeast India. Our understanding of witch hunts represents the persecution, even killings, of women and some men who are supposed to have acquired supernatural powers that they use to harm others in their community. These also include households that are perceived as 'the *thlen* (serpent) keepers' and individuals who possess 'the tiger spirit'. They are believed to cause physical harm, make others sick and rob them of resources.

Anthropologists and scholars of indigenous peoples generally work to describe what is taking place in indigenous societies and cultures without a critical reflection on the beliefs and practices. These writings provide a critical reflection on the beliefs and practices. These writings actively contribute to encouraging indigenous peoples not to think in ways that may provide a different worldview conducive to women's empowerment and economic development of society and its enhanced position in the present-day world. There are, however, a few scholars who did not engage in promoting such a worldview. There are classic examples in the works of Evans-Pritchard (1937), Parrinder (1958), Geschiere (1997) and Ngong (2012), which call the worldview into question.

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 this study, we made an attempt to understand the belief systems and ritual practices in matrilineal patriarchal societies in Northeast India that underlie witch violence and to explore the specific directions of change in this belief system at the nexus of patriarchal culture and capitalist trajectories.

The imagination of witches or witch-hunts is not limited to the practice of witch-hunts and *ojhas*, but it also includes the worldview or cosmology that breeds beliefs in witches and ritual attacks – the power and spirit to heal or hurt others. Through our work on witch-hunts for more than 25 years, we have come to understand that witch-hunts are caused by the belief in the ability of some men and women to use mystical, supernatural powers to harm or help others within the community. It is a manifestation of social control or a manifestation of socioeconomic changes due to structural forces or traumatic experiences in the transition to the growing capitalist economies.

Our study critically engages with indigenous beliefs and practices, and thereby challenges the dominant tradition of anthropological writings and some other scholarly works as well. This is, however, a very preliminary attempt to raise some critical questions, and it does not exhaustively cover all aspects of cultural beliefs and practices. Furthermore, this study is not intended to debase the positive aspects of indigenous cultures and religious practices, such as beliefs in communitarian way of life and nurturing of forests and sustainability of natural resources. What we have intended to show is that there are other elements of indigenous beliefs and practices that have a negative impact on women and indigenous societies.

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, and 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. In consideration of the diversity of gender systems, we selected two indigenous communities, Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya. The two communities of Meghalaya are matrilineal, with women having rights to land and lineage, control of resources and knowledge of ritualistic activities.

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.

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.

The persecution of women and men as witches and the ritual attacks within the communities have a number of consequences for their agency and social and economic development in indigenous societies. First, in areas which are widespread, women are reticent in exercising their agency in economic or other spheres for fear of being accused as witches. Women and men who do economically better, for instance, through wages from migration, are forced to hide their savings and not invest them locally for fear of eliciting jealousy from others. Their neighbour and relations may be resentful and suspicious of newly acquired assets, good harvests or livestock and may engage in harmful practices. Second, there is the human rights violation of women and their families. Their subsistence resources, such as chicken, cows and piglets are stolen in the dark by men who have acquired tiger–spirits, and there is no institutional authority they can appeal to against such activities. These are socially seen as an act of supernatural powers, and nothing can be done to stop the keeper of the tiger spirits or the *thlen*. Third, there is a general economic loss through the destruction of property. Fourth, women are not able to assert their rights to land, property, and decision-making, as was/is the case in patriarchal traditional societies. Fifth, there are substantial costs of treatment associated with the injury and insults due to violence against women and ritual attacks, which are treated by the *ojhas*/herbalist (also called *kabiraj*).

However, not all accusations end in the continued persecution of the accused women. There have been some examples of resistance by the accused and their supporters, namely, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or generally young community members, as we noted in our earlier fieldwork in Assam (Kelkar and Sharma, 2021). This study proposes to dive deep into the social practices and beliefs in witches and ritual attacks with the objective of strengthening resistance and policy formulations of these degraded forms of violence and making a path towards gender-responsive and gender-inclusive human rights–based culture and practice.

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 a local field research assistant who would be collaborating 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. How has this accumulation process played a major role in changing traditional cultural beliefs and social practices?

After the systematic literature review of the subject, fieldwork was conducted between August and October 2022 in six villages in two areas: East Khasi Hills and Garo Hills in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya. Our learnings from previous studies in Assam, Jharkhand and Meghalaya will be used to explore the background of the study areas.

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 focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interactive discussions with community thought leaders, women, men *ojhas/kabirajs* and herbalists, and the *thlen*-affected and the tiger-men-affected women and men. Through our earlier knowledge about witch-hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understood that a hierarchical social order produces different perspectives and worldviews on gender, ethnicity, and class. These result in fragmentary, even contradictory, answers to social beliefs and practices related to marginalized voices and a lack of resource control and political representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As research analysts, our challenge is to present a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field a dismantling of dualism and contradictions in discussions.

Group discussion on the belief system in Garo Hills

Focus group discussion in Garo Hills

Research support both for the fieldwork and for the translation of languages to English was provided by local scholars and activists in the two societies. Besides, we are grateful to the two societies. We are grateful to the various kinds of research support, that is, finding contact persons for the research and identifying villagers from the Northeast countryside under a difficult situation which was done by Prof. Glenn Christo Kharkongor and Ms Patricia Mukhim in East Khasi Hills. Earlier contacts with Mr Phrang Roy further helped me to dive deeper into the norms and practices of *thlen* keeping households in Khasi society. Our learnings came from FGDs and a series of frank and candid discussions with academics, administrators, and social activists.

Research support for translation and interpretation and for the fieldwork was provided by a gender-balanced group of young researchers and activists. We conducted - FGDs and - individual interviews with two *thlen* keeping households, one person with the 'tiger-spirit', nine *ojhas/kabirajs*/herbalists, seven academics and journalists, four administrators and nine common villagers (as explained in Table 1).

Table 1. Fieldwork details (August–October 2022)

States	Research sites	Villages and towns	FGDs	Individual interviews	Professions/Occupation
Meghalaya	East Khasi Hills	Shillong	1	17 individual interviews	The17 individual interviews include:
		Marbisu village	1		
		Madanriting village	1		4 Academics 1 Journalist 1 Administrator
		Pynursla village	1		2 *Thlen*-keeping households 7 Ojhas/herbalists 2 Affected by *thlen*
	Garo Hills	Tura	1	9 individual interviews	The 6 interviews include:
		San Awe village	1		1 Late *ojha's* wife 1 Nokma (village head)
		Migri village	1		1 IG Police (retired) 1 Herbalist
		Khasiapara (Daini village)	1		1 Tiger-woman 1 Academic 1 Wife of late tiger-man 1 Son of late tiger-man 1 Organic farmer
Total			**8**	**26**	

Theoretical Underpinnings

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 bad 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 a socially acceptable tool 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 L. Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches' 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 are 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. In many of the research sites, we noted that older women who could no longer provide children and sexual services to men were denounced as witches. They were seen as engaged in a demonic conspiracy, and therefore thought to deserve a brutalized physical elimination.

The third thought 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-hunting 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 in 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 of the ritual knowledge, which is a socially highly 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.

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.

Gender Systems in Meghalaya

Gender systems are complex, dynamic, and socially embedded, having many interconnected dimensions. In the Khasi matrilineal system of Meghalaya, the youngest daughter (Khatduh) has the right of inheritance to ancestral property, forestlands, and lineage through the mother's clan (Kur). The head of the clan is the maternal uncle, who in consultation with the matri-clan members decides on the social and political interest of the members. The youngest daughter in consultation with the maternal uncle is expected to manage the family resources and support parents in their old age and other members of the family in any economic crisis. Generally, women have a major role in the cultivation of land. Their control and knowledge of seeds, herbs, plants and matrilocality marriage give them a greater say in how family or clan resources are to be used. Women are seen as spiritual heads, for example, Syiem (the Chieftain's mother or elder sister) among the Khasis has the final power to heal and save people from critical illnesses particularly caused by the *thlen* (a mythical serpent that feeds itself on human blood). Women's spiritual and healing power accords them more independence, freedom of mobility, and higher social and cultural status than men in other societies in Northeast India.

This higher social status of women, however, is missing in community decision-making, the Dorhar, the hub of political debates. As noted by Patricia Mukhim, in Meghalaya 'Politics is male-centric and carries a strong patriarchal bias, till date not more than 10 Khasi women have been elected to the State Assembly of 60 members'.

There are some noticeable patriarchal forces that are working towards the fast erosion of matriliny in Meghalaya. These include (1) Synkhong Rympi Thymmai (Foundation for a New Hearth, men's rights group), which is opposed by women but is making strides; and (2) the Mait Shaphrang Movement, which advocates for equal distribution of property between daughters and sons. Their advocacy is based on an unstudied statement that Khasi men own virtually nothing and, therefore are not given due respect in their own families, which leads them to alcoholism; (3) entry of capitalist values and market forces leading to drastic changes in an egalitarian society with communitarian values (Mukhim n.d.). The Khasi scholar Nongbri (2005) points out that Christianity as an agent of modern education has altered the traditional social structure, seriously eroding 'the ideological and material bases of Khasi matriliny; it has helped 'create a social milieu of fostering patriarchal values' among both Christian and non-Christian Khasis (pp. 383–84).

In the matrilineal system of Garo Hills, women play a major role in the management of forest lands. A daughter (not necessarily the youngest one) is recognized as the rightful owner of community lands (A' King's land). Where there is no woman to inherit the property, the clan members may appoint another woman of the clan as Nokma. As the head of a particular clan, she is conferred the title of Nokma (the village head). The Nokma's husband is supposed to assist her in the management of village affairs. However, over the years, with increased patriarchal control, men have acquired the centre stage in taking decisions related to village affairs. He is called the Nokma or male Nokma. On 8 March 2017, the Naga Mothers' Union, one of the oldest women's organizations in Garo Hills (established in 1941), protested against such a change, with a theme called 'Be Bold for Change', and made demand for restoration of the traditional position of women in Garo society (Khan 2017)

In the fieldwork, we noted that the power of decision-making is with men. Women can neither take part in any religious ceremonies nor can they be priests. Politics and administrative affairs are considered to be the prerogative of men (Marak 2002, 59). The Nokma (the village head) and the Kamal (the priest) are always men. The Kamal as the head of traditional religious ceremonies holds an important position in the Garo rural society. The Nokma derives position from his wife (Nokma), the heir of large parts of forest lands. However, she enjoys authority without power. She cannot sell or buy land without the approval of her maternal uncle, brothers, or clan members.

Garo women protesting for their Nokma rights.

The institution of Nokma is such that he is the head of the clan or headship of the village. Generally, Nokma is the husband of the senior-most woman of the clan, or in the absence of the daughter, the nearest woman relative of Nokma. This shows that traditions and customs favour male headship of village administration, although in recent years there have been instances where Nokma's wife has succeeded to the office of Nokma.

Cultural Rights and Social Beliefs

Our current knowledge of the Northeastern culture of the Khasis and Garos is based on the colonial descriptions of the early 20th century. The monographs written by ethnographers J. H. Hutton (1921, 1922) and Mills (1992) were largely based on ‘Notes and Queries on Anthropology’ – “a methodological guide published at regular times from the 1870s onwards for comparative evolutionist research, which was being conducted the world over” to understand cultural systems at that time (Oppitz et al. 2008, 18).

In recent global discourses on development, cultural rights are seen as “…indispensable to sustainable development. That development will only be sustainable if it is shaped by the values of the people that they ascribe to it, protect their resources, and use their heritage in all its dimensions .... A human rights approach with a strong consideration for the cultural rights” of women and marginalized men in all spheres of existence (UN General Assembly 2022).

Such human rights-based cultural rights are essential for the empowerment and construction of identities of communities and individuals. People's rights to resources, knowledge dignity and equality are essential components of cultural rights.

To realize the cultural rights of women and other marginalized social groups, we have argued, through this research, for ‘human rights–respecting cultural mixing and syncretism’ and for positive mixing of cultural identities that are firmly grounded in equality and human rights at the macro and micro levels. Admittedly, there is a serious concern about cultural appropriation in indigenous societies by dominant groups, majoritarian regimes and growing capitalist forces. Equally important, however, is the fact that women and cultural dissenters may face the imposition of fabricated monocultural constructs and cultural codes on them that they have no power to deal with. In view of the above, we will discuss three major institutions of social beliefs in Meghalaya: the serpent (*thlen*), the tiger spirit and the *ojhas/kabirajs*.

The Thlen

The *thlen* is a mythical demonic being, a snake of enormous size with supernatural powers which feeds on human blood. Over a long period of time, it has acquired the status of a strong home spirit that is worshipped in the hope of acquiring immeasurable wealth. The households and families that are reputed to be worshippers or keepers of the *thlen* are rewarded with fear in the Khasi society, and to them are attributed numerous kinds of atrocities, such as the kidnapping of children, murders and attempted murders. The *thlen* keepers are known to employ some men known as nongshohnoh to collect human blood to feed the *thlen* (Rafy 1920). The *thlen* has the power to diminish or enlarge his size at will. Sometimes he appears like a string of fine thread; at other times, he expands himself to a huge size that he could swallow a person's body. The households that keep the *thlen* never disclose to anyone that they are the *thlen* keepers. It is believed that a *thlen* keeper employs certain men called nongshohnoh to obtain human blood, usually from fingernails. In the present day, this belief results in lynching, ostracism, and attacks on members of the community who are seen to be *thlen* keepers. This belief has also resulted in jealousy and isolation of households that have made some economic gains or acquired resources (Lyngdoh 2015, 2016).

Many people in Khasi society regard the *thlen* keeper with great awe that they will not utter even the names of the *thlen*-keeping households for fear that some ill may affect them. Rituals such as singing, praying, and beating of drum occur until the *thlen* is sucked out of the victim's blood collected on a golden plate. Should a family member of the *thlen* keeper want to rid himself from the *thlen*'s influence, he must leave the home, abandoning all his possessions, even their clothing, and walk out nude. He will receive new clothes from the Syiem and begin his life free of *thlen* keeping. It is believed that a *thlen* cannot enter the Syiem's house; 'it follows, therefore, that property of thlen keeper can be appropriated by the Syiem' (Gurdon 1907, 101).

The belief of Khasi people in the *thlen* has evolved into a constant fear for the common people, to the point that walking alone is not considered safe. During the fieldwork, we saw many people of all ages and genders being treated by the *ojhas/kabirajs* as they were made sick by a supposedly nongshohnoh. Young girls and boys do not relate to their peers from the *thlen*-keeper households. Only Syiem (Chieftain) and Lyndoh (priest) households are free from *thlen* attacks:

> *Young girl in the school, they will not sit next to me, thinking that I would have a pair of scissors to cut their hair or a piece of clothing to feed the thlen .... When I got the proposal for marriage, there were questions on my family as being known the thlen keeping household.*

Attacks and lynching of menshohnoh (the *thlen* keeper) suspects are not uncommon in the rural areas of Meghalaya. Social distrust caused by belief in the *thlen* is a major concern. There is a continuing belief among the Khasis that some families engage in hidden worship of the *thlen*, and they need to be dealt with. Local newspapers often report cases related to the *thlen* where people were either seriously injured or killed, resulting in loss of life and property.

The recent market-based economic changes, reinforced by patriarchal socio-political systems, have transformed the earlier village-based morality, leading to a breakdown of traditional norms, and bringing forth reactions to a breakdown of norms. In the case of Meghalaya, for example, we came across several cases where a person from outside the village, if seen visiting the village, was attacked for his potential witchcraft activities. The village children or adults would see him as a 'men-ai-ksuid' (witch) or a menshonoh (worshipper of the serpent, U *thlen*), who has presumably come to collect human blood for U *thlen*. In the process, the person would be attacked by the villagers. During the fieldwork in East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya in October–November 2020, our research team noted persons or families who are well off being often looked on as 'others' in the village. Similarly, strangers are often looked at with suspicion as they do not belong to the community. In addition, persons who do not have strong familial relations with those residing in the village are also targeted.

The Ojha/Kabiraj

The authority of the *ojha/kabiraj* (the traditional healer and the witchfinder) is embedded in the institutional structure of indigenous societies of Northeast India. For the local people, he interprets formal rules; unwritten social, economic, and healthcare rules; traditional social conventions; gender norms and behaviours; shared beliefs about the cause and cure of disease caused by the *thlen*; and the means of enforcement to limit their individual behaviour.

The *ojha/kabiraj* plays a key role in identifying witches and *thlen* attacks and in advising people how to free themselves from a supposed witch or *thlen* attacks. In an interview with a *kabiraj*'s widow, we came to know that the ojha was murdered by his close family members, including his nephew, because he had refused to share his knowledge on 'how to get rich'. The late *ojha* had amazed some resources and cash through payment for his services, and the extended family members wanted to know his ways of doing things. When he did not share his mantras with them, the nephew organized a couple of his friends to murder the *ojha* in his home.

In many of the cases, the *ojha/kabiraj* has a critical role in identifying whether a person is attacked by the *thlen*. In the Northeastern states, belief in witches and social practices of witch branding are common to diverse indigenous societies. The alleged witch is called 'daini' and as the *thlen* (serpent) and the tiger-man in local parlance; they are believed to cause ailments and ill-health to the people in the communities and also destroy crops and cause the disappearance of livestock. The witch or a *thlen* keeper is usually identified by a man (a woman in a few cases) called *ojha* or *kabiraj* (most of the *thlen* are from the Syiem clan). When the treatment fails, they are driven out of the village or killed. The process of identification of ailments caused by the witch or the *thlen* is specified by the ojha by looking into the symptoms of the patient. The *ojha* uses a hot iron stick, puts it into a bottle of water and usually through the type of bubbling water identifies the disease caused by the *thlen*. If this process confirms that the disease is caused by the *thlen*, then the red-hot iron stick is used to burn a small lock of hair of the patient. This is further followed by a prescription of the herbal mix to take for several days. The treatment is repeated only thrice.

If the *ojha* is not able to treat a person, then he would direct the person to Syiem, or in a few rare cases, to the hospital. Like some indigenous states in Central India (namely, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha), Meghalaya does not have any witch prevention laws, and as a result, the *ojhas* have continued to perform their practices and convincing people that they have been affected by *thlen* attacks. Nevertheless, she/he takes due care for her/

An *ojha* demonstrating his technique of treating the *thlen* attack'.

his protection and charges a fee for services in healing or treating the *thlen*-affected persons with a hot iron rod and some herbal potions.

There are not many healthcare facilities in the rural areas of the Northeastern states, and people also prefer the *ojha/kabiraj* when they fall ill, although they pay a hefty amount for the *ojha*'s services. There is a continuing belief that the *ojha* will be able to cure their illness caused by the mythical all-powerful *thlen*. The young man who drove us around in the East Khasi Hills narrated that he had lost two brothers due to being affected by the *thlen*:

> *They became very yellow, and had no strength to eat and walk ... even the ojha was not able to save them. But when I got ill like them, I went to a known ojha, and he was able to save me from a massive attack of the thlen.*

Obviously, these were the cases of hepatitis and interpreted as the thlen attack.

It is important to acknowledge the role of some ojhas in healing the patients who seek help for the cure of their disease. Their reputation in the healing profession develops by word of mouth, which depends on their treatment with herbal knowledge. In recent years, the Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) in Shillong has begun organizing a certificate-based course to enhance their knowledge in plant-based treatment and herbal healing. During the fieldwork, we met with one of such healers or the *ojhas*, who said that he acquired his initial knowledge and skills of treatment from his ancestors, but the acquisition of herbal knowledge from the MLCU made him a specialist in the field of herbal healing.

An *Ojha* with the Martin Luther Christian University certificate in herbal treatment

The MLCU training, according to the *ojha* we interviewed, is oriented to make him more knowledgeable and efficient in the use of herbal medicines. However, he has continued with the usual and unchanged practice of curing diseases supposed to be caused by the *thlen*.

This was seen as an unchallenged part of the social belief of the Khasi people, hence, not to be questioned. It is argued that the acknowledgement and integration of 'local health traditions' into the contemporary forms of a plural medical system are likely to make the healthcare system in the Northeastern society of India more accessible and effective (Albert et al. 2015, 958). However, the question is whether medical treatment includes a belief system based on the existence of mythical creatures like the *thlen*. What we noted in the field was that the *thlen* imagination has not left the Khasis despite the *ojhas* training in the modernized herbal system. There have not been sufficient intellectual and other efforts to challenge this imagination. Rational and theological critique, the development of science and technology, and adequate, accessible healthcare improvement are some of the essential elements that are crucial in challenging this imagination about the *thlen*, the witch or the tiger spirits.

For the witch-hunts to be effectively challenged and the well-being of indigenous peoples to be enhanced, policymakers should put in their policies that have already been initiated, for example, continued improvement in educational standards and infrastructure facilities that effectively address the witch imagination. Policymakers should put in place policies aimed at improving decentralized healthcare systems in indigenous and forested areas, which would help in reducing the healthcare and well-being dependence on the *ojhas* or traditional healers. Consistent policy efforts are needed to improve indigenous economies, especially spurred by agricultural, manufacturing, and digital sectors that would not only make the living standards better for indigenous women and men but also contribute to dispelling the claims that wealth is generated through worshipping the *thlen* or through the illegally planned activities of the tiger-men.

The Tiger Man

When we met a tiger-spirit woman in Tura, we found her to be very gentle, with a gentle outlook. The woman said that she was branded a tiger girl, and later a woman because of her insomnia and lack of concentration in studies. She found it difficult to free herself from these allegations and continued with her work and employment with the government.

Modern Christianity makes it difficult for tiger men or tiger women to reveal themselves as such or to speak of their abilities. We, however, met a woman who was willing to talk about her life as a tiger-woman in an interview. She said,

> *I was seen as a hard-working girl in my school days and preferred to work at night, as a result, I often felt sleepy during the day. I also lacked concentration during class, so the concerned teachers and fellow students defined me as a tiger girl who roamed in the night and felt sleepy during the day. On one occasion, I gave some information about the location of some rebel young men to my brother-in-law (a high-ranking police officer), and he, too, confirmed me as a tiger woman.*

On my question of why she did not protest about her being branded as a tiger woman, she said they do not do such branding while talking to you:

> *All this branding is done through gossip about you. Besides, this did not affect my life in terms of seeking employment or leading a normal life. So, I saw no reason to protest and to whom I protest? The way society defines you is not simply by physical or visible aspects; however, it does carry immaterial meanings and value notions that bother them more than me.*

(Interview with Govind Kelkar in Tura)

The tiger woman in the printed white shirt

Conclusion: Structural Changes and Beliefs

We live in an interconnected world, connected by global flows of ideas, knowledge and concerns for the equality and dignity of all humans. These flows in the deglobalizing world remain deeply interconnected and, in return, create demands for new forces of equality and human rights that go beyond technological progress and self-sufficiency of resources. Policymakers are taking steps to shape political institutions and social systems in line with new forces of strategic importance. However, traditional systems that experienced downsides of patriarchy and capitalist greed for resources resulted in strengthening the resilience of their own systems. The story of witch-hunts, the *thlen* and the tiger-men are some of these examples in the indigenous societies of Northeast India and other rural and indigenous peoples in Asia, the Pacific and Africa regions. Of course, earlier, they had existed in Europe and North America as well (for detailed analysis, see Kelkar and Nathan 2020). In this study, we looked at the two societies in Meghalaya of Northeast India, known for their diversity of gender systems, education, Christianity, and ecological concerns for forests. What we noticed, however, is that pre-colonial and pre-Christianity systems and values of social equality have turned into tools of control and manipulation of the masses of women and men. In this process of transformation, we wanted to explore through this study the demand for gender equality and dignity for all humans.

The question of identity has been a central concern in the Northeast region of India. There have been questions formed by the constants and changes in identity; both the people view this themselves and in the eyes and comments of outsiders. We need to see, through the dynamics of capital and culture, how it has contributed to change with the pervasive patriarchy and the privatization of resources, leading to a silent demise of the communitarian way of life and the steady loss of social, economic, and political powers of women even in the matrilineal state of Meghalaya. Margret Lyngdoh (2012) observes, 'Khasis have less and less time to bond with each other in ways considered meaningful by tradition' (p. 217). In the given liminality of Khasis, the subversion of the position of women and the rise in crimes against women have been pointed out by recent research works (Lyngdoh 2012; Mukhim 2019).

This framework for addressing witch persecution or witch hunts must also be informed both by local and global dynamics in understanding the ways in which capitalist patriarchy is part of the globalised world. The UN Secretary-General's Report 'Field of Cultural Rights' (2021) recently noted that a "refusal to respect cultural mixing or mixed cultural identities leads to many human rights violations". These measures are bound to create new norms of dignity and equality for rural and indigenous women. It is important to recognize that a structure of gender norms has internal dynamics of change, undermining the present patterns in gender roles. A society cannot progress and be part of a wider society where equality and dignity of women are not an integral part of sustainable, justice-based development without human rights-respecting cultural sharing.

At a general level, we have raised three policy and social actions required to eventually end witch persecution and witch-hunting practices. These include the following: (1) change in patriarchal mindsets and attitudes and the role of media; (2) effective state mechanisms against witch persecution and witch-hunts; and (3) concrete evidence of witchcraft and building community support to dismantle power and authority of the *ojhas*, the *thlen* keepers and the tiger-men.

The legal and norms-based inequality in feminist economic analysis raises questions about men's role as decision-makers and owners of land and property within the family and outside in the wider society. Some policy efforts to change this type of gender inequality (e.g., The Hindu Succession Amendment Act, 2005) are limited by social norms and cultural systems. These barriers need to be changed with a multi-pronged approach: (1) the state-instituted measures for women's unmediated rights to productive assets, land, property and knowledge; (2) providing economic incentives for change in misogyny in social norms and decision-making/governance; and (3) the state and central governments need to institute universal forms of social security, such as provision for education (including higher and technical education), healthcare and nutrition, as well as freedom from gender-based violence within the domestic sphere, workplaces and in public spaces. What needs to be understood and advocated is that these universal forms of social security are not deductions from productive investments. The state provision for universal forms of social security measures and women's freedom from gendered mobility are productivity-enhancing measures.

In the current economic transformation from a non-accumulative to an accumulative economy, we notice a paradox of rise in hegemonic masculinity and women's increased struggles against this hegemonic masculinity. Rather than carrying witch persecution and witch-hunting to oppose the system of accumulation, a better option would be the state-instituted enforceable measures for new forms of a human rights-based approach to embrace the dignity and equality of women.

We noted that witch prevention laws in several states of the country have brought some changes in the earlier fearless persecution and hunts of women as witches. Both the *ojhas* and the community or familial actors engaged in witch-hunting have a sense of fear about legal punitive action by police. This sense of fear about being engaged in illegal/criminal activity, 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 national law against witch persecution. An effective implementation of the state law can change reportedly hesitant and timid action by police and social skepticism, leading to a fundamental change in norms and practices of witch-hunts, the *thlen* and the tiger men.

The socio-economic structural transformations are gendered processes, embedding in them the malcontents of modernity of targeting women as witches. It is to be noted that women have played an important, influential role in challenging masculine prerogatives. For example, the most diminished category of social relationships is the status of 'head of the family' generally held by men, which has declined in the developing world, and the power to provide can no longer be exercised (Mbembe 2006, 326). With women's greater involvement in agriculture and unorganized sectors in developing economies, there is greater economic emergence for women. Research on women's roles in agricultural production and in the unorganized sector shows that men's position and power to provide for the family can no longer be held as masculine prerogatives.

Media, with its use of print media, video and camera, has a big role in creating general awareness against social practices of branding of witches and ritual attacks like the *thlen* and the tiger-spirits. So far, only a very limited number of journalists, such as Patricia Mukhim from Meghalaya (the Editor of *The Shillong Times*), Nava Thauria from the Journalist Forum Assam and Jitendra Choudhry of Dainik Axom have taken up writing and presentations against witch persecution and ritual attacks. They have been trying to convince people that deaths and diseases occur due to a lack of medical and healthcare facilities, as well as the lack of adequate sanitation and the lack of clean drinking water and nutritious food intake. In her study, Juhi Pushpa Pathak (2017) candidly suggests that the media, in its continuing efforts, should carry out campaigns against witch branding and expose 'the myth, the pain, the trauma that victims go through make people aware of such inhuman acts …. Educate people through regular write-ups and broadcast of documentaries' (p. 16). Media could team up with local police in informing people and creating social awareness against witch persecution and ritual attacks by the *thlen* and the tiger spirits.

Any legal change by itself may not work in ending the violence against supposed witches. Two simultaneous policy measures are required to minimize and eventually end the practice of belief in witchcraft and the justification of violence related to such a belief. First is the introduction of decentralized healthcare facilities in rural and indigenous areas. In the 19th century in central India (now the state of Chhattisgarh), cholera was thought to be caused by witches (Macdonald 2004, 22–23). Later, people came to understand that cholera is related to unclean water and can be treated with oral rehydration. This ended the 'cholera witches' phenomenon, although belief in witches took other forms, including fever and general illness with its potential threat to the death of children and adults.

Second, a policy change in the belief about the existence of witches and witchcraft practices is also needed. Norms related to such a belief can change. They can change with political measures to promote indigenous and rural women's engagement with elevated socio-political tasks and roles. It is important to recognize that a structure of gender norms has internal dynamics of change, undermining the present patterns in gender roles. Some mediating factors in this potential change can be accessed, as well as the use of technology, such as mobile phones, television, and forces of gender-specific democratization brought about by the women's movement that campaign against the notion of persons acquiring evil powers and organizing discussions by local, gender-responsive women's groups on good examples of resistance against the witch belief, of women who successfully fought against being branded/persecuted as a witch. There are examples of people, such as Chhutni Devi in Jharkhand and Birubala Rabha in Assam, who were recently honored with 'Padmashree' award for their work with the alleged witches, as well as of Haribai of Rajasthan who successfully fought against the caste-based group of grabbers of her land and now lives in her village with dignity and right in her house and land (Kelkar and Nathan 2020). A combination of all these examples is likely to diminish and eventually end the belief in witches and witchcraft.

Recently, in a High Court case in 2018, the belief in witchcraft was considered as a mitigating circumstance in case of witch-hunts. Similarly, in South Africa, courts have reduced sentences on the grounds of the perpetrators' belief in witchcraft (Comaroffs 1999). As we understand, there is one legal system and varied cultural ideas of justice. Admittedly, the cultural ideas of justice may not all be uniform. Survivors of witch hunts may have different ideas of culture-based justice from the perpetrators of witch violence. We think, however, that it is necessary to be careful with the use of belief or culture as a mitigating circumstance. What about the case of 'Sati' (widow burning) or more recently 'honour killing' of women who get married against the traditional norms of their family or community? It would be difficult to argue that beliefs of a particular culture should be accepted as mitigating circumstances.

The existence of witches, the *thlen* keepers and the tiger-men are said to be part of a belief system of many indigenous peoples. We have a limited understanding of beliefs that result directly from the nature of human consciousness and actions. As against the economists' claim that individuals are rational (i.e., act in what they think to be their self-interest), we see them acting in "a complicated amalgam of their preferences over different outcomes, the alternatives they face, and their beliefs about their actions will affect the world around them" (North et al. 2009, 18). Their actions are intentional, with a purpose to achieve the best outcomes in the experience of social interactions, organizations, and networks. The individual jealousy over the accumulation of resources or collective frenzy to free their society from the adverse effects of witch-hunts is likely to be embedded in a belief system that views women functioning in a subordinate yet manipulative position, with no agential rights to decision-making and ritual practices. Any potential transgression of these gender norms is likely to cause harm through death or disaster to the social group or the family in which they live.

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