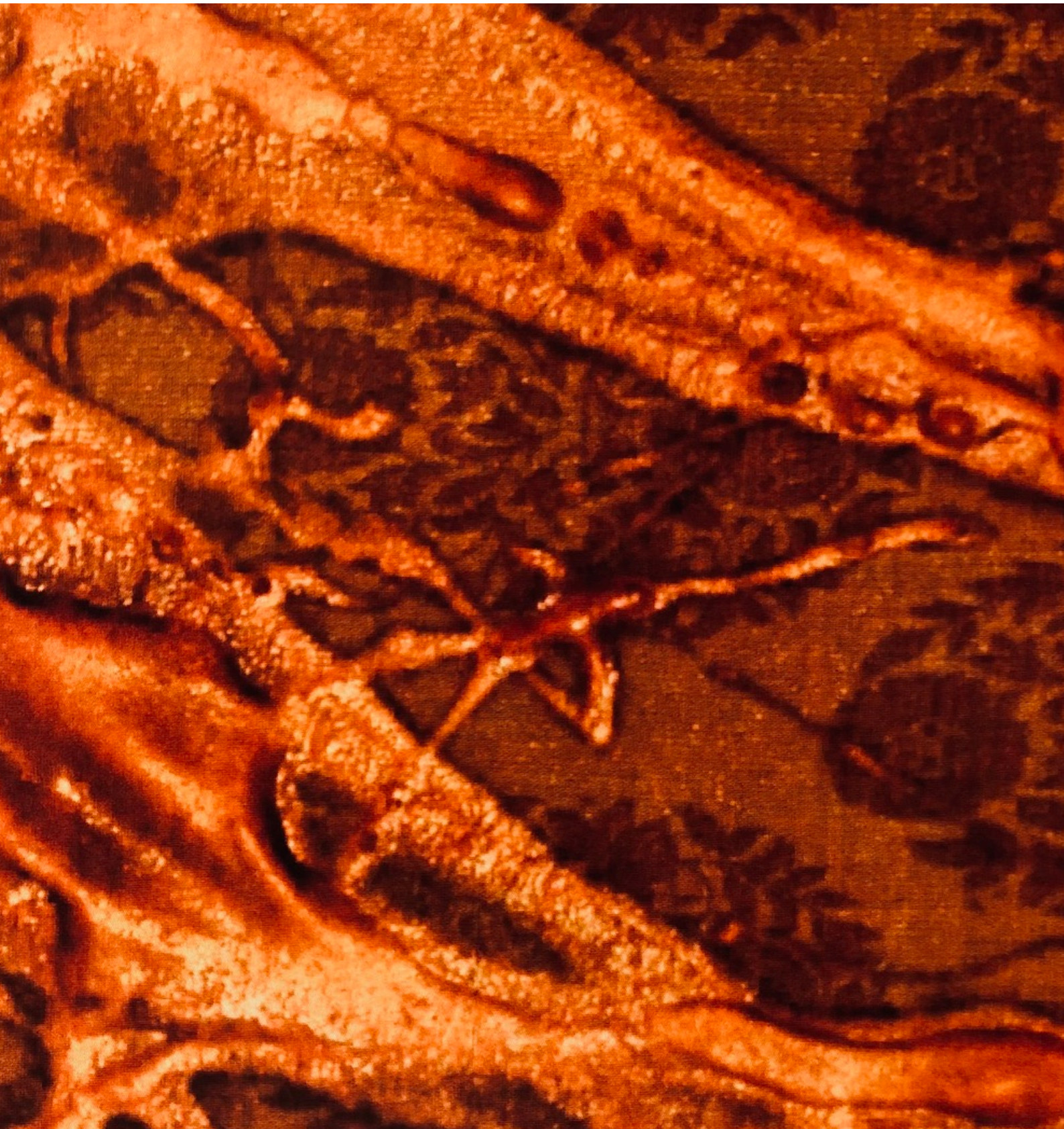
Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Gender, Culture and Capital in Nagaland, India

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 Nagaland, 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 two indigenous scholars, Rosemary Dzuvichu and Neisetsonuo Casavi. 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 17 in-depth individual interviews with academics, social activists, women and men, shamans/healers/herbalists, village leaders, and common people in Nagaland. 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 Nagaland.

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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.

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WITCH HUNTS & RITUAL ATTACKS: GENDER, CULTURE AND CAPITAL IN NAGALAND

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

Research Team: Rosemary Dzuvichu, Neisetsonuo Casavi, Anant Pandey.

Introduction

This study has tried to explore the social beliefs and ritual practices of witch-hunts in indigenous societies of Nagaland 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 individuals who are perceived as possessing '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 patriarchal societies of the Nagas 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 transition to the growing capitalist economies.

Terraced farming in a Naga village

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 a communitarian way of life, 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 and agricultural economy to 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.

The two communities of Angami and Sema in Nagaland are patriarchal, where men hold virtually all formal positions of power and control over land and decision-making political positions. Naga women can neither inherit any land and are excluded from the decision-making processes of village councils; also they cannot be village heads. Even the constitutional and legal provision of 33 per cent reservation for women in the local bodies has not been possible as it was perceived as the Indian State's interference in the Naga culture. In 2017, a woman's attempt to buy a

piece of land was considered an act of witch and there was an attempt to set her on fire. These communities are going through the trauma of cultural and structural changes, largely related to rights to land, control over resources, and women's agency and knowledge of ritualistic activities. Women's assertion of having resources and engaging in accusation of ritualistic knowledge is seen as a transgression of traditional, patriarchal norms, and thus, they are seen as inviting punishment to themselves.

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 of others. Their neighbours 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 possessor of the tiger spirits. 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 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 from August to October 2022 in two areas: Angami and Sema in the patriarchal society of Nagaland. Our learnings from previous studies in Assam, Jharkhand and Meghalaya were 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.

Discussion in the Sema village

Local scholars and activists in the two villages provided Research support for the fieldwork and for the translation of languages to English. Besides, we are grateful to the two societies. We are grateful for the various kinds of research support, that is, finding contact persons for the research and identifying villagers from Nagaland under a difficult situation, which Prof. Rosemary Dzuvichu did.

A gender-balanced group of young researchers and activists provided research support for translation and interpretation and the fieldwork. We conducted 3 FGDs and 17 individual interviews, one person with the 'tiger spirit', seven *gaonburas*/village elders, two tiger spirit survivors, two academics, two administrators and three common villagers. Table 1 explains the fieldwork details.

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,

Table 1. Fieldwork details (August–October 2022)

States	Research sites	Villages and towns	FGDs	Individual interviews	Professions/Occupation
Nagaland	Kohima	Kohima			
		Kohima village	1	9 Angami tribe	The17 individual interviews include:
	Jakhama Circle	Phesama village	1	5 Sema tribe	1 Village chief 3 Village elders 1 Naga army man
	Pughoboto circle,	Mishilimi village	1	1 Chang tribe	1 Engineer 1 Retired commissioner 3 Common man
	Zunheboto	Pangsha (telephonic interview)		2 Khiamniungan tribe	3 Village former council chairperson 2 Academicians 1 Tiger-man 1 Administrator
Total			**3**	**17**	

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 tools for weeding out anti-social elements (witches) from 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 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 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 Nagaland

In Nagaland, women are excluded from political decision-making spaces; these are considered the domain of men. Women are not allowed to represent in the village councils. They are confined to domestic spheres with the primary tasks of childbearing, cleaning, cooking and agricultural work, while men are engaged in managing political affairs, hunting and warfare. Only men can inherit property. After the father's death, the property goes to the youngest son, who can keep and share with older brothers (J. H. Hutton 1921, 136). Traditionally, a man is not allowed to leave his property to his daughter, although he can leave it for use by the daughter during her lifetime. A woman's own property goes to her children, and her personal ornaments always to her daughter. Regarding the division of work within the traditional family, a woman is like a 'working machine' (Kelhou 1998, 56–57). She manages both household unpaid work of social reproduction and much of agricultural production, with barely any help from her husband or brothers. Over the years, things have been changing with increased education of girls and increased employment outside the household. However, the financial dependence of women still rests on men for the majority of Naga Women.

Focused group discussion in a Naga village

In the Angami Naga society, women are seen as custodians of culture. Management of the house or work surroundings is seen as the duty of women. 'It is a matter of shame if the house and the surrounds are untidy' or unattended. To avoid insult or ridicule by neighbours, women work very hard in attending to all the household 'duties' of cleaning and cooking. A popular saying goes, 'Women are the pride of the home, and men the pride of society' (Nagaland State Commission for Women 2015, 14).

According to Angami traditional customary laws, it is considered an offence if a woman speaks out before the men. There are two reasons why women do not play an active part in decision-making in Angami society: first, women's leadership breaks down clan solidarity or severs social ties; second, they lack time to indulge in community discourses (Nagaland State Commission for Women 2015, 15).

Women are expected to excel in housekeeping or unrecognized, unpaid care work and in agricultural production. They rarely involve themselves in wars; they are perceived as physically weak for the war. Women's participation in war is seen as gathering stones for men to throw at the enemy and carrying food for the warring men who are set out to war with the enemy of another village. Hutton refers to a common practice of headhunting among various tribes of the Northeast, including the Nagas, who would do it to avert the displeasure of some particular evil spirit. Reference to the tiger spirit and snake as evil spirits demanding human or animal sacrifices can be noted frequently in Naga beliefs.

Importantly, women often play the role of mediator between warring villages. Some recent feminist narratives of the Naga society represent Naga women as fearless, tough, intelligent, and not coy and timid. One such narrative describes an act of valour of a Naga woman (Bendangsenla et al. 2021, 17–18).

This story based on a folk song recounts how Longkongla obtained justice for herself by killing men of her village. Longkongla had an 'illegitimate' son who was killed by the village men. So, in grief and as an act of revenge, she invited all the children of the village to her house, fed them and set the house ablaze. To prevent men from coming for her, she spread out 30 mats of millet on the village street and waited for the men with her weaving stock. Men slipped over the millet, and she killed them all with her weaving stick, who otherwise were armed with machetes and spears.

The role of Christianity in relation to women's status in Naga society has been problematic. For example, the women Baptist Foreign Missions made efforts to educate Naga women. They were, however, trained in sewing, knitting, weaving, cooking, and cleaning schools and houses. They were educated in such a way that they would become good housewives not only in male-centric cultural norms but also in feminine and delicate roles (Bendangsenla et al. 2021; in the case of African societies, also see David Ngong 2012); they were instructed not to take up physically challenging jobs and full-time career when they have children. When the Naga Mother's Association demanded the application of India's constitutional law for a 33 per cent reservation of women in the local administrative bodies, the Naga male politicians opposed it by invoking tribal social norms and customs as the main argument.

The Sema society is patriarchal in that women neither have inheritance rights to property nor have any decision-making role in the family and community. A widow is entitled to only one-third of the husband's moveable property. Men are considered as the head of the family; other members of the family function under his 'protection' and control. 'Men are regarded as the backbone' of the Sema society, while women are seen in the background with the primary role of childbearing, rearing and all unpaid care work at home (Zehol 1998; Zhimomi 1998, 47–48). The birth of a male child is a welcome

event as this would enable the continuation of the lineage, and the birth of a female child is seen as worthless. However, over the past several decades, women's position in the Sema society has gotten stronger. The Sema Women's Associations have been working to strengthen women's social position, enabling them to raise their voices. With the introduction of improved production technology, agricultural responsibility as workers and managers has devolved to women. But men's power in politics and decision-making has remained unaltered.

Cultural Rights and Social Beliefs

Our current knowledge of the Northeastern culture of the Nagas is based on the colonial descriptions of the early 20th century. J. H. Hutton (1921) wrote in his monograph on the Angami Nagas, 'old beliefs and cultures are dying; the old traditions were being forgotten; the number of Christians or quasi-Christians is steadily increasing, and the spirit of change is invading and pervading every aspect of village life' (p. vii ff). So, what is now regarded as the traditional aspects of indigeneity is often equated with the terms defined by colonial and Christian systems. 'Although isolated elements of the lost culture have found their way into present times, they mostly lack their former context' (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 the values of the people shape it 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 the 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 two major institutions of social beliefs in Nagaland: the tiger spirit and the ojhas/kabirajs.

The Tiger Man

The Naga tiger-man (*tekhumiavi*) is a subject of mythical, half-human and half-animal being in popular belief. J. H. Hutton (1921) describes him as follows: 'The fear of the tiger among all Nagas is considerable and all regard them as beings apart from the ordinary wild animals and very closely connected with the human race' (p. 208). Sutter (2011, 275) describes tiger-men as an 'exchange of souls between tigers and humans', and not that the tiger-men are 'instances of people transforming into tigers or vice versa'. He further points out that *tekhumiavi* possessions are often accompanied by swelling and severe pain in the knee and elbow joints. However, in the fieldwork in the Angami and Sema villages in Nagaland, we did not hear about such pains and swelling.

Most of the interviewees, including the retired administrator and police officer, believed in the present-day existence of tiger-men, reputed to have big rolling eyes, fierce-looking faces, and huge bodies. Their ability could be obtained by feeding 'chicken flesh and ginger' given in successive collections of six,

five and three pieces. We further learnt that in the beginning, the tiger spirit takes the shape of small insects, then the form of a butterfly and the like progressing to the shape of small animals such as dogs and cats. At this stage, it starts attacking small livestock and eventually turns into a tiger; he is likely to roam around the people's houses and rob them of properties chickens, and piglets. In the Konyak and Sema areas of Nagaland, the tiger men were noted for the frequent killing of humans and cannibalistic and sexual escapades, as we learned from our academic and other interviewees (Thai, 2017).

Historical records (J. H. Hutton 1921; Longchar 2000; Sutter 2008) and our interviews with academics and common people in the Kohima village and Sema areas confirm that during the full moon nights, tiger-spirit men have their 'council of tigers' (Heneise, 2016:96). As noted by Sutter, "During full moon we hold our meetings [….] And then what kind of animals we can take all these things are discussed. We have to divide animals among ourselves […], there is also discussion about the fields of the farmers. We have a system" (Sutter, 2008:272). They would not strike at their own houses or close relatives. In some areas, they were known to sexually attack or harass women, too, if they were found alone in the forests.

When we met a tiger-spirit man in Sema village, we found him to be very kind, with a gentle outlook.

According to the Naga beliefs, human beings are surrounded by demons and evil spirits. These evil spirits can also take human form and lead them to forests and hurt them. Strangely enough, there is no authority to appeal to against such attacks by these evil spirits, including the tiger-spirit men. These are seen as an act of

The tiger man in yellow t-shirt

a tiger-spirit human, who has supernatural powers. People live in fear of the tiger spirit and pray that the next incident will not be an attack on their property and lives. The present-day modern Christianity makes it difficult for the tiger-men to reveal themselves as such or to speak of their abilities.

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 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 states 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.

Nshoga (2009) observes that transformation occurs in all cultures, and it 'produces other culture which does not belong to one's culture, but it is the adoption of another culture' (p. 250). In the case of the Naga village society, 'the impact of the British administration and the works of Christian missionaries influenced the culture of the indigenous Nagas in many ways', including the introduction of foreign laws, education, religion, economy, governance, and mode of living. 'Individualism replaced the communal activities and rituals in which the whole of a village or Khel might join' (Nshoga 2009, 307). 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.

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 end witch persecution and witch hunts 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, 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. 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 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 witches and ritual attacks like 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 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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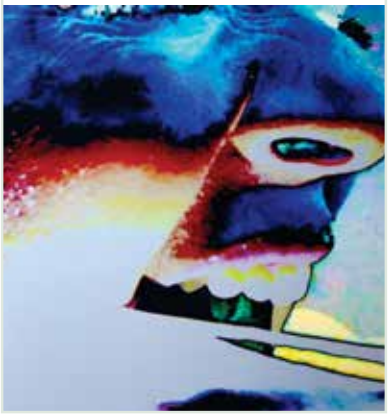

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