Gender, Culture, and Capital: Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks Across Northeast India

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

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COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG SOUTH ASIA

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

Research support for immersive fieldwork and the translation of local languages to English was provided by 17 indigenous scholars. We would like to acknowledge the research inputs made by Poornima M. and Aparajita Sharma of CSD and Anant Pandey of GenDev CRI. We are grateful for the tremendous help we received in conducting this study through identifying and engaging with contact persons for fieldwork while identifying villages in the Northeastern countryside to locate our research within.

We conducted 14 focused-group discussions and 171 in-depth individual interviews with academics, social activists, women and men, shamans/healers/herbalists, village leaders, and common people in Sikkim. 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 discussions 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, academics, 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 Sikkim.

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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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Introduction

This study looks at the interrelated factors of transition from a pre-state forest-dependent and agricultural economy to a social system of an agricultural economy and state-society, a society where new inequalities are brought by global changes such as consumption patterns, new communication technologies and new forms of mobility, all leading to an increase in inequalities and patriarchal forces. Some outcomes of capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a large percentage of women in indigenous and rural populations. The objective of this study is to understand the culture and social beliefs that underlie modern-day witch hunts and other ritual attacks on women in the various states of Northeast India and to explore the specific direction of change in these cultures and belief systems at the nexus of patriarchal capitalist trajectories.

The ongoing transition to a capitalist economy entails a shift from a largely subsistence economy to one driven by accumulation. This usually means the abandonment of forms of sharing, often meant to prevent systematic accumulation and the associated growth of inequality in favour of market-based relations of exchange. Some forms of community-based exchange, such as in joint labour for some agricultural operations, such as land preparation and house construction, may persist. But they are not any more the characteristic forms of inter-household economic relations, which are dominated by market-based exchange. The economy of market-based valuation replaces the moral economy of the commons.

Economic relations, however, are not all that are observed to change. There are also changes in culture. Radio, television, movies, and other forms of information and entertainment bring in new forms of music and dress. Daily routines change with the introduction of office and other non-household work. Families may no longer gather around the fireplace in the evening, rather it is in front of the television. Religions also change to, say, Christianity among many of the indigenous peoples of Northeast India, or Hinduism in Assam and Manipur. Belief systems are also subject to change, for instance, with the introduction of new types of medicines and medical treatment.

Within all this, there is also the change in gender systems, the relations and division of labour between women and men. Marriage and systems of property could also be subject to change. The role of women in community decision-making, as in local village government, is also subject to change with new laws and rules, such as those of the Indian village administrative system of the Panchayat.

What we have outlined above are the impulses for change in economy, culture and gender relations. But they do not enter into societies that are blank sheets. Rather, these impulses necessarily interact with already existing social systems, including, among other aspects, cultural beliefs and gender relations. As a result, there may well be a simultaneous existence of practices that belong to different religious systems. For instance, in early modern Europe Carlo Ginzburg (1991) found evidence of a non-Christian agrarian cult of an ecstatic character. This is the simultaneous existence of two types of cultural practices, one Christian and the other of an earlier agrarian cult, a “cultural compromise” which he called a hybrid.

This simultaneous existence of practices and, we might add, beliefs from different religio-cultural systems shows that it is necessary to study the history of culture and, for that matter, of gender relations or beliefs in witchcraft. In this process of connection forms also change, as, for instance, sacred rocks become Hindu temples or sacred groves become Christian grottos.

Consequently, this study looks at the manner in which older and newer economic, religio-cultural and gender systems have interacted across various communities, mainly indigenous peoples, across Northeast India. In this, we concentrate on the portrayal of persons, mainly women, as causing evil through the use of supernatural powers as they persist or are transformed over these encounters.

Who, then, is a witch? It is often thought that those who cause harm through supernatural, mystical or occult powers is a witch. This formulation would accept that there exist such persons with supernatural powers. But for social analysis what is important is not whether there exist such persons, but the belief in their existence. What is operative is that societies believe that such persons exist and then carry out actions that violate the human rights of the accused. Since it is most often women who are thought to possess and use such supernatural powers, witch accusations and witch hunts are, in the main, a form of gendered violence and persecution.

Witch, of course, is an English word. Each community would have a word in its own language. For instance, *dain* in Jharkhand or toni in Chhattisgarh. In the communities of India's Northeast, there are other words, such as thlen-keepers of the Khasi (Meghalaya), *romle* of the Galo (Arunachal Pradesh), *hingchabi* of the Meitei (Manipur), or tiger-men or tiger-women among the Nagas (Nagaland) the Garo (Meghalaya) and *ning* and *barmo* in Sikkim. The thlen is supposed to be a serpent, its keepers feed human blood to get rich. *Romle* and *hingchabi* are said to be women who cast an evil eye and, through that, cause misfortune, either of a medical or economic type. The tiger men or women are supposed to steal and mystically kill people. The ning is seen to administer poison with intent to kill a person. What is to be noted is that in each of these local definitions, the persons are supposed to have supernatural powers which they use to cause harm. This, as pointed out above, is what the English word witch is, defined as a person who is supposed to have supernatural powers and uses them to bring harm to others. For an analysis carried out in the English language, we will have to use the word as the corresponding word for each of the specific connotations referred to above. This is not to deny the local specificities of these characteristics but to point out what is general in them.

The actions taken against those supposed to have evil powers can also be quite varied, ranging from avoidance, social boycott, exiling or even killing. In our investigations, we did not find the extreme violations, such as forcing women to eat excreta, parading them naked or tonsuring their heads, that are often reported in other parts of India. The murder of supposed witches was reported mainly in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura among the states of the Northeast, as per the records of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). So, it would seem that the extreme measure of killing is resorted to somewhat infrequently in the Northeast. However, our investigations show that violations of human rights did occur in forms such as boycotting or exiling of accused women and their families. In fact, the supposed tiger men or tiger women are so feared that social action is not even taken against them.

In our earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020), we observed that violence against persons accused of being witches, i.e. mainly women who possessed supernatural powers and used them to cause harm to others, is related to two different types of structural transformations occurring somewhat simultaneously: the creation of patriarchy in the move from hoe to plough agriculture and capitalist transformation, e.g., massive structural changes within families from matriliny to patriliny and the formation of patriarchy, along with the primary accumulation of capital and the separation of workers from the means of production. The articulation of belief in

witchcraft alongside such massive structural changes produces a spiritual insecurity that results in the persecution and killing of women, some men and even children. This occurs mainly among indigenous peoples in India as well as parts of Africa and Asia, Oceania and the Amazon region. It also occurred in early modern Europe.

Official police records in India list 'witch persecution' or 'witchcraft' as a cause of killing and list an average of 150 killings per year from 2001 to 2012. The table below shows the motive for murder is witchcraft.

Table 1. Witchcraft as the Motive for Murder 2006 to 2021

Northeastern States	Motive for Murder
Arunachal Pradesh	3
Assam	23
Manipur	0
Meghalaya	22
Mizoram	1
Nagaland	1
Sikkim	0
Tripura	7
Total	**57**

Source: National Crime Records Bureau 2006-2021

Civil society organisations and social scientists who have actively opposed witch violence point out that this is an underestimation since many killings may be shown as having occurred due to property disputes. Most of the accused are women; only 10 to 13 per cent of reported cases involve men. Several states in India, such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Odisha and Rajasthan, have responded by enacting anti-witch persecution laws from the year 2000 onwards.

The accused women are punished in inhuman ways for their alleged diabolical activities. The violence inflicted on them includes both killing and humiliation-cum-banishment from home, along with the seizure of land and properties. This form of violence and its consequences of killing and banishment came to the attention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as an international problem as early as 2009 (The New York Times, 20 May 2021).

This Compendium is a collection of studies of the interaction of gender, culture, and capital in the transformations currently underway in the eight states of India's Northeast. In all these states, we studied one or more indigenous peoples: Galo in Arunachal Pradesh, Boro in Assam, Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya, Mizo in Mizoram, Angami and Sema in Nagaland, Lepcha in Sikkim, and Borok in Tripura. The only non-indigenous community we studied was the basically Hindu Meitei of Manipur. The reason for this choice was to see whether there was a contrast with the others in the interaction of older cultures and beliefs with Hinduism.

Post-modern analysts have often portrayed witch hunts as a reaction to the excesses of capitalist modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). By default, they end up being uncritical of the excesses and human rights violations manifest in witch hunts. However, many of the classical writers on the witch question did not end up justifying witch hunts (Evans-Pritchard 1937), Geschiere (1997) and Ngong (2012). We continue that critique of witch hunts while pointing out that this does not mean a rejection of all that there is in indigenous worldviews and cultural practices. All cultures, however, need critique and reform, and indigenous worldviews are no exception.

Methodology

A systematic literature review that is considered unbiased and more political

and scientific in approach than the traditional narrative reviews was employed to explore people's beliefs in witches and ritual attacks. In the first phase of this research, we identified research assistants who would be collaborating with us. This was followed by research of reports clips about ritual practices in English and local language sources. Search by Google Scholar was of immense help in finding relevant books, studies, papers and archival sources. After the systematic literature review of the subject, we conducted fieldwork in various states. In each, we were supported by some local researchers who both arranged interviews and served as translators. Details of the researchers and fieldwork in each state are given in the relevant chapters.

Qualitative research is characterized by voice-based discussions and an observation-based inductive approach to building knowledge. To understand the role of social beliefs and practices about ritual attacks and branding, we engaged with our field research through individual interactive discussions within the community with thought leaders, farmers, ritual specialists, and those said to be affected by evil spirits, women and men. In total, we conducted 171 interviews and 14 focused group discussions. We were frank and candid in explaining the purpose of our study, i.e., to look at inter-related factors of transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of agricultural economy and a technologically oriented society with patriarchal state control of resources and governance. This transition is marked by new inequalities caused by new production and consumption patterns, new forms of communication and emergent women's agency that are super-imposed over traditional beliefs and cultural practices, leading to an increase in social and gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes, caused by growing capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a significant percentage of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

Table 2. Individual Interviews

Northeastern States	No. of Individual Interviews
Arunachal Pradesh	14
Assam	19
Manipur	36
Meghalaya	26
Mizoram	14
Nagaland	34
Sikkim	14
Tripura	14
Total	**171**

Source: Authors' Interviews

Background: Women in the States of Northeast India

Northeast India includes eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The proportion of indigenous people (Scheduled Tribes) in the population of the different states is:

Table 3. Percentage of Indigenous Population in Northeastern States

Northeastern States	Indigenous Population (in percent)
Arunachal Pradesh	68.8
Assam	12.4
Manipur	40.9
Meghalaya	86.1
Mizoram	94.4
Nagaland	86.5
Sikkim	33.8
Tripura	31.8

Source: https://tribal.nic.in/ST/Statistics8518.pdf, last accessed December 16, 2023.

Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland are dominated by indigenous communities, who account for 69 to 94 percent of the population. In Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura, they account for 30 percent to 40 percent of the population, while in Assam, they are just about 12 percent of the population. Based on this differentiation, we have classified the states based on the proportion of indigenous peoples being high (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland); medium (Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura); and low (Assam).

Data on women's situation is taken from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).[1] We use NFHS 5 (2019-20) to show the present situation and the trend over NFHS 3 (2005-06), NFHS 4 (2015-16) and NFHS 5 (2019-20) to show the trend, whether better, worse or the same. The key indicators we have used are:

Women's role in household decision-making

1. Women usually decide on large household expenses.

Ownership of Property

2. Women's ownership of land

Women's mobility

3. Women decide on visits outside the village/ community.

Violence against women

4. Ever experienced physical violence.
5. Ever experienced sexual violence

Women being complicit in patriarchy

6. Agree that the husband's hitting is justified.

The results are given in Table 4. The current situation of women is given in the columns 2019-20 from NFHS-5. Whether this situation was an improvement (better), deterioration (worse) or no different (same) is given in the columns to the right. The states have been classified on the basis of the proportion of indigenous peoples in the population.

Women's decision-making power is generally higher in the states with high indigenous people states, compared to the others. Assam, the low indigenous population state, is in the lowest position at 3.7 percent, which is half of the All-India average of 7.4 percent. Manipur and Tripura are also below the All-India average, not much better off than Assam.

In ownership of land, Meghalaya, the matrilineal state, obviously does much better than the others, with 53.7 percent of women owning land. Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura are all in double digits, while the rest are around the single-digit All-India average. All the states, however, are improving their position in women's ownership of land.

For women's mobility outside the village/ community, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Assam are all lower than the All-India average, while Arunachal, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura are above the All-India average.

Violence is an important indicator of women's situation. Of the states with high indigenous populations, only Arunachal Pradesh, at 27.2 percent, is in the twenties, along with Tripura and Sikkim for women who faced physical violence in the preceding year. While Assam at 37.4 percent is higher than the All-India average, the standout figure is that of Manipur, with 45.1 percent of women have faced physical violence. The figures for having faced sexual violence are below the All-India average for most of the states of Northeast India, with only Arunachal, Tripura and Assam being above the All-India average.

1. Our thanks to Dr. Swati Dutta for having put together this data from NFHS 3, 4 and 5.

Table 4. Key Indicators on women's situation from the National Family Health Survey in the Northeastern States

	Decision Making		Property		Mobility		Violence				Complicit in Patriarchy	
Indicator	Women Decide Large Purchases		Land Ownership		Travel Outside Village/ Community		Physical Violence		Sexual Violence		Attitude to Husband's Violence	
	2019-20	Change from 2005-6	2019-20	Change from 2005-6	2019-20	Change from 2005-6	2019-20	Change from 2005-6	2019-20	Change from 2005-6	2019-20	Change from 2005-6
State												
High ST%												
Arunachal	14.7	Worse	6.7	Better	57.5	Better	27.2	Better	6.4	Better	33.4	Better
Mizoram	12.2	Worse	12.2	Better	78.5	Same	11.4	Better	1.4	Same	32.9	Better
Meghalaya	12.5	Worse	53.7	Better	41.2	Better	16.5	Better	5.6	Worse	31.9	Better
Nagaland	21.9	Better	6.0	Better	39.0	Better	13.3	Better	1.6	Better	23.9	Better
Medium ST%												
Manipur	4.9	Better	10.9	Better	45.3	Worse	45.1	Worse	4.2	Better	65.9	Better
Sikkim	12.8	Better	8.4	Better	75.9	Better	20.7	Worse	1.9	Better	32.3	Worse
Tripura	4.4	Worse	11.5	Better	61.4	Better	28.5	Better	6.8	Better	29.5	Better
Low ST%												
Assam	3.7	Worse	6.7	Better	45.7	Better	37.4	Same	7.0	Better	32.1	Better
All-India	7.4	Same	8.8	Better	50.0	Better	32.4	Better	6.0	Better	45.4	Better

Source: Calculated from unit-level data of NFHS 3 and 5.

Note: We used the term ST (Schedule Tribe) for indigenous people, as is stated in the official records in India.

Attitudes to violence are important in reflecting the acceptance or rejection of men's right to violence against women. Women's acceptance of the husband's right to violence against wives can be taken as an indicator of women being complicit with patriarchy. The figures for this factor are quite high – from around one-fifth to one-third of women felt that husband did have such a right. However, here again, the standout figure is that of Manipur, with almost 70 percent of women thinking that men did have such a right. With such a high degree of women's acceptance of men's right to violence, it is not surprising that this state also reports the highest incidence of physical violence among states in the Northeast. In both these indicators, the incidence of physical violence and its acceptance by women in Manipur is well above the All-India average. This would support Patricia Mukhim's point that Manipur women have been brought up into a patriarchal mindset.

A limitation of the above analysis is that it is by states and not communities, e.g., indigenous peoples and others. But given the generally better performance of indigenous people-dominated states, we would expect that indicators for the non-indigenous communities would overall be worse than for the indigenous communities.

Above, we have looked at some indicators of women's position and the strengthening of patriarchy over the years. A more comprehensive analysis would be based on an index combining all of the above indicators and other relevant indicators from NFHS. This is shown below in Table 5. This calculation has been done for 2005-06 (NFHS 3), and 2019-20 (NFHS 5).

Table 5: Burden of Patriarchy in States of Northeast India

	2005-06	2019-20
High STs percent		
Arunachal	51.4	53.2
Mizoram	42.8	39.8
Meghalaya	55.8	49.2
Nagaland	69.7	40.7
Medium STs percent		
Manipur	76.1	87.4
Sikkim	47.7	32.1
Tripura	69.6	72.9
Low STs percent		
Assam	79.2	85.1

Source: Calculated from unit-level data of NFHS 3 and 5.

The study has considered ten indicators for calculating the patriarchy index.

These indicators include ownership of house by women; ownership of land by women; women usually decide on their own healthcare; women usually decide on large household purchases; mobility market; mobility health facility; places outside the village/community; women ever experienced physical violence; women ever experienced sexual violence; women agreeing that husband hitting is justified. Before arriving at the score, the normalisation of the indicator values on a scale of 0 to 100 is required to compare the scores across the states and over time. The lower the score indicates the better the performance of the states, whereas the higher the score indicates the poor performing states.

In 2019-20, the states with a high percentage of indigenous population have weaker patriarchy than the other states, except for Sikkim. Sikkim, in fact, is the best performer with the weakest patriarchy in 2019-20. Manipur and Assam have the highest burden of patriarchy, with Tripura following them. Other than Manipur, Assam, and Tripura, there is a decline in the strength of patriarchy in the states of Northeast India. Arunachal Pradesh is at almost the same level in 2019-20 as in 2005-06.

This analysis is followed by eight chapters, reporting the state of affairs about witch hunts and ritual practices. These studies were conducted in the years 2021-2023. Assam in 2021; Meghalaya and Nagaland in 2022; Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura in 2023. We hope a critical brief analysis of cultures and belief systems at the nexus of patriarchal capitalist trajectories will result in social reflections, community actions and policymaking to end witch hunts and adverse actual practices. More important, in formulating and implementing measures for women's equality and dignity in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres.

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

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

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

Research Team: Jarjum Ete, Renu Koyu, Poornima M.

Introduction

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

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

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

This study engages with the belief system and ritual practices connected with *romle* in the Aalo region of Arunachal Pradesh. Furthermore, we seek to explore the specific directions of change in belief systems at the nexus of patriarchal culture and capitalist trajectories.

The imagination of *romle* is not limited to the practice of *romle* branding or *nyibus* (healers/priests); it also includes the worldview or cosmology that breeds belief in ritual attacks – a supernatural power to heal or hurt others. Our findings explore how this is a manifestation of social control or jealousy, a distinct feature

of socio-economic changes due to structural forces or traumatic experiences in the transition to a growing capitalist economy.

We explore social beliefs and cultural practices as well as economic concerns that give rise to witch violence and ritual attacks. It also gives voice to the efforts of women and allies in the Northeast of India working to co-create the space for human rights-based discourses, legal recourse to action against violence and questioning the impact of witch hunts and ritual attacks from a gender just lens.

Methodology

North-East India includes eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. According to the 2011 Census of India, the state of Arunachal Pradesh has a population of 13,87,727 people, inclusive of 105 indigenous communities (called Scheduled Tribes) with 9,51,827 people. The two authors of this study have been in contact with some women leaders of Aalo area in the West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabited by the Galo people. In consideration of our reach, we selected West Siang for this study.

A systematic literature review that is considered unbiased and more political and scientific in approach than the traditional narrative reviews, was employed to explore people's beliefs in witches and ritual attacks, like *romle* lanam (the concept of the evil eye in Galo society). In the first phase of this research, we identified research assistants, who would be collaborating with us. This was followed by research of news clips about ritual practices in English and local language sources. Search by Google Scholar was of immense help in finding relevant books, studies, papers and archival sources.

We decided to focus on the period from 1991 to 2022, keeping in view the emerging women's movement in India, feminist writings and the opening of the Indian economy, with attention to the accumulation process in indigenous societies. Throughout the study, one of our concerns was: whether this accumulation process has played a role in changing the traditional beliefs and social, and cultural practices.

After the systematic literature review of the subject in March 2023, we conducted fieldwork among the Galo people in Aalo area of Arunachal Pradesh. We conducted 14 detailed interviews as explained below.

S. No.	Type of Person	Number	Description
1.	*Nyibus*	2	1 woman, 1 man engaged in treatment of persons affected by *romle*
2.	Farmers	2	1 woman, 1 man engaged in swidden cultivation
3.	Officials	2	Women, office-bearers of the State Women's Welfare Society
4.	Activist	1	A well-known women's rights advocate in the state
5.	Academics	2	A folklore writer and a professor, who did a Ph.D. on Galo women's empowerment
6.	Traditional singer	1	A woman ponu folk singer, sings during mopin and other cultural events
7.	Shopkeeper	1	A woman shopkeeper known for her views on *romle*
8.	Lawyers	2	Women lawyers who practise in the High Court of the state
9.	Political Interpreter	1	A retired political Interpreter and local farmer
	Total	**14**	**7 women and 7 men**

Research support, both for the fieldwork and translation from the local language into English and vice-versa, was provided by a young scholar Renu Koyu and a known social activist Jarjum Ete. Photographs used in this study were taken by Renu Koyu. We are grateful to them for varying kinds of field support, such as finding contact persons for our interviews and finding key persons like *nyibus* and villagers under difficult physical conditions, on a sensitive subject of culture and belief systems. Our learnings came from the fieldwork, a series of frank and candid discussions with farmers, academics, *nyibus*, shamans/priests and social activists.

Qualitative research is characterised by voice-based discussions and an observation-based inductive approach to building knowledge. To understand the role of social beliefs and practices about ritual attacks and branding as *romle*, we engaged with our field research through individual interactive discussions within the community with thought leaders, farmers, *nyibus* and *romle*-affected women and men. We were frank and candid in explaining the purpose of our study, i.e., to look at inter-related factors of transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of agricultural economy and a technologically oriented society with patriarchal state control resources and governance. This transition is marked by new inequalities, caused by new production and consumption patterns and new forms of communication and emergent women's agency that are super-imposed over traditional beliefs and cultural practices, leading to an increase in social and gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes, caused by growing capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a significant percentage of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

In our introduction with the interviewees, we further explained that our study intends to explore social beliefs and ritual practices as well as cultural and economic concerns that give rise to gender-based violence, such as witch hunts and *romle*; yet at the same time create social and legal spaces for human rights-based discourses, questioning the practice of *romle* and witch hunts. As a research outcome, we would like to see the social systems of Northeast India, where *romle* or witch hunts will not be seen as a normal part of indigenous cultures.

To our surprise, our explanation of the purpose of our research was well-received with a polite silence and nodding of heads. Through our previous knowledge of the subject of witch hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understand that a hierarchical gender social order provides a different perspective and worldview on inequality and marginality. These result in frequent, even contradictory answers about social beliefs and ritual practices related to marginalized voices, a lack of resource control and marginal representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As researchers, our challenge lies in presenting a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field and dismantling dualism and contradictions in field discussions.

We speak from the standpoint of those who are directly affected by customary practices that are still gender unjust.

Background: Borderlands

In a broad sense, the Galo and other indigenous peoples in Aalo are societies that have not been within or part of state systems for a long period of their history and remained so until British colonial rule. These indigenous peoples, however, did not possess a supra-village political organization such as a state with a standing army and bureaucracy. There were only loose relations between groups of these people. "Each village acted independently according to the dictates of its village council,

called Kebba among the Galo]," (Nyori 1993: 165). In fact, many of the indigenous peoples of Arunachal Pradesh and other hill states of Northeast India had a history of resisting state power (Bhattacharya and Pachuau 2019:12).

The non-state character of the Adis or Galo puts them squarely within the category of indigenous peoples. Some other indigenous peoples of Northeast India, such as the Khasi of Meghalaya, had a proto-state structure, with chiefdoms. But they had neither a standing army nor a regular bureaucracy, nor did they collect some form of rent from the farmers. This results in the Khasi also falling within the category of indigenous peoples.

The next feature of these indigenous societies is that they are largely of a subsistence nature with little accumulation. In fact, they often have processes for redistribution of the surpluses that they may produce or forms of sanctions for those who do accumulate wealth in what is considered an illicit manner. The earlier analysis by Kelkar and Nathan (2020) emphasized the ritual attacks on women as part of the process of building patriarchy in the transition from subsistence to accumulative economies. This is something we will accept here along with looking at the culture and belief system of Galo people of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Galos are almost entirely located within Arunachal Pradesh, with some possible spillover into neighbouring areas of Assam. But the Tani group includes tribes, which are spread across not just India but also adjoining Yunnan, China and neighbouring areas of Myanmar. One such indigenous people are the Lisu, who are mainly in Yunnan, China, but a few thousand of whom are in Arunachal Pradesh and are also known as the Yobin in India (Kaushik 2022). Like Arunachal Pradesh, Yunnan is also a mosaic of indigenous peoples known as minority nationalities or minzu in China (Yang 2008). There could be much in common in their ritual practices and cultures. Having been fortunate enough to study gender relations and ritual practices on both sides of the border, we will try to connect what we have observed on the two sides. As Duncan McDuie-Ra points out about the indigenous peoples of Northeast India, "They may not be like other parts of India, but they may be like other places outside India," (2019: 85).

This connectedness across borders shows the limitation of the concept of borderlands. Looked at from a political point of view, Arunachal Pradesh and other states of Northeast India are obviously Indian borderlands, while Yunnan is a Chinese borderland. Socio-economic and cultural developments on both sides are affected by their respective mainland. We will look at some of these influences later. At this stage, we would point out that the sharing of common origins and pre-colonial connections are together likely to be manifest in some similar cultural practices and beliefs. As one would expect, both borderlands were regarded by the mainland in similar terms. In British times the name Abor was used to signify 'barbarians', 'rude', 'unruly, and 'savage' (Nyori 1993: 4). Similar terms such as barbarians, savage, uncivilized, rude, bellicose, dangerous and exotic were used to characterize the indigenous peoples of Yunnan (Yang, 2008: 743).

One point of difference does stand out between the two borderland regions of Arunachal Pradesh and Yunnan – the difference in the times of incorporation into the respective states. Yunnan became part of Beijing's rule during the time of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty in the mid-1200s; while Arunachal Pradesh's incorporation into the Delhi state began with British colonial rule in the mid-1800s and became effective only after India's Independence in 1947. The result would be that in Yunnan the force of the Confucian ideology has been working for many more centuries than ideologies of Hinduism or Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh, leading one to expect a stronger influence of the earlier Tani ideologies in Arunachal Pradesh.

Galo traditional house

Social Structures in Galo Society

The social structure of the Galo community is patriarchal with male control in the household and decision-making in the family and community. Patriarchy is strengthened by the patrilocal marriage system and male control and ownership of the lineage.

Traditionally, Galos built their houses on a platform, the height of which varies from house to house. They use the front of verandas as the space for men and traditionally for cooking by men during rituals. The entry of women in the menstruation period is prohibited in this space. The back part of the house has a veranda for women to meet each other and use activities like winnowing, weaving, cleaning water pots and other utensils, and storing firewood for daily use. These houses have separate ladders for women and men, called Nyilo Koba for men to access the front veranda and Nyim Koba to access the women's veranda at the back of the house (Bagra, 2020).

The Galo had no script of their own. According to a legend, they once had a script but on their long migratory journey from the south, where they are settled now, their ancestors had written it on deer skin. But in the absence of food during this journey, they ended up eating the deer skin for survival. In Galo society, the people's knowledge was transmitted orally, passed on from one generation to the next. The young learnt most of the practical work, including craft, weaving and farming through observation and its application in day-to-day work. During our fieldwork in Galo villages, we asked a couple of older people how they acquired skills and knowledge. They answered that they learnt simply through observation and helping their parents and village elders in their daily work.

A view of Galo village

Community gatherings were an important part of village life. In these gatherings, village elders would narrate to the youth the community's history and beliefs. This was also a place where young women and men, with a proclivity for speech, story-telling and ritual chanting, would be inducted into nyibuhood (priesthood) through song and dance. Apparently, there is no gender restriction on who can be a *nyibu* but the existing gender relations of the Galo makes it easier for men to initiate into the priesthood, rather than women. Burdened with the domestic routine of cooking, cleaning, and care work, as well as farming, weaving and making poka (rice beer), women did not have the time to devote themselves to the time-consuming pursuit of becoming a *nyibu*. In our interviews, we did, however, meet a female *nyibu*, but this is a recent development as there are no references to women *nyibus* in literature.

The *nyibu* is the centre of Galo rites, rituals and social memory. Through rituals and ritual chanting, a *nyibu* is expected to cure and heal all kinds of diseases. There is a general belief among Galo people that modern medicine cannot replace the ritual performed for the general well-being and prosperity of a family and the community (Dabi, 2017:1060).

Galo Economy: A Gendered System of Resource Rights

The Galo economy, until recently, was one of swidden cultivation or jhum in the uplands. This went along with the gathering of forest products, besides fishing and hunting. The Galo also raised animals, pigs and chicken, besides the semi-domesticated mithun or bison. There was some barter trade, exchanging surplus produce, such as chillies, iron and brass from Tibet. Later, wet rice cultivation in valleys was taken up along with horticulture. Arunachal Pradesh is currently the largest producer of kiwis and the second-largest producer of large cardamom in India.

The Galo myth of the origin of agriculture attributes it to the first woman, Mopin, who brought seeds with her. Given the fact that gathering forest produce was largely women's work, this myth points to women's role in moving from gathering to cultivating, or from foraging to producing. But cultivation is not a socially prized economic activity. That is reserved for hunting, which is exclusively men's work.

The exclusion of women from hunting, however, seems to have a history of women's

participation at one time. The story is that there was a competition between women and men to see who could be better hunters. Obviously, according to this story, at that time, women were also hunters. When women lost this competition, they were excluded from hunting or even touching hunting weapons. Hunting became men's work and the most prestigious activity. Even when hunting became merely a matter of recreation with little economic role, it remained socially highly regarded. Hunting trophies are placed in the community hall or Moshup (Nyori, 1993: 182).

Before the 20th century, the Galo had extraordinarily little interaction with the outside world. Extremely terrestrial and isolated from their neighbours, the only interactions were to barter certain items like salt, arom (brass ornaments), tadok (beads) and livestock. As a result, these items became extremely valuable cultural capital for the people. They continued to be important to the community as symbols of wealth, prosperity, and prestige. Tadoks (beads) and arom (brass ornaments) as antique pieces have been passed down through generations and are priced high.

We have heard of cases where people have bartered them for land and, very recently, even jobs. The main value of the tadok and beads is their connection to the past, to the ancestors long gone and to the history attached to them. The older the ornaments and beads, the more expensive they are. Around 2000 to 2010, demand for old ornaments and beads grew as the rich and powerful wanted to own the ones that are truly old and, therefore, "original". Interestingly, women have been at the centre of the tadok and arom trade. We met with women, who can distinguish the old and "original" tadoks from the newer varieties and who use this knowledge to buy from one part and re-sell them to others at exponentially higher prices. We also heard that beads were being sold for Rs.10,000 a piece to a strand costing more than Rs.100,000. Now, imitations that look like the old ones are sold by merchants from Assam. Blackburn's Himalayan Tribal Tales (2008) a monograph on the Apatani indigenous community, contains stories of inter-tribal interactions at that time that mention the trading of tadok, arom, mithun, woven fabric, etc. The account presents the development of the tadok trade and how it connected the tribes to Tibet and Assam, creating a trade route.

A set of gongs

For the Galo, wealth usually meant owning properties like brass ornaments, beads, mithun and land. These are still culturally significant to the Galo and have managed to stay relevant from the times of barter to the current market economy. Traditionally, women inherit beads from their mothers when they marry and go to their marital homes. This will eventually be passed down to her daughter(s) and daughter(s)-in-law. However, for everything else she earns by virtue of her own arduous work, she can use it as she pleases. During our fieldwork, in Darka, we interviewed a woman in her late sixties, who told us that the land their house is built on was acquired by her through the money she saved selling rice she cultivated on her father's fields. This is how she managed to send her brother to school and college and sacrificed her own chances of getting an education. Interestingly, she inherited some of her family's ancestral land as well. However, her case is an exception, not a norm for women's ownership of ancestral land.

Women's Exclusion

Within Galo social organization, gender exclusion works at two levels, that of the familial and social divisions of labour. At the family level, the arrangements for the ritual ceremonies are made by men (Nyori, 1993: 208). Women do not have rights to land or ancestral property. They exist with "all kinds of vulnerability" (Basar, 2016:45). At the higher social level of the ritual specialists too, there seems to have been an exclusion of women from acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to be a *nyibu*. The *nyibu* must learn the various divining methods, usually involving grains of rice, eggs, chicken or rocks. The *nyibu* must also learn the various chants and dances. This learning is usually conducted in a long period of apprenticeship as an assistant, called Bo.

The socio-economic and political spheres of Galo society are governed by the Kebba (village council) and Panchayati Raj institutions (PRI). The gaonburras (village elders) appointed by the government usually head the Kebba. Traditionally, the Kebba had the power to conduct trials in all civil and criminal cases, including adultery, family quarrels, murder, rape, theft and witch (*romle*) accusations and killings. But with the development of PRI, most disputes related to land and development of the village fall within the jurisdiction of the Panchayat; criminal cases are within the purview of the modern law courts; and all customary disputes, intra- and inter-family cases, are settled by the Kebba. Surprisingly, most of the rape cases, though they are criminal cases, were disposed of by the Kebba. In all levels of society, women are denied their rights, especially on the grounds of culture and religion, thereby making them victims of discrimination.

Women were excluded from the Kebba. Since marriage was patrilocal, they were less familiar with inter-clan matters in their marital village and were excluded from discussions on such matters. Overall, it meant that while women were not formally excluded from the political sphere of the village council, as was the case with the Khasi of Meghalaya State, they were, in practice, excluded from the political sphere.

Women's exclusion extends to the ritual sphere. The Galo religion is of nature worship and shamanistic religion. There is a belief in various spirits that live not only in animate beings but also in inanimate objects and geographical features. To overcome unexplained illness or misfortune, there is both appeasement and propitiation of various spirits, performed by *nyibus* through the ritual of divination. This involves reading the liver of a chick or the yolk of a boiled egg to find out what kind of spirit or a human being has affected the family and what kind of sacrificial ritual is needed for appeasement.

Women are not formally excluded from being a *nyibu*, it is considered a gift ordained by nature, acquired through a dream or spirit visits. However, being a *nyibu* means the acquisition of chanting skills in a different language (the archaic Galo spoken language) and other time-consuming singing and dancing during rituals. Women did not have time for induction into nyibuhood, so they preferred not to be a *nyibu*. Both women and men we interviewed accepted that women are overburdened. When a woman is not able to manage both housework and farm work, the man brings in an additional wife.

We have already mentioned the exclusion of women from hunting. In jhum, while men did the felling of trees and their burning, subsequent tasks, such as seeding, weeding and harvesting, were mainly carried out by women. But land and other property remained squarely in the hands of men (Ete and Ete 1997). The land was inherited by men in the patrilineal line. Women, as widows, were at best caretakers on behalf of minor sons.

In movable property, women did have a share. They owned the beads and part of the brass gongs. These forms of movable property were highly valued, and women could give their beads and other movable to their daughters and even daughters-in-law. Besides that, daughters (and sons) living with their parents could cultivate a part of the family land and use the resulting income to get some assets for themselves.

Thus, there were many exclusions of women. They were excluded from ownership of land, a crucial production resource. They were forbidden to take part in hunting. Men organized sacrifices. This subordination of women within the family was noticeable in our interactions, both formal and casual, with married couples. The wife remained seated a little behind her husband and did not intervene in the discussion unless asked to. In a sense, this is like what happened in the Kebba, the village assembly, where women's participation would be on matters concerning them (Nyori 1993), where they could present and represent their views, though they had little or no role in decision making.

Romle: The Evil Eye

While being excluded from many positive aspects of social life, women have been over-included in the negative areas. This is in the possession of the power to cause harm to others, termed as the use of "evil eye", or "buri najar" in Hindi and *romle* in the Galo language. *Romle* is the evil eye; *romle lanam* is the act of casting an evil eye; and r*omle lane* is the person who possesses the evil eye. We have used the term *romle* to refer to women and some men accused of casting the evil eye and causing harm. In our interviews and discussions, the term *romle* was used rather than *romle* lanam or *romle* lane.

There is little known about *romle* in the ethnographic literature. The compilation of Galo customary law does mention a penalty for causing harm with black magic (Ete and Ete 1997: 109) and a penalty for cursing another person (Ete and Ete 1997: 112). But nothing about the process of finding the *romle*. A key task of *nyibus*, the ritual specialists of the Galo, is to provide relief to those affected by *romle* by identifying the people, mainly women, causing the unexplained illness.

In an interview with a *nyibu* in Darka village, we learnt that the original *Romle* was the elder brother of Tani (the first male god). For some unknown reason, their father secretly cast some magic on *Romle* that made him see his own species as food. He started to prefer raw meat to overcooked meat, which left the mother perplexed. All those who are accused of being *romle* today are believed to be his descendants. According to this *nyibu*, when a *romle* is hungry for human meat, they cannot help but see their closest relatives – parents or spouse as food (the *nyibu* used the word

'banana', maybe to reflect how human flesh for them just another ordinary, everyday food they would eat).

In Galo society, *romle* is a wayward soul, who is supposedly born with an evil eye, and can be either a man or a woman. Sometimes a whole family/clan/village can be *romle*, infecting their spouses or the mental household after they marry and go to the marital household. Such a person can cause sickness, harm or even death of an individual or family she/he cast an evil eye on harm, or even death of an individual or family she/he cast an evil eye on. Generally, *romle* is believed to eat the soul of a person, which is manifested in physical ailments and even death. This often leads to their exclusion from any kind of social gathering in the village and community, often resulting in social persecution, humiliation and being driven out of the village.

The *romle* loses control of their sense of right and wrong, natural and unnatural when they crave the flesh of a human being. For two or three days, the *romle* would be in great physical pain after they devour the victim (metaphorical sense). One of the ways to know a *romle* is that they continuously vomit after the act and in their vomit, there are usually tell-tale signs of their crime: hair of the victim. Of course, they do not presuppose any malady as a case of *romle* lanam before divining the cause through the ritual of roksin kognaam (chicken liver divination). Even if through divining, a person's or family's misfortune is figured out as a case of *romle* lanam, the *romle* lane individual is not confronted. The *nyibu* will prescribe rituals as solutions till the problems go away and that is all that matter. This was the position of all *nyibus* we interviewed.

In our discussions on manifestations or local practices that would amount to the use of supernatural powers, we did not come across the term "evil eye". Of course, in everyday parlance in mainland India, people will often use the term evil eye and a black spot is put on babies to ward it off. But there is no identification of a particular person as having an evil eye. Among the Galo and other tribes of the Adi, however, the evil eye is possessed by a person, usually a woman. In other Tani peoples, the possession and use of the evil eye is an addition to the types of supernatural powers that those denounced as witches are supposed to have. Regarding witchcraft, while possession of the evil eye is an assumption, one that is a belief, what does happen is the persecution of women, who are said to have the evil eye. These forms of persecution may be less gruesome than those that exists among indigenous peoples in Central India or countries of Africa, but is nevertheless a real persecution, involving social boycott.

Identifying Women as Romle and Strengthening Patriarchy

How did the *romle* belief system and related rituals work? A key informant explained the process: "If someone is very ill, the healer (*nyibu* or shaman) can perform a chicken test to find out why and from where it came. After chanting mantras, the healer can read the chicken liver. He preferred three or five people to read the liver – the majority view is taken as correct. They can identify the person who has brought about the illness. But if the person is named, it can be challenged in the village council and the accuser/s can be asked to provide proof of the accusation. So, this is done secretly – the name won't be disclosed, but the area the person comes from, along with other identifying marks. The village knows who has brought about the illness - they know this from past quarrels, which indicates who has an interest in causing the illness." This is very similar to the process noted in Jharkhand, with the accusation based on the history of enmity or quarrels.

Roksin kognam (chicken liver divination). The *nyibu* (extreme left with a chick in his left hand and a local knife in the right hand) is chanting and invoking the spirits to speak to him. The ones sitting with him are his bo (assistant priest). While still chanting, he will sacrifice the chick and take out its liver to divine an answer and remedy.

Two kinds of action then follow this identification. First, the aggrieved family must sacrifice an animal, ranging from a chicken to a pig or mithun. This can itself be quite costly. The second action is then taken by the village community against the accused *romle*. Word spreads and people in the village start avoiding her and her family. Though there is no explicit rule that requires the boycott of *romle*s, they are not invited to village functions and rituals. From conversations with people of the older generations; *romles* and their families were often driven out of the village or forced to live on its outskirts. Such people might themselves move to another village or even seek conversion to another religion, Christianity, or Hinduism. Many said that people are hesitant to share food and drink with them.

A story narrated by one of the *nyibu* we interviewed,

> *"Though the romle is not named by the nyibu, words spread, nevertheless. People whisper among themselves and arrive at their own conclusions about certain people as being romles and, therefore, avoid them as much as possible. To protect themselves and their families from the claws of the romle, people avoid sharing certain food items with them – rice paste, chicken, ginger – and items like needles, thread, etc. Though there is no explicit rule that calls for keeping romles from taking part in social gatherings or drinking and eating with others, people usually avoid inviting them to avoid any misfortune*

The person they are divining for is a prosperous farmer who is converting one of his lands into a fishery. He had chronic pain in his left leg for which he had consulted a doctor but even after medical treatment when the pain persisted, the family decided to call the *nyibu*. According to the divination, the farmer had earned the ire of isi urom (water spirit).

> *falling on them and their loved ones. This in turn results in people believed to be romles getting socially ostracized…. People accused of being Romle could not be driven out of their villages because kinship is stronger than any other factor for the Galo. But the social ostracization would compel some people to leave their lands for better treatment elsewhere."*

Ostracism could well compel *romle* families to leave their own village and seek better treatment elsewhere. It could also lead to conversion to another religion.

"Every village has at least one witch [using the English word]. A wife may bring it with her from her natal family and spread it among the marital family." As mentioned in legends, though the first *romle* was thought to be a man, people who are supposed to be *romle* are largely women. From various interviews, we got the figure of some 80 per cent *romle* being women.

At the same time, it is also said that many prominent people, including men, have at some time been accused of being *romle*. We were even told that in earlier times, strong women were accused of having acquired the *romle* attribute from the strong Northern spirits, i.e., spirits from the region of Tibet.

Importantly, this denigration of women as having the evil eye is part of the process of the formation of patriarchy. We have seen above the monopolization by men of superior status, as hunters; the ownership of land and other property; of the political sphere; and of the ritual sphere too. These monopolies have their counterpart in the negative portrayal of women as possessors of the evil eye; while men, who become *nyibu*, are the ones who find those who possess the evil eye. Women are mainly *romle*; while men are almost exclusively *romle*-finders. This is a parallel to women named as witches (dain) and men as witch-finders (ojha) in other parts of India.

An altar from a ritual conducted a few months ago.

The exclusion from positive spheres of activity and inclusion in the negative sphere, together make up the complex of patriarchy. In a sense, the characterization of women as having the evil eye is an early manifestation of the ideology of misogyny that accompanies patriarchy.

Donyi-Polo, Christianity and Romle

There are two trends of religio-cultural reform in Northeast India. The dominant trade has been the movement to promote organized religion, such as Christianity, in most of these states (Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya) or Hinduism (in Manipur). The other trend has been the attempt to reformulate and systematize traditional religions, such as Heraka (Naga), Bathou (Bodo), SengKhasi (Khasi) and Donyi Polo. The Galo and other Adi tribes in Arunachal Pradesh have been part of the reformulation of traditional religion in the form of the Donyi-Polo religious system, based on the Sun (Donyi) and Moon (Polo).

At one level this is a reformulation of the traditional indigenous religious beliefs. But as pointed out by John Thomas (2019) this has been part of an attempt to recast them as tributaries and extensions of Hinduism, with "traditional gods becoming avatars of Hindu gods and the existing religious and cultural practices becoming attuned to the standards set by Hindutva" (Thomas, 2019: 325).

Beliefs in *romle* or the evil eye are not necessarily rejected by Donyi-Polo. Rather, these beliefs are at the subterranean level. They are not rejected but lie under the surface. They do influence current behaviour, with covert boycotts of families associated with *romle* accusations. As one woman told

us, “Even as children we would be told to be careful of that clan.” Thus, the belief in *romle*, while subterranean, is real, and has effects on current behaviour. To eradicate this from the belief system, it needs to be confronted and not just brushed aside.

The Donyi-Polo religion is said to have been promoted to stop the spread of Christianity. But Christianity too did not oppose the culture of *romle* or evil spirits. Rather, it was propagated as a way of dealing with evil spirits. True believers in Christianity were supposed to be protected from these evil spirits. Christianity was supposed to provide protection against evil spirits. But the belief in evil spirits could remain, as it were, at the subterranean level. Only, instead of seeking relief through sacrifices dictated by a *nyibu*, those who thought they were affected sought protection through the Christian church.

In our discussions and interviews, *romle* often came up rather late, after some prodding about the possible existence of evil practices. This reminds us of a discussion with one of our Chinese colleagues, the late Prof. Shih Hua. When we were discussing the possibility of the existence of such beliefs, she initially denied them quite categorically. Much later she remembered that in childhood they would be told to be careful when passing by a certain house. The children were told to avoid that house if they had an open wound, as the woman there might introduce some poison into their bodies even at a distance. There is a longue duree in the continued existence of such beliefs. Change in religion, or even rejection of all religions, as in China after the Communist Revolution, does not necessarily end earlier beliefs. They often are still in the subterranean layer and continue, even if with lesser force, to influence current practices.

Encounters with Capitalist Modernity

As mentioned above, production was basically for self-consumption with occasional surpluses being bartered for goods, such as iron and brass, that are not produced locally. More recently, however, as transport and economic links have grown with the rest of India, there has been a growth of market-oriented production, particularly in horticulture and handicrafts. Arunachal Pradesh is the largest producer of kiwi and the second-largest producer of large cardamom in India. Much of this was sold to mainland India.

Thus, the impact of capital through market relations is a recent phenomenon. But some form of accumulation seems to have started even before those market relations were established. The semi-domesticated mithun had become a symbol of status, and there was status connected with the number of mithuns one could sacrifice. It is not clear whether those of higher status were more victims of the evil eye who could, thus, be expected to sacrifice more mithuns. But there is a clear connection between social status and the number of mithuns a man could sacrifice. The sacrifice and subsequent distributed consumption of the meat could have worked as a redistributive mechanism – those with more wealth would be required to sacrifice part of their wealth for community consumption, thus reducing their wealth. The indigenous Americans of the Northwest Coast of America were well-known for competitive feasting, and potlatch, as a redistributive mechanism to inhibit the accumulation of wealth. Mithun sacrifices, spurred by supposed evil eye attacks, could have played a similar role in consuming surpluses, thus inhibiting the growth of inequality.

There could well be some connection between evil eye accusations and jealousy. As one informant put it, “Jealousy is often the reason for the witch [using the English word] accusation – jealousy of those who do better. Even women can be targeted. Men are more jealous and often make the accusation…. Jealousy has increased – as more people are better off now.” At the same time, it is also said

that many prominent people, including men, have at some time been accused of being *romle*. We were even told that in earlier times, strong women were accused of acquiring the *romle* powers from the strong Northern spirits, i.e., spirits from Tibet.

Thus, in a number of ways – those with more wealth, social status, prominent men, and strong women could be accused of being *romle*. Power, economic and social status, and being a strong woman – could all result in *romle* accusations. This is a hypothesis that needs to be explored with more sustained ethnographic and oral history investigations.

Conclusions: Policy Change and Proof

There is a peculiarity in the traditional judicial system to decide on *romle* accusations. The accuser had to prove the accusation. How does one prove that an evil eye was cast, leading to the illness? This asking for proof is an oddity in a faith-based belief system – the evil eye exists because one believes in it. As a Cameron judge had pointed out, finally proof of witchcraft (what is here called the *romle*) follows from it being an "intimate connection" (quoted in Kelkar and Nathan, 2020: 207). When actions cannot be proven, then there is a fallback on beliefs of having caused harm. Similar views come from women survivors of witch hunts in Jharkhand and Assam, "Show us proof of what we are supposed to have done to cause harm or disaster?"

In the Galo traditional judicial system of the Kebba, divination was not accepted as proof in *romle* cases. There were, however, other ways of acquiring the proof, like consultations with two to three *nyibus* and enquiring from the neighbours about the "strange" activities by the potential *romle* (in most cases women). The requirement of proof certainly influenced decisions not to name the *romle*. Importantly, there was a change in early modern Europe from belief or attributes to proof when judges in England in the mid-16th century began to ask for proof of having used witchcraft to cause harm. But even without proof, innuendo and rumour could still play a role in spreading notions of women, or some men, causing harm. To end the social boycott or such ways of dealing with the evil eye, it is also necessary to end belief in such systems of cultural-religious belief.

When asked how they think about this situation of Galo women, who are threatened with being denounced as *romle*, and/or men bringing in a second wife home, the two women lawyers we interviewed suggest four pointers: " 1) Women must empower themselves; 2) solidarity of both women and men is crucial, need to make an alliance with the progressive, gender-sensitive men in the community; 3) inclusion of women's rights in Galo educational system; and 4) it should be a collective effort by both the government and the people".

This was followed by narrating a story by one lawyer, who frankly shared with us her battle to be a lawyer within her family and later in the court against the systemic biases against professional women by male colleagues. She gave an example of how customary law is partial towards men in the case of polygamy, which is the reason people prefer to go to the customary court of Kebba and not to the Indian Penal Code system. "Unfortunately, the state law does not address the issue of polygamy at all". We also heard progressive and gender-sensitive voices on the question of *romle* saying that "...allegation and social boycott of some people for 'allegedly practising' *romle*, which has no scientific proof, and which is purely a super 'superstition', needs to change, and the customary law needs more relaxation and leniency for daughters" (Ete. N.d.). Another Galo study pointed out that "customs and practices must also develop and grow along with time rather than being archaic" (Basar, 2016:45).

Importantly, in recent years, many civil society organisations have appeared to discuss social and legal spaces for women and indigenous people in general on the basis of rights-based discourses. Some of the strong organizations that have appeared in the recent past in Arunachal Pradesh include the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society, NEFA Indigenous Human Rights Organization and Arunachal Pradesh Indigenous and Tribals Human Rights Organization and several cultural societies of different indigenous peoples at the district level (Nayak, 2011). All these organizations have raised concerns about social, political, economic, and cultural rights as related to human rights. Human rights movements are strongly picking up in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. There have been associations of women, students and religious groups, who have raised awareness of human rights and made efforts to check violations of human rights.

In 2017, a case of witchcraft torture was filed by a father in Pasighat in the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. He reported that his two daughters were allegedly tortured and abused in the name of witchcraft practices. He also said he and his wife suffered abuse and ill-treatment when they came to rescue their children. Further, he reported that there has been constant pressure for about a year from the accused to withdraw the case. It was even reported that he has been sent several summonses to appear before the kebang (customary court) with the aim of harassing him to withdraw the case (Arunachal Times, 2018). It is to be noted that the accusation was made against the wife of the-then Education Secretary of Arunachal Pradesh. In this case, when bail was granted to five prime accused of the influential family, there were protests by activist groups such as Adi Baane Kebang Youth Wing, Women Against Social Evil, All Bogong Students' Union, Adi Students' Union, etc. They demanded that justice be delivered for the victims, who were tortured in the name of witchcraft, as there was a strong possibility that the evidence was tampered with and the witnesses were manipulated (Arunachal Observer, 2017).

A policy change in the belief about the existence of witches or *romle* as a practice is also needed. Norms related to such a belief can change. They can change with political measures to promote indigenous women's engagement with elevated social-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 and relations. Some mediatory factors in this potential change can be assessed, such as (1) distribution of assets and land in independent names of women; (2) use of technology such as mobile phones, television shows to have forces of gender-specific documentation within home and community institutions like Kebba and Panchayat; (3) campaigns against the notion of persons acquiring super-natural evil powers; (4) as argued by Galo thought leader Dedo Ete, "… allegation and social boycott of some people for 'allegedly' practising '*romle*', which has no scientific proof and which is purely 'superstition' should end" (Dedo Ete 2023); 5) organizing discussions by local, gender-responsive women's groups on good examples of resistance against belief in *romle* or witches, as well as giving examples of women who successfully fought against being branded and persecuted as a witch or *romle*. A combination of all these measures is likely to diminish and eventually end the belief in *romle* or witches. Hence, there is an urgent need for policy and action to end the *romle* or witch branding.

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

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

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan, Aparajita Sharma

Introduction

This study looks at the interrelated factors of transition from a pre-state forest-dependent economy to a social system of an agricultural economy and state society; a society where new inequalities are brought by global changes such as consumption patterns, new communication technologies and new forms of mobility, all leading to an increase in inequalities and patriarchal forces. Some outcomes of capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a large percentage of women in indigenous and rural populations. The objective of this study is to understand the culture and social beliefs that underlie modern-day witch hunts in Assam and to explore the specific direction of change in these cultures and belief systems at the nexus of patriarchal capitalist trajectories.

While some contemporary representations of witchcraft include feminist reclamations in cities, this study deals with the current misogynist branding of rural and indigenous women as witches who cause harm to others in their communities. These women are punished in inhuman ways for their alleged diabolical activities. The violence inflicted on them includes both killing and humiliation-cum-banishment from home, along with the seizure of land and properties. This form of violence and its consequences of killing and banishment came to the attention of UNHCR as an international problem as early as 2009 (The New York Times, 20 May 2021).

Official police records in India list 'witch persecution' as a cause of killing and list an average of 150 killings per year from 2001 to 2012. NGOs and social scientists who have actively opposed witch violence point out that this is an underestimation since many killings may be shown as having occurred due to property disputes. In India, most of the accused are women; only 10 to 13 per cent of reported cases involve men. Several states in India, such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Tripura, Odisha and Rajasthan, have responded by enacting anti-witch persecution laws from the year 2000 onwards. Feminist organisations like the North-East Network (a women's rights organisation), the Assam Mahila Samata Society, the Bodo Students Union of Assam and the Assam police initiative 'Project Prahari' as well as human rights organisations have noted the violent consequences of witch accusations and have mobilized to eliminate witch hunting practices. However, societal belief in witches and in their power to cause harm and illness, as well as

the land and property gains that come to the accusers, have resulted in limited success.

In our earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020), we observed that witch violence is related to two different types of structural transformations occurring somewhat simultaneously: the creation of patriarchy in the move from hoe to plough agriculture and capitalist transformation, e.g., massive structural changes within families from matriliny to patriliny and the formation of patriarchy, along with the primary accumulation of capital and the separation of workers from the means of production. The articulation of belief in witchcraft alongside such massive structural changes produces a spiritual insecurity that results in the persecution and killing of women, some men and even children. This occurs largely in indigenous areas in India as well as parts of Africa and Asia.

This study is a critical analysis of cultural rights among Assam's indigenous peoples as well as an attempt to understand the human rights-respecting cultural rights of everyone without discrimination and violence in the case of diverse practices. This framework for addressing witch persecution or witch hunts in Assam must also be informed both by local and global dynamics in understanding the ways in which capitalist patriarchy in one part of the globalised world can affect development elsewhere and lead to discrimination. Xenophobia and related violence, such as witch branding and hunting. 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". 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.

Methodology

A systematic literature review that took an unbiased and more political and scientific approach than a traditional narrative review was employed to explore people's belief in the concepts of witchcraft and witches. In the first phase of the review, the research objectives for finding the basis for the data and keywords for a search were chosen. This was followed by the use of Google Scholar to ensure the inclusion of relevant papers/studies and archival sources. An analysis of secondary sources was undertaken by collecting information from various published and unpublished materials in the public domain and from the websites of government agencies, academic institutions, research centres and individual researchers in India, Africa and Europe. During our survey and discussions, we focused on the period from 1990 to 2020, keeping in mind the process of accumulation and the rise in patriarchal changes in indigenous societies. We focused on how the process of accumulation and the associated development of patriarchal governance has played a major role in changing the traditional beliefs and social structures and led to strengthened patriarchy and indigenous identities but with less room for human rights-respecting discourses.

Fieldwork was then conducted in the districts of Goalpara and Kokrajhar of Assam by the Lead Researcher (Govind Kelkar) and the Research Assistant (Aparajita Sharma). Both Goalpara and Kokrajhar are infamous for carrying out witch hunts. In 2006, Goalpara was declared one of the most backward districts in the country by the Indian government; the Rabha, Bodo and Rajbongshi communities inhabit the district. Kokrajhar district is an administrative unit carved out from the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam; Bodo indigenous peoples predominantly inhabit it.

Table I. Districts Goalpara and Kokrajhar in Assam

Interviews with women survivors of witch violence conducted in August-September 2021

SNo.	Alleged Witches	Community	Ojha
1	Heera Rabha(G)	Rabha	Tapan Ojha
2	Bibha Rabha (G)	Rabha	Madhav Barman Ojha
3	Raneshwari Rabha(G)	Rabha	Kabiram Ojha
4	Khedai Rabha(G)	Rabha	
5	Buduli Rabha (G)	Rabha	
6	Pakhi Rabha (G)	Rabha	
7	Megheshwari Rabha(G)	Rabha	
8	Kamaleshwari Rabha(G)	Rabha	
9	Jumila Rabha(G)	Rabha	
10	Deepali Rabha(G)	Rabha	
11	Padumi Rabha(G)	Rabha	
12	Masi Brahma (K)	Bodo	
13	Gaijrai Basumatary(K)	Bodo	
14	Putuli Basumatary	Bodo	
15	Rabiram Narzary (K) (Man)	Bodo	
16	Anima Basumatary(G)	Bodo	
17	Dukhuli Daimari(G)	Bodo	
18	Basanti Barman(G)	Raj Bongshi	
19	Jyotsna Rai(K)	Raj Bongshi	

K = Kokrajhar District
G = Goalpara District

We gathered material on 19 cases of witch violence from the survivors, who included 18 women and 1 man, as well as 3 cases of ojhas/kabiraj (witch finders), and compiled a total of 22 case studies. The survivors included 11 individuals from the Rabha community, 6 from the Bodo community and 2 from the Rajbongshi community. Additionally, we interviewed the 3 practicing ojhas (witch finders) and conducted 16 key informant interviews to understand diverse viewpoints and get a plurality of perspectives on cultural diversity and cultural rights in indigenous societies. During fieldwork, two researchers engaged in the day-to-day activities of the villagers and ojhas to understand their history, culture, and the socio-economic structures of their society. We had long sessions with women in their homes, during which they shared their life stories and talked about the status of women in their communities and their health problems. Field assistance was provided by Usha Rabha, who manages the Birubala Mission office in Goalpara, and we are grateful for her time and assistance.

Interview with key informants in Kokrajhar

Interviews with local NGO workers and government officers who have dealt with cases of witch violence also helped us to understand different perspectives on the activities of the ojhas and rivalries between ojhas. The contrasting and fragmented views on the witch belief system and associated violence we uncovered can be summed up in two major trends of thought:

1) Indigenous peoples' belief in a system of witchcraft is not simply the superstition of untaught minds; it is similar to the belief in the existence of superhuman or supernatural power, which is universally present in other religious or social groups.

2) There are some who question this belief in witchcraft. This was expressed by some of the women leaders who had survived the witch violence and who had received awards from the Government of India for running campaigns against witch branding and hunting. Our discussions with them indicated that there has been a major shift in the thinking of women who survived the witch violence or who were at risk of being accused of practising witchcraft. These women, along with progressive villagers, were of the opinion that "there is nothing like witches, they exist in [people's] minds to punish others and grab their property. We cannot be accused of being a witch based on somebody's belief without concrete evidence. If we are witches, then produce the evidence of use of our evil practice" (Chhutni Devi, Jharkhand in a discussion with Govind Kelkar). Importantly, the All Bodo Students Union has carried out regular campaigns against witch branding and hunting.

Table II. Discussions with key experts on witch violence

S No.	Name	Affiliation
1.	Gita Bhattacharya	Former Director, Assam Samata Society, Guwahati
2.	Birubala Rabha	Activist and alleged witch
3.	Usha Rabha	President, Birubala Mission
4.	Preetam Brahma Chowdhury	Journalist
5.	Khanindra Basumatary	ABSU General Secretary
6.	Dr Natyabir Das	Gen Secretary, Mission Birubala
7.	Chikimiki Talukdar	Assam women commission, Guwahati
8.	Mamoni Saikia	Activist (Former Assam Samata Society
9.	Bhumika Rai	Activist (WinG)
10.	Poonam Toppo	Activist, ASHA NGO, Ranchi
11.	Neelesh Singh	GARIMA Project, Ranchi
12.	Samar Bosu Mullick	Activist, Writer, Ranchi
13.	Chhutni Devi	Saraikela/Jamshedpur
14.	Dev Nathan	Researcher, Gurgaon
15.	Virginus Xaxa	Researcher, Delhi
16.	Sarika Sinha	ActionAid, Bhopal

As part of building our research perspectives, we contacted key experts on indigenous issues. We put the following questions to these key experts in order to facilitate discussion:

- What is the situation with regard to witch branding and persecution in the area?
- When is a woman or man likely to branded as a witch?
- Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?
- Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?
- As reports indicate, witch branding has increased during the corona virus period. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?
- What are your ideas of how this practice can be ended legally and socially?
- Are current legal provisions sufficient to deal with witch hunts?
- What is required to provide legal aid and protection to the survivors? Can they be resettled in their communities?
- How have you influenced governments and other key actors in their response to the violent crime of witch hunts?

Prior to our fieldwork, we organised a one-day internal discussion on research perspectives and research tools. Questioning the dominant notion of strong objectivity in conventional research practice, our self-organised training was informed by the idea of a feminist standpoint based on the lived experiences of survivors of witch violence within an unjust social order. Such an approach is more relevant to producing knowledge that can be used for building a human rights-centred social system (Harding 2004).

We also discussed situational analysis, inspired by Donna Haraway's 'Concept of Situated Knowledges' (1991), and foregrounding a mode of analysis which makes witch violence more visible and makes the silences of alleged witches speak for themselves on the subject of enquiry. Further, we discussed how ojhas (witch finders) use human and non-human ritualistic practices to identify and torture women, as well as men who come out in support of the women identified as witches.

With regard to research ethics, we conducted our fieldwork with care and respect for the interviewees, i.e., keeping strictly confidential the information we gathered from the women. Oral or written consent was taken prior to each individual interview and group discussion. We maintained anonymity when recording sensitive matters that emerged during our fieldwork.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Various social movements and indigenous peoples have been engaged in discourses of indigeneity and politics of identity assertion. The practice of witch hunts is seen as a marker of the exclusive identity of indigenous peoples, and is set against forces of globalisation and the related cultural homogenising of the Indian state, which attempt to bring in global standardisation and make inroads into a world dominated by western values and symbols (Nath, 2014; Gohain, 2007; 2008; Robertson and White, 2003).

We noted three 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. In this analysis, the practice of witch hunts as it exists today is located within a narrative of increasing inequality and the cultural and political marginalisation of indigenous and rural peoples in Assam.

Within historical accounts of colonialism and later struggles against the central government of India, witch persecution or killing is understood to be a part of indigenous identity, an action necessary to preserve the moral fibre of society. There have been cases where individuals who have killed so-called witches have gone on to surrender themselves after the act and justified their actions as upholding the moral fabric of their society, which Evans-Prichard sees as a moral stabilising influence on the social system of the indigenous people. These notions are part of the indigenous people's faith in supernatural powers, which are considered to be superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women living at margins of the community, are blamed for causing bad weather conditions, natural disasters, diseases, deaths, etc. Accused of causing these detrimental events, violence against the accused, such as flogging, rape, burning alive and otherwise murdering the accused, is seen as a socially acceptable tool for weeding out anti-social elements (witches). The socially privileged kabiraj or ojha continues to be more powerful. He is seen as someone who is capable of driving out evil spirits from the bodies of possessed women and also as someone who not only heals but is also capable of causing harm.

Meeting with Tapan ojha in his house

The second stream of thought, as seen in post-modernist studies, is in the context of the contact between indigenous societies and capitalist modernism, as in John and Jean Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches as modernity's malcontents, and Peter Geschiere's work on Africa's capitalist modernism (2013). Silvia Federici's new book *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women* (2018) explains that capitalism and patriarchy together produce 'witches' who were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children. Capitalist society has made women's bodies the fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women as midwives, abortionists, and herbalists with knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal power and create generations of subjugated women as a 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. Across many of the research sites and also in several African countries, 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 brutalised physical elimination.

The third stream, in agreement with an earlier study (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020), 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 often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu 2001:1-4). However, there are, at the same time, processes of dismantling power structures and bringing in transformation in the social economic order, and feminist researchers have recognised that the analysis of the androcentric principle is necessary for an objective analysis of a social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we see a crucial role played by men's monopolisation of productive resources like land and housing, and of ritual knowledge, which is a socially higher 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/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, this was modified to "a person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to other humans" (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/Nathan, 2020:4). In fact, people may not possess such occult power to cause harm to others.

Historical research suggests that the Rabha community had the matrilineal system. However, assimilation with mainstream Hindu society shifted the system towards a patriarchal institutional system (Bujorbaruah, 2018). Once the community switched over to the patriarchal system, women's role in all public and private decision making decreased, bringing a deterioration of both women's status and knowledge. Shikha Das (2018), in her study of the Rabha community, noted that property rights and the control of resources in the hands of the women later became a matter of shame and a masculine system with men controlling land, forests and knowledge of how to treat illness with herbs became a matter of honour. In the process, powerful women came to be branded as witches. The popular term used by the Rabhas for a woman who is known as a keeper of evil power is 'tikkar'. It exists in every village in the form of the practice of evil power, which has the ability to harm others in the community, and villagers can take advantage of this evil magical power for their own use (Das, 2018:90).

The customary laws of the Bodos relating to marriage and inheritance of property had provisions for the rights of women. For example, a woman who was married could exercise rights over the assets she brought with her from her parental house. Her husband or in-laws were not allowed to claim this property (Narzary 2019). In one of the marriage systems of Bodo people (Gwrajia Lakhinai), the newly married son-in-law was adopted to manage property in the bride's family. Over time and largely under the influence of the Hindu patriarchal system, these management rights became ownership rights for men and deprived the wife of any share in her parents' property. In the late 19th century, the Bodos were noted as having many gender-specific discriminatory norms, including child marriage, purdah, and other forms of women's dependency (Islam, 2012). Any form of material rights, including over property and lineage, for women, became a matter of cultural concern, while masculine identity became something to be admired and acknowledged as part of the Bodo culture.

In recent years, civil society and academic discourse have largely concentrated on the 'purity' of indigeneity and traditional cultures; they have stayed away from recognising cultural diversity and plurality of perspective that come from cultural sharing and mutual learning from human rights-respecting practices in both indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. The idea of 'purity' of culture, like that of colour, caste, or race, especially in marginalised groups, generally ends in representing them as trapped in the past and, by implication, unfit to deal with human rights-respecting practices and their social and economic benefits.

In some indigenous societies, to halt cultural decay, younger women are told by village elders (all male) that it is an inherent violation of

indigenous culture to wear jeans, the clothing of 'others', or to communicate through mobile phones or adopt 'foreign' ways of worshipping or performing rituals. These practices are underpinned by a patriarchal greed for the control of land and other resources that women and girls might have had and legitimise the physical torture of women (and some men) who engage in 'unconventional' religious practices. This cultural gatekeeping promotes social injustice and is a violation of human rights.

This study is an attempt to introduce a human rights-respecting approach to cultural diversity with a focus on witch hunts in the context of indigenous peoples' social systems. It is essential to work for the erasure of witch hunt practices and see them as part of the cultural identities of the past. Their histories must be understood in a manner respectful of the cultural rights of women and plurality of change from matriliny to patriliny and then to patriarchal societies and the adverse impact of this on women's equality and dignity. Of course, women's adverse social position was further complicated and strengthened by the colonialist attempt to control indigenous peoples' resources like forests and land. (Kelkar, Nathan and Walter, 2003). To avoid the processes of a market-led world, the associated patriarchal greed for power and control, and the commercialization and corporatization of forests, land and other resources, efforts must be made to maintain and promote the diversity of human rights respecting-cultures in line with international standards of human rights for all women and men.

Factors in Witch Hunts

The most important proximate factors in witch persecution that usually bring forth accusations and violence are illness and premature death. The problem of illness is understood as having been caused by the spells of women using witchcraft. This belief in the existence of witches and their malevolent power (the evil eye, the evil mouth) to cause harm to children, cattle, or crops is deeply seated in the collected psyche of many indigenous peoples in India. The community assigns itself the power to punish the alleged witch in a degrading way, such as for example, making her eat human excrement, pulling off her nails, gangraping her and so on.

Such violence on the basis of accusations of witchcraft has a number of causes and consequences. The literature points to struggles to capture land and related property by male relatives, social stress and change, reactions to growing inequality and uneven development through the market, and the reaffirmation of male domination as some causes of witchcraft accusations and persecutions. Most important, however, is the effect of witch persecution on the formation of a culture and ideology that are not conducive to the development of women and their communities.

It has been argued that 'the witch is not solely or simply the creation of patriarchy', and that women are themselves engaged in fantasy, which enables them to speak and manage otherwise fears and desires (Purkiss, 1996: 2). It is likely that women, like men, in many indigenous and rural communities share the belief that the existence of witches makes society weak from within; therefore, witch persecution is justified. However, it is important to note that these treacherous attacks on women accused of being witches come from the immediate surroundings of the village or the home and family, with men in the dominant positions and heads of households. In these cases, women had put their trust in the village/household and worked hard for the people they lived and worked with, as we observed in our case study in Assam.

From this social perspective, the torture or killing of alleged witches is seen as an attempt to find the person responsible for illness, death, or misfortune in the community. During a discussion, an ojha in the Rabha village in Goalpara district defined witch violence as

"an act of providing service to the village by eliminating the danger, otherwise the witch would cause further misfortune and deaths in this village… It is because of us that she would no longer be in a position to eat our villagers". This belief in the 'evil powers' of the witch makes witch hunts possible in rural Assam and in other societies, too, as observed by Geshere (2013) in the case of African societies.

The persecution of women as witches has a number of consequences for women's agency and development in the region. First, in areas where this is widespread, women are inhibited in exercising their agency in economic or other spheres for fear of being accused as witches. Women who do economically better through, for instance, wages from migration, are forced to hide their savings and not invest them savings locally for fear of eliciting the envy of others, who may be resentful and suspicious of newly acquired assets, good harvests, or livestock. Second, there is the human rights violation of women and their families. Third, there is the general economic loss through the destruction of property. Fourth, women are not able to assert their rights to land and other property, as was the case in traditional societies. Fifth, there are substantial costs of treatment associated with the injuries sustained due to the violence perpetrated against women.

Not all accusations end in the continued persecution of the accused woman. There have been some examples of resistance by the accused and their supporters, whether NGOs or family members, as we noted in some ad hoc reporting and in our earlier fieldwork. This study attempts to dive deep into the societal belief in witches, with the objective of strengthening resistance and policies to overcome this most degrading form of violence that is carried out in the name of culture and to take a step towards social transformation, where the concerned communities can cherish an egalitarian system that promotes agency, equality, and dignity for women and other dispossessed groups in their societies.

The National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB) shows that a total of 2,468 murders were committed between 2001 and 2016 in which witch persecution was recorded as the motive. In 2016, 134 persons were killed for supposedly practising witchcraft and were accused of causing the illness or deaths of individuals or harming a family or a community. Table 1 shows the incidence of killings of persons accused as witches from 2001 to 2016; from 2017 onwards, the NCRB does not have specific data on killings due to witch persecution or killings of alleged witches.

Researchers with Usha Rabha, manager of the Birubala Mission

Table III. Incidence of killing (murder and culpable homicide) of persons accused as witches

States	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
Andhra Pradesh/ Telangana	20	23	38	25	75	26	33	23	27	26	29	24	15	10	19* (8 + 11)
Arunachal Pradesh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Assam	3	1	1	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	5	1	-	0	1
Bihar	1	1	4	0	1	11	0	0	2	2	0	13	-	6	0
Chhattisgarh	16	4	14	11	9	10	8	15	6	8	17	8	7	16	17
Goa	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Gujarat	2	4	1	1	6	3	1	0	4	5	0	3	-	10	14
Haryana	2	0	0	0	28	34	30	26	32	58	5	0	0	0	2
Himachal Pradesh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Jammu & Kashmir	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
Jharkhand	22	28	19	28	26	30	50	52	37	15	36	26	54	47	27
Karnataka	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	77	0	-	0	0
Kerala	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Madhya	13	24	29	14	13	13	14	17	25	18	15	11	11	24	19
Maharashtra	6	14	9	4	7	9	14	11	11	11	13	1	-	5	2
Manipur	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Meghalaya	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	1	2	3	0	-	1	2
Mizoram	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Nagaland	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Orissa	30	39	26	22	25	36	28	23	36	34	41	32	24	32	24
Punjab	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
Rajasthan	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	1
Sikkim	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
Tamil Nadu	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	-	0	0
Tripura	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	1	-	0	0
Uttar Pradesh	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	-	3	3
Uttarakhand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
West Bengal	13	14	9	8	5	1	0	4	0	0	0	1	-	1	3
Total states	129	153	151	114	197	188	179	176	186	182	242	121	160	156	134

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2015, 2016).

It must be noted that NCRB data are likely to be an underestimate of the real figures on witch persecution and witch killings. Some cases of such killings may be recorded as having occurred due to land disputes or other conflicts, thus reducing the numbers of killings recorded as due to witch persecution. Further, data on witch killings do not record other forms of persecution of supposed witches, whether the branding of women as witches or their brutal torture and the threats women face in their communities. It is only after a woman who is branded as a witch is killed that she finds a place in police records.

Table IV: Witch Hunts Cases in Assam

District	2010					2011					2012					2013					2014					2015					2016					2017					2018					2019				
	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA
Kokrajhar																3			3	9	1			1	11						2	1		1	5												1			1	17
Dhubri																																																	
Goalpara											1			1	3						3		1	2	2											1	1			8	3	3			18	1			1	5
Barpeta																																																	
Morigaon																																			1			1		2	1		1	5					
Nagaon											1			1	7																1	1			4														
Sonitpur											3	1		2	18	2			2	6	2			2	24						1	1			3														
Lakhimpur																2	1		1	13						1			1																				
Dhemaji																1			1	1																														
Tinsukia																					2			2						2	1		1	7															
Dibrugarh											1	1			4																																		
Sivasagar											1	1			35						3	1	1	1	19																								
Jorhat											1	1			20	1				1	1			1						1	1																		
Golaghat											1	1			13	1				1																														
KarbiAnglong																					1			1	18											1	1				3	1		2	46					
DimaHasao																																																	
Cachar																1	1			17																														
Karimganj																																																	
Hailakandi																																																	
Bongaigaon																																																	
Chirang											1			1	2	2			2	5	2			2		2			2	3						2	2			18	2	2			18	3	1		2	13
Kamrup																1	1			17	1	1			8	1			1	4																1			1	10

District	2010					2011					2012					2013					2014					2015					2016					2017					2018					2019				
	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA
Kamrup Metro																																																
Nalbari																																			1			1	4	1			1	4					
Baksa																																																
Darrang																																															
Udalguri											2	2			6	2	2			22	3	2	1		9																							
Biswanath																																			1			1	18										
Charaideo																																			1			1										
Hojai																																															
Majuli																																																
South Salmara																																															
West K Anglong																																															
City Guwahati											2	1	1		5																															
Hamren																										1	1			7																		
Assam	11	9	2	0	52	29	21	4	4	149	14	8	1	5	113	16	5		9	92	19	4	3	12	91	4			4	7	8	6		2	26	8	4		4	48	11	7		4	91	7	1		6	53

CR= Cases Register, CS= Charge Sheet, FR= Final Report, PI= Pending Investigation,

PA= Persons Arrested.

Source: (Table 24.02 to 24.06) O/o the Addl. Director General of Police, C.I.D, Assam.

STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM - 2020

STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM - 2013 (Data from 2010-2011)

Source: (Table 24.02 to 24.06) O/o the Addl. Director General of Police, C.I.D, Assam.STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM – 2020

STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM - 2013 (Data from 2010-2011)

Table IV shows the number of witch hunt cases in Assam's districts. 7 out of 34 have not reported any case in the last decade. We were informed during our fieldwork that people are reluctant to report witch hunt cases to the police or to any government agency. Also, the police do not treat these cases with any seriousness, and it is only when a woman is killed that a case is filed under a section of Indian Penal Code. Further, these figures show that in 2012, 2013 and 2014 the number of people arrested for witch persecution were 113, 92, 91 respectively, and these numbers declined significantly during 2015, 2016, and 2017. It is likely that this occurred because there were a number of campaigns during this period demanding a legal act to prevent witch persecution in the state. Later, as a result of some enforcement of the 2018 Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, the number of cases declined, and there was an increase in the arrest of people engaged in persecution. For example, in 2018 only 11 cases were registered, and 91 arrests made; in 2019, this number of the registered cases was only 7 and 53 arrests made. A general assessment from our interviews showed that that numbers in the official records were an underestimation of the actual cases occurred.

Momoni Saikia and Natyabir Das said that "First it is very difficult to register as cases of witch hunting, and second, if civil society members are not present, the police is reluctant to register cases as witch hunts and would divert cases… In Goalpara itself it will be around 100 cases of witch hunts in the period from 2010-2019, while the data show [the] all-India figure is 105 total cases" (Interview with Aparajita Sharma). The question of low data on the official witch hunt cases was also mentioned by Lawrence Israly (a member of the Legislative Assembly of Assam) in a telephonic discussion with us.

The stylized public punishment of witches (who, in most cases, are women) is carried out by a dominant coalition of men, with a local ojha/kabiraj in the lead. Such a coalition involves two sets of villagers: one that believes in witches and is convinced that they (the villagers) have the right to control village land and resources, and a second set of villagers, including some women, who are driven by their belief in the existence and power of witches to harm children and others. Women too, therefore, fear witches and support the effort to eliminate those accused of practicing witchcraft—or a woman who has dared to defy the social rules of submissiveness and gender norms of dependency and unfreedoms of women.

In numerous cases, the dominant coalition of attackers (or its leader) captures a large economic return by seizing the land and other assets of the woman attacked, driven out or killed as a witch. In some cases, alleged witches run away from the village to escape such organized violence. Importantly, violence against the alleged witches encompasses the use of both threats and acts of torture and killing.

The institutional structures of indigenous communities in Assam and other indigenous communities in India have 'adherent' social organizations. The role of outside law-enforcing agencies, such as the police and judiciary, are neither fully understood nor accepted in indigenous societies; they adhere to their social organizations and traditional practices. The role of legal institutions to constrain or punish for the use of violence is generally acceptable in 'contractual organizations' which utilize both the state or third-party enforcement of contracts to maintain law and order as well as incentive-compatible agreements among members, such as in a large number of non-indigenous societies in the country. The witches and their power to cause harm and illnesses are embedded in the institutional structures and individual beliefs of the great majority of indigenous peoples.

The capitalist system is shaped by two forces: that of the nation state and the market and that of the individual. The intermediate communities are left out of this analysis, as argued by Raghuram Rajan (2018). In human rights-respecting cultures, it is necessary to recognise the rights of individuals and communities and, more importantly, the rights of women among them. Believers in witchcraft and those accused of being witches all have human rights and are entitled to a culture of dignity. For the former, their belief does not give them right to persecute, torture and kill any woman or man whom they consider to be engaging in witchcraft.

Witch Persecution and Resilience

1. What were the reasons why and when a woman was declared a witch?

In the traditional Rabha belief system, Daini Puja (the ritual of worshipping a witch) is performed to please a daini so as to safeguard crops from insects to protect people and prevent illnesses like stomach ailments, fever, eye issues and so on. It is believed that people fall sick due to the evil eye of a daini, and that she is also capable of destroying crops and poisoning cattle, thereby adversely affecting primary livelihoods. A similar belief system exists among the Bodo and other indigenous peoples in Assam. The daini (witch) and the ojha/kabiraj (witchfinder and healer) constitute an inseparable part of the everyday rituals of the indigenous culture and the traditional knowledge system. The daini, who symbolizes evil, is mostly a woman from a marginalized household in the village. Her powerlessness is further exploited by the ojha (mostly male), by branding her a witch. In the 19 cases, we collected information on during our study, the primary reasons for which the women accused as witches were conflict over land/property, jealousy, prolonged illness of someone in the village, spiritual possession (Deu utha) and others. In most cases, it was found that there was more than one reason for such allegations, which not only violated the basic human dignity of the alleged witches but further marginalized them. They were subjected to violence and trauma through torture and indignities such as hair-pulling, the pulling out of nails, being forced to eat human excreta and being driven out of the village to live a life of seclusion and insult. The women narrated these stories to us with tearful eyes and choked voices.

Table V: Reasons for women being branded as witches

Name of the alleged witch	Ethnicity	District & Block	Reasons she was branded a witch	Who branded her	Role of ojha/kabiraj/deodhani	Year
Anima Basumatary	Bodo	Goalpara, Kosdhowa	Anima's husband works in the BSF and is well-paid. She is a good weaver and has educated her daughters. This caused **jealousy.**	A woman (Gita Khaklary) who had a love affair with Anima's husband	Gita's father was an ojha. However, Anima consulted another ojha who said she was not a daini but asked her to compromise rather than going to the police.	12 January 2015
Dukhuli Daimary	Bodo	Goalpara, Kosdhowa	Prolonged **illness** of the niece and jealousy of the accused owing to her popularity in the community	Brother-in- law's daughter/niece	Consulted an ojha	2009
Gayary Basumatary	Bodo	Kokrajhar, Bismuri	Spreading **illness** (fever) in the village and political rivalry between supporters of Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and United People's Party Liberal (UPPL)	Villagers	An ojha was not consulted but political groups mobilized the local people.	August 2016
Putuli Basumatary	Bodo	Kokajhar/ Bismuri	The stepson wanted to **take over** the **land** and house and the daughter of an alleged daini/stepson's wife fell ill after birth of her first child.	Stepson	The stepson consulted an ojha for his wife's illness and before the ojha said anything, he started calling his mother a dayni, to which the ojha also agreed.	2019
Masi Brahma	Bodo	Kokrajhar / Nayek Goan	**Land** and control over resources like a well	A neighbour whose land shares a boundary with the accused's land	The neighbour themselves performed a puja to cure the illness.	2018
Rabiram Narzary	Bodo	Kokrajhar/ Bismuri	A boy died during an **accident** suffered while playing football in the field opposite his house.	The boy's family	The dead boy's family consulted a deodhani who accused Rabiram of being a witch and causing the death.	2017
Deepali Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara, Balijana	**Jealousy** of an ojha and the failing health conditions of a woman living next door	A neighbour who was suffering from prolonged illness after miscarrying her second child	Deepali Rabha who is a deodhani performed puja/rituals in the ojha's house. The ojha whom the neighbour consulted was jealous of Tapan ojha's popularity.	2021
Heera Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara, Krishnai	Resentment over her management skills and capabilities and of property and familial relations. She is also a vegetable vendor and doing well.	Villagers, mostly young men. The village elders supported. Heera.	An ojha was consulted.	April 2011
Jumila Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara, Kosdhowa	The sister-in-law wanted to **seize her land** and property. Jumila used to worship the god Shiva for peace of mind, and this became another reason for accusing her of practicing witchcraft.	Sister-in-law	An ojha was not consulted, but neighbours were mobilized.	2015

Name of the alleged witch	Ethnicity	District & Block	Reasons she was branded a witch	Who branded her	Role of ojha/kabiraj/deodhani	Year
Kamaleshwari Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara, Krishnai	Associating with a dayni in her village and **causing illness**	Villagers	An ojha was consulted.	2014
Khedai Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ Kosdhowa	**Independence of thinking:** Khedai refused to marry her daughter to her neighbour's son.	Newly married wife of the neighbour's son who was seen under the spell of possession.	An ojha was consulted.	2001
Megheshwari Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ Krishnai	**Jealousy** of her popularity and good weaving skills and the prolonged **illness** of a neighbour, premature death of a girl in the same household.	Neighbours	An ojha was consulted.	2007
Pudumi Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ kosdhowa	Second wife to a man who gave her a separate house. The first wife and friends were jealous of her. The first wife wanted to take over the **house and property.**	Neighbour who was apparently her best friend	An ojha was consulted.	2006
Pakhi Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ Kosdhowa	Everyone was **jealous** of her weaving skills, income, property, and her adopted children who were attending convent schools.	Neighbours; a newly married woman in the neighbourhood was possessed	No ojha was consulted, but a statement was made by a neighbouring woman who was seen as possessed by a spirit.	2009
Raneshwari Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ Lakhipur	A stepdaughter wanted to take over **land and property.** She was also jealous of her stepmother's popularity	Stepdaughter	Did not consult an ojha but mobilized local people.	2005
Bibha Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ Kosdhowa	**Illness** of a neighbour	Neighbour's family	An ojha was consulted to treat the illness.	2005
Buduli Rabha	Rabha	Goalpara/ Lakhipur	**Unconventional religious practices.** She worshipped Mansa Devi and offered sacrifices to Shiva.	Husband	Did not consult an ojha but mobilized villagers.	2019
Basanti Barman	Raj Bonshi	Goalpara, Jaleswar	Conflict over **land**	Her brother-in-law and nephew wanted to seize her land after the death of her husband.	Did not consult an ojha.	2012
Jyotsna Rai	Raj Bongshi	Kokrajhar, Dotoma	Jyotsna's husband is differently abled and his family wanted to remove his claim to the family **land and property.** The villagers were jealous of her capable management of the family resources, and of her children doing well. The brother-in-law and neighbour also had a sexual interest in her.	Villagers and brother-in-law	Did not consult an ojha.	2010

Land and Property: An analysis of the above 19 cases shows that in all the cases, there were multiple reasons for branding the women as witches: in 7 cases, a conflict over land and property was the primary reason, while in 6, it was causing illness and in another 4 cases jealousy was the primary reason. In one case, unconventional ritual practice was the reason and in another, a woman's capability and assertion of independence was the reason. Conflict over land and property emerged as the primary reason for our interviews. Elsewhere in a study of 5 states (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Telangana), it was noted that of the 122 witch persecution cases, 42 were related to grabbing land from the women who were persecuted as witches (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020:72).

The other two factors that emerged in branding the witch were a woman's assertion of independence if she was seen as capable of making her own decisions and decisions for her family and resources. Heera Rabha's response to our question: "What do you think was the reason for calling you a witch?" said, "I am taking good care of everyone in the family, including my stepdaughters and mother-in-law. My husband left drinking after he married me. Both my husband and I work hard and earn well and also help others in times of ill-treatment from their own family". Heera Rabha had to face tremendous difficulty after her neighbour called her a witch. Heera helped her neighbour's mother-in-law and also managed her resources well. She did not indulge in consuming alcohol or drugs. She was a vegetable vendor and used to sell vegetables in the market. Her neighbours were jealous of her and regarded her as very successful in business and a good manager of resources. During a trance ritual of being possessed by Bunbahi Devi, a woman named Heera, a witch. An ojha was called, and he validated the claim of the woman who made the accusation. However, some elders in the village supported Heera and settled the matter in Heera's favour. Nonetheless, Heera and her family went through torture. In another case, Jyotsna Rai explained how she struggled against the takeover of her land and property and resisted the sexual advances of her brother-in-law (husband's older brother) when her husband was away working in Kerala in 2017. Jyotsna's case shows women's resilience and resistance against the community-led persecution of women as witches. During this struggle, she did seek help from the police and a lawyer, who provided only 'half-hearted support'—the attacks on her have continued. Now, the matter of land seizure will be decided in court and both Jyotsna and her husband are together in this legal battle.

Historically, both the Rabha and Bodo (partially) societies were matrilineal societies, which, over decades, have transformed into patriarchal societies. In this transition, women's control over land and property has become a contested issue. Women held important positions in matrilineal cultures; they treated illness, predicted the future and acted as intermediaries between the common people and forest spirits. With the switch to patrilineal and patrilocal systems, this traditional knowledge was met with social disapproval. Such women were not trusted but rather feared and avoided in order to keep common women and men free from harm and illness. Women's roles as healers who used salt and herbs to treat illness and in land management were forcibly taken away by men, and women were relegated to a position of caregiving at home and made economically and otherwise dependent on men. When they tried to argue for their earlier rights in the fields of knowledge and resource control, they were denounced as having evil power and persecuted and killed (for detailed case studies on Thailand and Malaysia, see Kelkar and Nathan and Walter, 2003).

A major feature of this belief system is that witches cannot be stopped once their deeds are set in motion. Hence, they need to be physically eliminated. In the 7 cases in which land was the primary reason for branding a woman a witch, it was noted that woman often faced the predicament of being branded a witch after the death of their husbands, as was evident in the case of Basanti Barman and Jumila Rabha. In the case of Jyotsna Rai, the husband was seen as vulnerable and suffering from some chronic illness or physical disability, and the child was also suffering from some infirmity. Therefore, the likelihood of branding the wife/mother as a witch increased. In such cases, branding a woman as a witch forces them to leave the village and attacker (in most cases a close relative), who can then possess their land/ property conveniently. In the cases of Raneshwari Rabha and Putuli Basumatary (a Bodo woman), their stepchildren didn't want to share property and land with their stepmother, leading to a horrifying tale of witch hunting. In the case of Masi Brahma, her neighbour had the ulterior motive of wanting to take control of her property. So, she was branded her a witch and every effort was made to force her and her family out of the village.

The land is a key resource for subsistence. Ownership and control of land gives women (or men) recognition as full members of a family and community and the freedom to decide one's life path and choices. In the change from matriliny to patriliny and a patriarchal social system, women's independence, so necessary for the exercise of their voice and agency, was lost. Women lost the status of being landowners/controllers and became dependent on men for their day-to-day needs. This transition also changed social norms and became part of everyone's belief system, establishing and reinforcing patriarchy and disallowing women's freedom, inheritance rights, and resource control. Any transgression of these social rules made a woman a likely candidate to be branded a witch and punished in brutal ways for daring to act in a way that was not in accordance with indigenous cultures (for more analysis, see Kelkar and Krishnaraj, 2012).

Box. 1

Masi Brahma

Masi Brahma lived with her parents and brother. They worshipped Shiva and Kali (a god and a goddess). There was a well in Masi's house and the water from the well would overflow and block the passage to the neighbour's premises. Their next-door neighbour was a local healer who earned a living through the use of tantra/mantra (ritual chanting). Many patients who came for solutions or treatment to the local ojha's house complained about the water logging in the passage, and it affected the ojha's business. During Kali Puja, the neighbours took the water logging as a reason to brand Masi Brahma a daini. Their ulterior motive was to grab her land and property and force her out of the village. Two villagers attending the puja in a highly intoxicated state barged into Masi Brahma's house and asked the father to drink with them. When he refused, they took out a khukri (a sharp dagger) and tried to kill him. Masi and her father had to run for their lives as the villagers kept shouting "Kill those dainis". The next day, they were forced to accept that they were dainis in a public meeting and also light 3 lamps (jewari) in front of the idols of Shiva and Kali in a public temple. Although the lamps were lit without difficulty (it is a belief that a lamp would not light if she was a daini), the villagers called a car, forced them to get into it and gave directions to the driver to drop them somewhere far away from the village. Masi and her family kept pleading for mercy, but the villagers threatened them to kill them if they didn't leave the village. Local villagers even attacked the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) office when some students tried to help Masi and her father.

Jealousy: This is a major reason why women are branded as witches and tortured mercilessly. Anima Basumatary faced the trauma of being branded a witch due to her husband's love affair with another woman (Geeta) who, out of jealousy, accused her of being a witch. Geeta approached an ojha and, during a trance during which she was possessed, branded Anima a witch. If Anima were made to leave the village, Geeta could live with Anima's husband. The ojha validated the allegation and the village believed it. Anima faces the trauma of being called a witch even today, and her educated daughters are finding it difficult to get married, as they are seen as likely to be witches as well. Pudumi Rabha faced torture after she was branded a witch out of jealousy by her neighbour.

Box. 2

Pudumi Rabha

Pudumi and Tiki Rabha were friends and used to stay in the same neighbourhood. One day Tiki Rabha invited an ojha to performe jara phuka (a ritual performed by an ojha to ward off an evil spell on the patient). Tiki Rabha suffered from bloating due to a stomach illness (pet phula). The ojha during the process identified the cause of the disease as a daini who had cast an evil spell on her. Tiki Rabha named her friend Pudumi as the witch. On hearing this, the villagers barged into Pudumi's house and dragged her by her hair across the village in the late evening. Her husband managed to escape. She had two children, one a 3-month old and the other a 2.5 year-old son, who were seen clinging to her side. The Goan Burha (village head) asked them not to run in this manner, and the villagers then dragged her to the deep dark Maikuwa jungle and tried to kill her and her two children. But she managed to run away.

Illness: Unable to pay for medical services, villagers usually consult ojhas, although we were told that an ojha also charges a 'hefty amount' for his services. Lack of health infrastructure and lack of transport facilities make people visit ojhas/deodhanis to be cured of their illnesses. Besides, there is also a strong belief in the medicinal value of local herbs and plants and illness is largely seen as a result of an evil eye or witchcraft. This occurs in remote villages far away from block or district health centres and without any transport facilities. Deepali Rabha, a deodhani1 herself, was alleged to be a witch by another deodhani, who was apparently known to be associated with a more powerful ojha in the village or in another village and was engaged in treatment of the illness of her neighbour, who became weak after a miscarriage.

We learnt in the field that branding of women as witches becomes intensified during the rainy season, owing to the sudden onset of water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, malaria, jaundice that have serious consequences and can be fatal. So, women are alleged to be witches and made responsible for causing these illnesses and deaths. The actual problem is that 97% of water sources are not safe for drinking and the nearest PHC /dispensary is approximately 15 km away from the villages. (Gita Bhattacharya, one of the key informants who was formerly the Director of the Assam Mahila Samita Society).

Women are thus branded as witches not on the basis of on any evidence but simply on allegations validated through tantra/mantras (ritual of chanting) performed by an ojha. In some cases, though fewer in number, people inflict physical and torture and harassment on the alleged witch even without an ojha playing any role in it. As a result, the woman has to live with the humiliation all her life, and this often translates into the intergenerational exclusion of her daughters/sons and their continued humiliation in the local community, as the 'children of a witch' are considered likely to be witches too.

Medicinal Plants at Madhav ojha's House

1. A woman assistant to the ojha or kabiraj, who assists the ojha during shamanistic dance (called ojhapalli) in Assam. In solo or group performance, comprising 3 to 4 women, this dance is associated with the worship of snake goddess Mansa. Generally, a deodhani dances to the song sung by the ojha.

Box. 3

Megheswari Rabha,

Megheswari Rabha, who was accused of being a witch multiple times, is living a life of shame and humiliation. First, her neighbour, who was ill, called Megheswari a witch with the help of the local ojha. This was followed by accusations from a school-going girl who saw Megheshwari moving 'headless', on the street and then another woman who developed some illness and started having hallucinations of Megheshwari. Following this, Megheshwari was tortured, paraded naked, and forced to leave the village. During our interview, she repeatedly said she is waiting for the last day of her life; even after her death the villagers will not allow her to use the public graveyard, and she will have to be cremated in her own backyard.

Men as Witches

Among the 19 alleged witches is Rabiram Narzary, a Bodo who was branded a witch. During a local match at the football ground in front of his house, the ball hit the head of a young player who died as a result of his injury. On the tenth day after his death, a deodhani announced that Rabiram was a witch who was responsible for the death of the young man. The villagers barged into Rabiram's house and started beating and kicking him. Somehow, he managed to inform the police and he was saved by the police's intervention. Although Rabiram is now allowed to live in his house, nobody from the community, including his brother, is allowed to interact with him. Unsupported and isolated, Rabiram has become almost voiceless; his stepson calls his mother a daini and gives no support to the family.

In an earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan 2020) we noted that men are usually branded as witches for three reasons:

1) When a man is seen to oppose witch branding and is actively engaged in protecting his wife or another member of the family from torture;

2) When the household has accumulated wealth and refuses to share this with community or relate to the community on equal terms in communal dancing, drinking etc; and

3) When a man is engaged in accumulation through exploiting others of his community. We were not able to get much information from Rabiram, except that he himself believes in the concept of a witch and her evil power. We may make an intelligent guess that he thinks that young player died in front of his house because of an unidentified witch's spell on him.

The Ojha: Power and Influence

Our field investigations showed that the ojha or kabiraj is a key player in the entire witch persecution complex. There is, of course, the role of conflict relating to land/property, illness, jealousy of the accused on the part of the aggrieved person, which is supported by rumour and a belief in the evil designs of witches. However, in the end, it is the ojha or kabiraj who is called upon to identify an alleged witch. Although he avoids directly naming a person in most cases, he uses his skills to indicate a definite person, mostly a widowed, single, unsupported woman, as the witch who has caused illness or harm. He also suggests using tools such as a fishnet and a needle to poke the entire body of the woman in order to get a confession from her that she is the witch. Once she has confessed, she is then likely to be tortured in brutal and inhuman ways, including making her eat human excreta, pulling out her nails, and gangraping and parading her naked throughout the community. All these acts are done publicly, with the community's approval, and under the direct or indirect supervision of the ojha.

During our interviews with an ojha in a village in Goalpara district, he explained that "witches are part of our kusanskar (negative culture) and parampara (tradition). People believe in this culture and don't question it". Ojhas are supposed to be the protectors of culture and meant to protect the people from any misfortune as well as foretell untoward incidents.

In another village of Goalpara district, we met Kabiram, a popular 63-year-old ojha (name changed to protect identity), who shared with us his knowledge of how to identify witches.

Box. 4

Ojha Kabiram

Yes, there are many witches in these villages. We know how to identify the evil spell of a daini on a patient. In most cases, a patient would shout and yell loudly about her/his illness. This illness is different from others; and the patient seems to be under a spell, which only an ojha and kabiraj can identify. In such a case the ojha/kabiraj will hold the little finger and toes of the feet and press them hard for a while. This will make the patient shout even more than before. Then we will cover the patient with a fishnet (Jaal dhario) and then hold the ear. Thereafter the patient will say if she has been possessed by a daini or not. The ojha alone cannot do anything. They do it in consultation with the villagers. These things cannot be done alone.

In our village, one woman was identified as a witch and killed. She ate the kaleja (liver) of a girl and killed her. Then we caught hold of the daini and chased her out of the village. If we get to know that someone is a daini, we destroy her house, seize her property, torture her, and chase her out of the village, then she is killed.

It was me who identified that the girl was killed by a daini in the village, she was found in a room on a mat covered with a cloth. When the villagers came to see me and narrated the incident, I went (as kabiraj) with them and found a woman who was made to confess that she did eat the liver of the girl and killed her. She was old and abandoned by her family. Now the villagers use her land for agriculture. The daini is a pishachi/rakyoh (demon); she knows the mantra (chant) through which she eats the liver. She consumes only human beings… Only a kabiraj/ojha can identify a daini. Sometimes, a deodhani also knows how to identify a daini. We get more cases during the rainy season.

He added that there are witches who cannot be identified by present-day ojhas. Earlier, ojhas who were learned and led a pious life knew how to do it. He said there were instances when he was young many ojhas would kill daini (witches). But now they do it for money if they are unable to cure a particular patient. It is all fake. People are illiterate and they believe the ojha or anyone who brands someone as a daini.

Contradicting himself, he added "My main work is to cure illness… I don't know how to identify a daini… I perform Mansa pooja (a ritual of chanting mantras and villages come with offerings to Mansa Devi, the snake goddess, for 3 nights and 3 days and perform ojhapalli dance and sometimes with deodhani (women who assist ojhas and go through trance during this ritual)…I can treat and cure jaundice, fever, piles, paralysis, breathing problem, insomnia, stammering, arthritis, etc. I was trained to be a kabiraj by my father-in-law, who also trained me in how to make medicines, combining a number of herbs. I do pooja every Tuesday and Saturday and after that I prepare medicines. It is God who helps me in curing many people with different illnesses.

He also mentioned that during the last rainy season, he had slipped and hurt his back and got treatment from a medical doctor. When we asked him why he did not treat himself, he answered that, this would take a lot of effort in making the required medicine.

The preceding discussion with the ojha shows:

1) That the charge of being a witch is made possible by rumours and gossip that create a social environment in which a person can be branded a witch, as discussed in Stewart and Strathern (2004). When the ojha is brought in to identify an alleged witch, the identity of the woman to be charged for causing harm or illness (and therefore the witch) is already known in the community, and this charge does not require any evidence of actual harm or causing a person to become ill or die. Kabiram himself said, "I have never seen a witch in person".

2) Making the allegation that someone is a witch is a matter of belief and does not require any concrete evidence of the so-called witch's evil deeds.

3) What causes witch persecution is the growth of structural capitalist relations connected to patriarchy and the male desire for control over land and resources. In the uncertainty of poor health conditions and economic situation, what was relatively stable in egalitarian societies with women's rights to land and forests (though only user rights like that of men too). In this situation, cultural beliefs have become a tool for the oppression and exploitation of women and marginalised groups, resulting in stronger capitalist relations that favour patriarchal forces becoming dominant in societies that were relatively egalitarian in the past.

Indigenous Beliefs in Witches

The belief that illness, death, and misfortune are caused by the wilful interventions of individuals with special powers or magical knowledge is pervasive throughout Assam. As a result, belief in witchcraft exerts a powerful influence on many aspects of day-to-day life; this becomes a significant vector for community-approved witch violence. Furthermore, rather than declining thanks to modern education and exposure, belief in witchcraft is proving to be resilient, with research-based data claiming that belief in witchcraft and the accompanying violence against witches are increasing. Elsewhere, a study by one of the authors (Govind Kelkar) noted three conditions for this belief to result in witch hunts. These are: "first, the belief that there are human beings who cause harm to others; second, the idea that such harm can be caused by those who have acquired supernatural means and can use these supernatural means; and third, that there is collective/community acceptance of action against witches, that is persecution of witches or witch hunts" (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020:25).

Belief in the existence of witches is mirrored in the popular story 'Pita Lubhiya Daini Burhi', in which a young boy is attacked by a daini who likes eating pitha (a popular snack in Assam). To keep him safe from the daini, the mother of the boy teaches him a mantra/formula that involves mixing some mustard seeds, a strand of a woman's hair, dried chillies, and a hen's feathers into the pitha and then cooking the pitha over an open flame. The boy is praised for his strength and courage in driving away the daini from the village (Rabha, 2003).

Another myth is the ojha's ability to wield power through a 'ban mantra', i.e., hitting a person with an invisible arrow to make him unconscious. The ojha uses this invisible arrow on his enemies or the people who question his magical power during the ritual of Mansa Devi. During the course of this ritual, a deodhani who is spiritually possessed falls into a trance and may predict something about the village or villagers. This is considered a message from a supernatural power and is beyond the purview of any questions. These are some of the ways through which an ojha/kabiraj can establish his power and influence in Rabha and Bodo communities (author's interview with Usha Rabha). People's faith in a deodhani is also

Birubala Rabha

seen during the ojhapalli dance, as well as in their willingness to go to a deodhani for their knowledge of medicinal herbs to cure people of various kinds of illness and impending harm to cattle and farms.

Birubala, who was recently honoured with a Padma Shri award by the Government of India for her efforts to end belief in witchcraft and the associated violence against those accused of being witches, stated during our meeting with us that “Bishashes kore, manu rahe daini ase, puja kore, nedekhae bishashes kore (There is a strong belief in our community that witches exist, there is need to brand them and chase them away through performing puja/rituals)”. The belief is there, even though nobody has seen a witch.

Birubala herself was branded a witch when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Also, she gave birth to a son with some physical infirmity. She has challenged the community by saying, “If I was a witch, he would have been killed by me. But he is perfectly fine and doing well in life.” When she refuted the claim that witches exist during a public meeting, she was threatened with being cast out from her community. However, she continued to live in the community and refused to accept that she was a witch or that witches existed. Belief in the witches is learnt though books and also from previous generations. In her work on the Rabha and Bodo peoples, Kashyap explains this social system of witch hunts as “structural injustice, based on rumours and

gossip in everyday life. The role of youth in the entire system of victimization and acting as the major force to supply the punishment goes to the extent where they decide upon the death penalty of the alleged victim. Through these actions of torture and death, the youth seemed to have managed to flip their position of subordination into a powerful weapon to shape the truth to their own will" (Kashyap, 2018:84).

Putuli Basumatary, a Bodo woman from Kokrajhar said, "There is no logic in the belief about witches. If someone is called a witch, they will not leave her. My mother was called a witch, and today, my stepson is calling me a witch. I raised him like my own son". Another Bodo woman from Goalpara district said, "People in our Bodo community believe in witchcraft, and they will kill or force [people] to leave the village. It is widely believed in our culture. I had to abscond for almost a week, otherwise, the villagers would have killed me. Even now, many in the village don't like my participation in the social activities of the village" (Anima Basumatary).

Illness and misfortune are generally understood as having not only natural causes but also social causes, and the exercise of witch branding is to find out who is responsible. But why are almost all witches women?

Belief in witchcraft thrives on a patriarchal platform; in many cases, women were branded as witches owing to their increased assertiveness or agency and increased economic control. (Drucker-Brown, 1993; Kelkar and Nathan 2020). Furthermore, as a result of changing gender relations owing to economic growth and capitalist systems, men feel they are losing control over resources because of the instability of land and property in newly introduced capitalist relations in indigenous societies. Neighbours and family members become a threatening force, whether as instigators themselves or through the strength of other instigators, and function as inactive spectators of the brutality and murders of the alleged witches.

The reasons for witch hunts in the majority of cases we have described were related to struggles over gender relations. Indigenous ways of thinking and their myths and stories have created two categories of human beings: women, any of whom could be a witch, and men who are witch finders, albeit not all men but only some who have knowledge of mantras and training from an ojha/kabiraj. Women who transgress gender boundaries or manifest their agency are in danger of being branded and presented as witches.

Legal Dimensions to the Belief in Witches

India has the largest recorded number of witch persecution cases. The country also has the largest number of states with specific laws in place to prevent witch hunts. These have been enacted in addition to the Indian Penal Code. States that have laws to prevent witch hunts include Bihar (1999), Jharkhand (2001), Chhattisgarh (2005), Odisha (2013), Rajasthan (2015), and Assam (2015 which became effective in 2018). The Assam Act, called the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, made witch persecution non-bailable, cognizable, and non-compoundable. The act was reported to be good in the sense that it could lead to a reduction in witch violence. However, some, like Shankar Prasad Bhattacharjee, an advocate at the High Court in Guwahati, Assam, have expressed doubts over its legislative effectiveness, saying, "How can a deep-rooted social practice be challenged by law… people who practice witch hunts are so blind to the fact that until and unless you make some effort to enlighten them about laws and the consequences of their actions, I don't think there will be any effect".

Admittedly, little work has been carried out on the impact of the new law on the prevalence of witch hunts in Assam. Our discussions with key persons who have worked on witch violence in India suggested that anti-witch persecution laws did not have any discernible impact on beliefs and the practice of witch hunts. One exception in these interviews is Usha Rabha, who is in charge of the Birubala Mission office in Goalpara. She spoke of four cases of attempted witch persecution, which were registered under the anti-witch violence law of Assam. We also noticed the fear of legal punishment among ojhas and kabiraj, who, while narrating stories of finding witches, would in the same breath tell us, "I am not engaged in any of the witch finding activities, such activities of witch finding and persecution were carried out by others… I would not like to name any of them." Clearly, the ojhas are no longer as powerful as they were in the years prior to the passing of the anti-witch hunting law in Assam.

In the year 2000, in response to the killing of 5 persons on suspicion of being witches in Thaigarguri village in Kokrajhar, the Government of Assam instituted a community policing project called Prahari. The objective was to prevent social conflict and to eradicate superstitions and belief in witch hunts, black magic, etc. The project worked to reduce poverty, illiteracy, and lack of awareness of modern healthcare in several districts of Assam, including Jorhat, Dheemaji, Morigaon, Dhubri, Sibsagar, Hailakandi, and Kokrajhar. The project also offered community training in fishery and mushroom cultivation, created drinking water facilities and, most importantly, ran campaigns and workshops against witch hunts and formed Mahila Samitis (women's councils) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the countryside.

An evaluation study conducted by the OKD Institute of Social Change and Development noted in conclusion: "Without doubt, [the] Prahari initiative is providing a platform to launch a proactive strategy against social prejudices through collective campaigns [and has] had a definite positive impact on people's overall attitudes towards superstitions belief systems. This was reflected in [a] reduction of witch hunting cases in the Prahari village" (Prahari, 2016:36). Nevertheless, these changes were limited, and the project could not sustain the momentum of change (ibid: 35), especially in areas affected by militancy, where the task became compounded. The police's time and energy were needed to deal with militancy and insurgency in these areas of Assam, and the organic connection with the Prahari project was lost or replaced with having to deal with insurgency and other social conflicts.

The ABSU (All Bodo Students Union) has also played a critical role and conducted many awareness campaigns in villages where the status of women is low due to illiteracy and confinement to their village and home. We were told by Khanindra Basumatray that Council Chief Pramod Boro has been taking action against witch hunts from his days in ABSU.

Box. 5

Khanindra Basumatary, *General Secretary, ABSU, narrated:*

The belief in witches and that witches should be killed is not only common among the villagers or among people with low literacy but also among educated people. I remember being told by a science teacher, I will also start believing in witches after I get married and have kids. So, the belief that witches exist is very deep rooted in the society. However, as ABSU we have done a lot of work to stop the practice of witch hunting. I remember in Chirang there was a case where an old woman and man were killed after an ojha named them as witches. It didn't end there, they also performed shradha (last rites) of the couple. The ojha refused of doing anything and after pressurizing him to tell the truth, he confessed that he did it for money. Sometimes the patients give him money and, in this case, too some villagers gave him money. The ojha was arrested and imprisoned in this case. In another case, a brother called his brother as daini and killed him for property. The villagers believed the accused and the case was brought to the ABSU very late. In another case a person was suffering from a bulge in the leg and stomach due to high sugar. An ojha branded a woman as a witch and made her responsible for his condition. Once a woman is branded a witch by someone and by the ojha, then people believe that woman has to be a witch and will try their best to kill her.

Along with the police, we have organized many awareness campaigns. I myself have been part of many awareness campaigns. Witch branding is also used as a tool for personal or political gains. You will also find this in the villages that due to jealousy, hatred, greed for land property, this belief of simple people is exploited. However, as ABSU organises campaigns whenever possible, it is our prime agenda to stop the practice of witch hunting. We as ABSU give full support to the Pahari Project to end witch hunts. Police at the higher positions cooperate but at the lower level, cases of witch hunts are set aside as unimportant matters. We are committed to the cause of ending witch hunts as it is based on superstition and innocent people are killed, mostly vulnerable and weak women. If a woman is considered beautiful or seen doing good work, then out of jealousy also she is likely to be branded a witch.

During recent election campaign, wherever ABSU addressed meetings, ending the practice of witch hunts was one of the prime issues. Cases have come down but a lot of work needs to be done. Health and educational infrastructures are very poor in this Bodo region. Many people come up with health problems and there is no money to buy medicines.

The Assam Women's Commission has also conducted awareness campaigns against witch hunts in villages. Although people have understood that women are branded as witches by ojhas to further personal interests or the interests of the family members or other known persons, continued belief in the existence of witches haunts alleged witches and makes them live in fear. As Masi Brahma from Debargoan in Kokrajhar (who was branded a witch in 2016) said "I don't believe in witches and will never brand any woman as a witch, but people in the village do. They killed a woman some 15 years back after branding her as a witch".

In a number of cases, due to the intervention of the ABSU, villagers were unable to kill the alleged witches and they continued living in their own villages. This was also seen in Goalpara among the Rabha people. The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council supported the fight against witch hunts and provided land for the Birubala Mission office to help spread awareness of witch hunts. So, although the passing of the act against witch hunting is still to be translated into concrete action, it has been a boon for civil society workers. Bhumika Rai (from WinG-Women in Governance Team) explained: "It was very difficult before [the] coming of the law to work in the field as we were mostly mediators between two conflicting parties, and anybody would question our intention. It is largely believed in the villages that once branded a witch [a woman] will have to be treated like an outcast and cannot continue living with the villagers. Helping an alleged daini was risky for us and the villagers failed to understand our perspective. Sometimes they were also violent towards us. With the enactment of the law, it may become easier for us to establish that there are no witches and branding anyone as a witch is a criminal act".

Conclusion: What Women Say to the State and Community

In India and other countries affected by the witch violence, courts have reduced the sentences of the perpetrators of violence on the grounds of a person's (or of a community's) belief in witchcraft. For example, the Calcutta High Court verdict of 18 October 2018 commuted a sentence of execution to imprisonment. While we do not support barbaric death sentences, we do question the sentence being reduced on the grounds of the accused's cultural beliefs. In our discussions with witch violence survivors, women have a different idea of cultural justice from the persons who engaged in the torture and /or killing of the so-called witches. As Padma Shri awardee Chhutni Devi of Jharkhand, who was branded a witch by her husband and driven out of the home and village, said, "The use of culture or belief in a legal system is nonsense… what we propose is the use of concrete evidence. The perpetrators of witch hunts have to show us the evidence of our engagement in witchcraft".

Likewise, in our interviews with witch violence survivors in Rabha and Bodo villages of Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts, women unequivocally stated the need for realising the cultural rights of everyone and the importance of dignity and non-discrimination in community life. Geeta Bhattacharya, a leading member of the Assam Mahila Samata Society, said, "If a community is not made sensitive about the human rights of women, it is difficult to end this practice of witch violence… Police are not ready to take up their cases, the cases of witch violence… Only enacting a law is not enough, it has to be implemented and made enforceable without bringing in matters of indigenous belief and culture".

Earlier research (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020) and our field research in Assam show that the socio-economic context of indigenous societies in India has changed from a non-accumulative to an accumulative economy (Xaxa, 2005; 2016). In the current economic transformation, we notice a paradox of increased hegemonic masculinity and women's increased struggles against this hegemonic masculinity. Our discussions with the concerned thinkers suggest that state-instituted enforceable measures are needed to institute a rights-based approach that embraces the dignity and equality of women. Usha Rabha, the in-charge of Birubala Mission, suggested a 4-point solution to eliminate witch persecution:

1. Building community awareness against the socio-cultural belief in witches.

2. Setting up decentralised healthcare infrastructure with attention to the reproductive concerns of women and girls

and endemic fever, malaria etc. Make it so that ojhas are no longer powerful to validate the cause of an illness. We would like to add to this that allegations of "cholera witches" in the present-day state of Chhattisgarh in the 1870s and 1880s were neutralised through easy access to affordable medicines for cholera (Macdonald 2021; Harrison 2019) as well as increased understanding among people that cholera is caused by unclean water and can be treated with oral rehydration.

3. Bringing in a change in primary school textbooks through stories that say witchcraft and witches do not exist. This will help the new generation grow up in an egalitarian, gender-sensitive culture.

4. Build the capabilities of indigenous women and girls, with attention to human rights-respecting culture and scientific thinking, as well as new production technologies and gender-responsive egalitarian relations. These capability-building efforts can be accompanied by women's unmediated rights to land and property, making women economically independent and enabling them to live with dignity and the freedom to make decisions.

Individual jealousy over the accumulation of resources or a collective frenzy to free society from the adverse effects of witchcraft is embedded in a belief system that views women as occupying a subordinate yet manipulative position, with no agency in decision making and ritual practices. Any potential transgression of these gender norms is likely to cause harm through death or disaster for the social group or the family in which these women live.

The role of the state in providing unmediated productive assets and resource-based equality and dignity to indigenous and rural women, social security, and freedom from fear of violence in domestic and public spaces is crucial in the attempt to overcome the issue witch persecution and witch hunts. More important, however, is the withering away of beliefs in witchcraft through legal changes and by instituting policy and practice aimed at doing away with misogyny in social norms and imparting dignity to women in individual and collective attitudes.

A policy change in the belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft is also needed. Norms based on such beliefs can change through political measures to promote indigenous and rural women's engagement with elevated socio-political tasks and roles. It is important to recognise that a structure of gender norms has internal dynamics of change, undermining the present patterns in gendered roles. Some mediating factors in this potential change can be access and control of technology, such as mobile phones, television, etc. There is a need to institute women's resource rights to land and forests and recognise forces of gender-specific democratization brought about by the women's movements, campaigns against the notion of persons acquiring evil powers and good examples of resilience and resistance against the belief in witchcraft and of women who successfully fought against being branded/persecution as witches.

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

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Cover design by Pallavi Govindnathan

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG SOUTH ASIA

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

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

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Introduction

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

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

It is to be noted that our line of inquiry is not intended to devalue the many gifts and positive aspects of indigenous cultures - their communitarian way of life, their rich and varied knowledge systems, nor the nurturing of forests and the conservation of natural resources. What we have intended to examine are beliefs and practices that have a negative impact on the agency and autonomy of women and indigenous societies.

In line with our conceptual framework for earlier studies on Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, we have tried to explore social beliefs, patriarchal gender relations and ritual practices in the growing market economy of Manipur in Northeast India, in this study.

We engage with individuals and households that are socially perceived as possessing "the evil spirit" or *"hingchabi"* in the Manipuri language, and *"Kaose"* in the Kuki hills. These words are generally used for a *female devil*

or a person of “evil spirits”, who has magical powers to change the victim into a different person - with a purportedly changed voice as well as demeanor – the ability to make her greedy with different, unusual demands (Gangte, 1993) or turn her/him into animals (Shaw, 1997).

We explore the witch question within the context of Meite society from a human rights and feminist perspective. Specifically, we have tried to engage with the belief system and ritual practice of the *hingchabi* in Manipur. Furthermore, we sought to explore the specific directions of change in the *hingchabi* belief system at the nexus of patriarchal culture and capitalist trajectories.

The imagination of *hingchabi* is not limited to the practice of branding *hingchabi* and *maibis* (the healer/shaman); it also includes the worldview or cosmology that breeds belief in *hingchabi* and ritual attacks – a supernatural power to heal or hurt others. Our findings point to a manifestation of social control or jealousy, a distinct character of socio-economic changes due to structural forces or traumatic experiences in the transition to a growing capitalist economy.

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

Methodology

A systematic literature review that is considered unbiased and more political and scientific in approach than the traditional narrative reviews was employed to explore people’s beliefs in witches and ritual attacks, like *hingchabi* (the concept of the evil spirit eye in Meitei society). In the first phase of this research, we identified research assistants who would be collaborating with us. This was followed by research of news clips about ritual practices in English and local language sources. Search by Google Scholar was of great help in finding relevant books, studies, papers and archival sources.

We decided to focus on the period from 1991 to 2022, keeping in view the emerging women’s movement in India, feminist writings and the opening of the Indian economy, with attention to the accumulation process in indigenous societies. Throughout the study, one of our concerns was whether this accumulation process has played a role in changing the traditional beliefs and social and cultural practices.

After the systematic literature review of the subject, in April 2023, we conducted fieldwork among the Meitei people around the Imphal area of Manipur. Our discussions in the field centered on the following 4 points:

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

We conducted 35 detailed interviews as explained below.

S. No.	Participant Names	Occupation/Field
1.	Kalanjoy Khumach	A healer shaman/ojha, discussion on his healing practice
2.	Phumlou Sephai	Discussion on *hingchabi* (the evil eye)
3.	Diana Potsangbam	A trans woman, her life and ideas on gender relations in Meitei society
4.	Shaktiban	A spiritual healer, discussion on his healing practice
5.	A group of 5 *maibas* and 1 *maibi*	About their work and belief in society
6.	Chief *maibi*	Attending a ritual ceremony and festival of *maibi*
7.	Loitongbam	In charge of the Women's Market in Manipur
8.	2 women shopkeepers in the women's market	Two women shopkeepers in the Women's Market
9.	A social activist	A known social activist
10.	6 Meitei students/youth	Individual discussions on the belief system
11.	9 Naga students/ youth	Individual discussions on the belief system
12.	6 Kuki-zo students/ youth	Individual discussions on the belief system
	Total	**36 Interviews (5 women, 1 transperson, 9 men and 21 youth/ students).**

Research support, both for the fieldwork and translation from the local language into English and vice-versa, was provided by two young activists/journalists, Merina Leimarenbi and Mamta Lukram. Schulu Duo, a young scholar from the Naga area in Manipur, was assigned the task of interviewing youths/students of all three major communities (Meitei, Kuki-zo and Naga) on their belief in the existence and influence of evil powers of *hingchabi* or witchcraft, whether any change was there in their belief system related to *hingchabi*. We are grateful to them for varying kinds of field support, such as finding contact persons for our interviews and identifying key persons like ojhas/priests/shamans, *maibas* and *maibis* as well as the villagers under difficult physical conditions, on a sensitive subject of culture and belief system. Our learnings came from the fieldwork, a series of frank and candid discussions with farmers, academics, priests/ healers, shamans and social activists.

Qualitative research is generally characterised by voice-based discussions and an observation-based inductive approach to building knowledge. To understand the role of social beliefs and practices about ritual attacks and branding as *hingchabi*, we engaged with our field research through individual interactive discussions within the community with thought leaders, farmers, *maibis* and *hingchabi*-affected women and men. We were frank and candid in explaining the purpose of our study, i.e., to look at inter-related factors of transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of agricultural economy and a technologically oriented society with patriarchal state control resources and governance. This transition is marked by new inequalities, caused by new production and consumption patterns new forms of communication and emergent women's agency that are super-imposed over traditional beliefs and cultural practices, leading to an increase in social and gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes caused by growing capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a large number of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

In our introduction with the interviewees, we further explained that our study intends to explore social beliefs and ritual practices as well as cultural and economic concerns that give rise to gender-based violence like witch hunts and *hingchabi*; yet at the same time create social and legal spaces for human rights-based discourses, questioning the practice of *hingchabi* and witchcraft. As a research outcome, we would like to see the social systems of Northeast India, where *hingchabi*, or witch hunts, will not be seen as a normal part of indigenous cultures.

To our surprise, our explanation of the purpose of our research was well-received with a polite silence and nodding of heads. Through our earlier knowledge of the subject of witch hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understand that a hierarchical gender social order provides a different perspective and worldview on inequality and marginality. These result in frequent, even contradictory answers about social beliefs and ritual practices related to marginalized voices, a lack of resource control and marginal representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As researchers, our challenge lies in presenting a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field and dismantling dualism and contradictions in field discussions.

Early History

Manipur is one of the eight states of Northeast India, with a population of 28,56,000, according to the 2011 Census of India. Although there are 33 recognized indigenous communities (called scheduled tribes) in Manipur, the official language communication is Manipuri or Meiteilon of the Tibetan-Burman group of languages. The Meiteis are in majority in terms of numbers living in the valley region, the Naga and Kuki inhabit the hilly areas surrounding Imphal. After the defeat in the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, Manipur became a princely state; after independence from the British colonization in 1947, the state was merged with the Indian Union and later became a full state on 21 January 1971 (Sarangthem and Longmailai, 2017).

The Meitei are basically people living in the valley of Imphal, while the hills are populated by the Nagas and the Kuki-zo. Myths ascribe a common origin to the Meitei and the hill people; Hudson (1908) holds that “two hundred years ago, in internal organization, in religion, in habits, and manners, the Meiteis were as the hill people are” (1989:11); though by the time of British rule, the Meitei were differentiated by customs, dress codes, food habits and belief systems (Brara, 1998:1).

The differences were in the spheres of economy, political organization and religion. Unlike the subsistence swidden (jhum) cultivation of the hills, in the Imphal valley, the Meitei carried out wet rice cultivation. Wet rice cultivation would provide a surplus over subsistence and re-planting needs. Regular surpluses provided the economic means for the development of a state structure. The Meitei kingship was established well before the advent of Hinduism or later British rule.

The Meitei kingdom had an elaborate system of officials both at the state and local levels. The expenses of this state structure have been largely met through corvee, or unpaid, forced labor. Every man was required to spend 10 days out of 40 in the service of the king. The corvee was also a form of military organization, developing from a militia into a standing army (Hodson, 1908/2023: 59).

Meitei women have played leadership and mass roles in struggles against British colonial rule and the oppressive economic policies of the maharaja of what was known as the Kangleipak kingdom. In independent rule, they came to prominence in the struggle against the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), when a group of them stripped in

public holding banners that read, “Army Rape Us.” They became known as Meira Paibis, meaning “Women Torchbearers.” Like other community organizations such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA) or the Nagas Mothers Association (NMA), all relevant adults, women in the case of NMA and Meira Paibis, or all adults in the case of the YMA, are members by default. They are not voluntary organizations and often, it is their writ that runs in the villages.

The Meitei became a Hindu kingdom, following Hinduism as preached by Vaishnavite missionaries from Bengal. There was a section of the Meitei, the Lois, that refused to convert to Hinduism; they were literally treated as outcastes and were confined to a particular region. Along with Vaishnavite Hinduism, however, the Meitei also continued with their pre-Hindu religion, called Sanamahi. More than the usual problem of the persistence of the old, there is clearly a need to find “… the conceptual place of the past in the present, the superstructure in the infrastructure, the static in the dynamic, change in stability” (Sahlins, 1987: xvii).

In a state like Mizoram, we have noted that despite the conversion to Christianity, several beliefs, such as the existence of persons with evil eyes, continue to be part of the folk belief system. In other Northeastern states, too, conversion to Christianity or Hinduism does not negate or even weaken the belief in the existence of witches, or women with supernatural powers, who cause harm. These folk beliefs exist in a subterranean form below the surface of formal religious beliefs. While these folk beliefs exist and do influence behavior, they are rarely brought into the discussion, particularly with outsiders. But among the Meitei, the cultural system is more in the nature of a dual system, or what Carlo Ginsburg called in the case of Europe, “a cultural compromise formulation – the hybrid result of a conflict between folk culture and learned culture” (1991: 11). Folk culture here would be the Sanamahi culture, while the learned culture is that of Hinduism.

Simultaneous Existence of Two Religio-cultural Systems

In the early history of the imposition of Hinduism as the state religion during the reign of Garibiniwaz (18th century), there are reports of resistance to Hinduism. The king was able to establish Hinduism as a state religion only on the condition that the Meitei Sanamahi religion would continue alongside (Brara, 1998: 16). Thus, the Sanamahi religious system was given an official status, with its priests *maibi* (female) and *maiba* (male) being given financial support by the palace. They, along with Vaishnavite Hindu priests, continue to have an official place in temples and related buildings. Thus, it is more than folk belief; the Sanamahi religio-cultural system has an official role, continuing with state support.

More than the chronological sequence of the Sanamahi and Hindu culture, it is the simultaneous existence of both that is to be analyzed to understand the existence of various beliefs, as regarding *hingchabi* / hinchaba – persons with an evil eye, which we will deal with later. As pointed out in the early 20th century, “The old order has not passed away by any means, and the *maiba*, the doctor and priest of the animistic system, still find a livelihood despite the competition on the one hand from the Brahmin, and the Hospital Assistant on the other” (Hodson, 1908/2023: 96). We observed during our field visits to Manipur that the past is not simply a time that has passed, but it is in existence in the present. Simultaneous existence, however, need not mean equal relevance in religious and social matters. Power comes into the picture in the relation between the two religio-cultural systems.

The role of the state becomes important in these relations between the two systems. In the early history of Hinduism, the attempt to make Hinduism the state religion surely gave it a hegemonic role in the interaction between the two systems. More recently, however, there has

been an attempt to define a Meitei nationality as a pre-Hindu identity. This has led to the resurgence of the Sanamahi religious system and its ritual and other cultural practices. But against this revivalism, there is also the power of the relationship of the Manipur ruling party with the pan-India Hindutva politics and the Central government.

However, we must deal with the simultaneity of both religio-cultural systems. Along with the Hindu gods and goddesses they might also place relics of the older religion. Similarly, in daily practice they might well participate in both types of prayers and even use one or the other in an opportunistic manner, in particular, the use of Sanamahi ritual practices in dealing with unexplained misfortune.

Simultaneity and Hegemony

Both Sanamahi and Hindu beliefs and rituals exist simultaneously among the Meitei. But does one of the belief systems have a dominating or hegemonic role in that its beliefs tend to shape the other? One can see some ways in which Hindu beliefs have tended to dominate and even transform Sanamahi beliefs. For one, there is a change in sacrifices or offerings. Animal sacrifices have given way to vegetable offerings, as usually seen in Brahmanical practices. Along with this, Sanamahi spirits have been taken over as Hindu deities. In a manner familiar in other parts of India, the Sanamahi deity has been transformed into the Hindu goddess.

These changes are well-known in the phenomenon of Sanskritization or the adoption of Brahmanical norms. But more important than these religious norms are those regarding the economic sphere. Rather than hide wealth as would happen earlier, there now seems to be an acceptance of getting better off or even rich through market-based activities and professions. Discussions revealed and some research papers conclude (Singh, 2018) that the role of *maibi* in dealing with misfortune is going down and is more prevalent in rural than urban areas. *Hingchabi*, or women with the evil eye, we were told, make their presence felt more in rural than in urban areas. With the acceptance of wealth accumulation, one would expect that jealousy would not be manifested through demands for ritual sacrifices. In a sense, the poorer sections accept that growing inequality is a feature of the spread of capital, reducing the role of levelling actions and sacrifices.

There is also a social downgrading of the *maibi*. Children of *maibi* are reported to have problems getting married. In addition, the survey found that neither *maibis* nor their children wanted their children to become *maibi* (Singh, 2018). All this points to the overall downgrading of *maibi* and the hegemony of the Hindu system.

Accumulation

As mentioned above, the Meitei are basically wet rice cultivators in the Imphal Valley. Unlike swidden or jhum cultivation in the hills, wet rice cultivation in the valley can provide a regular surplus over subsistence. Post-Independence India has substantially improved communications, making possible regular trade. The growth of the monetary economy also allows for accumulation, not in terms of physical goods but in the medium of money. This has changed community relations.

For one, there seems to have been a change from an earlier regime of feasting (Hodson 2020: 47), which would have used up any surplus. Feasting is also a way of sharing any surplus with those who have less. “It is politically unwise to possess the reputation of wealth in a country where the conditions of life are as unsettled as they still are in many respects in Manipur, and those who held high office had to spend freely to maintain their position” (Hodson, 1908/2023: 78).

Other forms of sharing also have become less, if not died out. One respondent told us that he remembers that in childhood, people from his father's village would come for various reasons. It was the responsibility of his father to feed them for as long as they stayed. But, he remarked, this is no longer the case. What this would mean is that there has been a growth of familial individualism and a move away from earlier communitarian economic relations to one based on familial advancement. We did not come across any mention of any contemporary need to hide one's wealth. Individualistic accumulation is now accepted as legitimate economic behavior.

Hierarchical Gender Relations

In the old or traditional Meitei belief system, women are identified with the left side, while men are the right side. Left is female, dead and low; while the right is male, representing high in the social hierarchy (Brara, 1998: 42). This left and right-side hierarchy continues in the house – the right side is for the man, head of the household, while the left side is for the woman. Property and descent are both along the patrilineal line. In fact, genealogies only mention women when they come in as mothers (Thiyam, 2012). This is the overall gender ideology. But even within this, there seem to be traces of an earlier matrilineal ideology. One factor is the importance of the maternal uncle, otherwise a feature of matrilineal societies. Even more important is the earlier role of the *maibis* (the women priests/shamans). The king is said to have had to listen to the *maibi*. "They could not afford to disregard or neglect what they predicted" (Brara, 1998: 139).

As in the rest of Northeast India, women spin and weave cloth. The role of women in trading is legendary. The famous women's market, Ima Market, in Imphal dates back to the 14th century. A Meitei proverb says, "A man who does not go to Loishang [be a warrior] and a woman who does not go to market are worthless" (Arambam, 2020: 434).

But curiously enough, women are said to be the "slaves" of men, which they become when they marry (Hodson, 1908/2023: 91). Women did not own property. This, however, has changed with the Hindu Succession Act amendments, which give women an equal share in ancestral property.

Along with their earlier non-ownership of property, women are substantially under-represented in new jobs, largely those in the government sector (Arambam, 2020). And, as in many other plough economies, they cannot plough or even touch the plough. They also cannot touch men's weapons. That taboo, however, has led them to develop their own weapon – the beam of the loom, which they wield like one would use a sword. With or without these weapons, Meitei women have been a force to reckon with, whether against British colonial rule or the Indian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

The Hingchabi

Meitei women have been economically and politically quite active. Nevertheless, they are also subject to ritual attacks in the name of *hingchabi*, or women who can cause harm by casting an evil eye. In a way, this is a belief that falls within the category of a witch, where a witch can be defined as a person who is supposed to possess and use supernatural powers to cause harm. Hodson had referred to "all the horrid legion of witchcraft" (1908/2023: 96). The terms witch or witchcraft do not subsequently occur in the literature, where the Meitei term *hingchabi* is reproduced. In fact, even the term "casting an evil eye" is only used in literature.

To make cross-society analysis possible it, however, is necessary to bring out common features of phenomena to classify them. The supposed use of supernatural powers to cause harm is the essence of witch accusations. The evil eye of *hingchabi* falls into this category of attacks on women (or men, in some cases) for

causing harm by using supernatural powers or forms of magic. In an interview with a Kuki-zo student, he explained:

> The evil spirit is known to steal from the rich and bless those whom he sees as most devoted. There are some *maibis*/"chosen" people, who are capable of making direct contact with those evil spirits. They are said to perform some sort of black magic to please the evil spirits so that they can be blessed with various authorities. They are capable of blessing or placing a curse on people. At times they do it for their own personal motives and other times the people bring offerings to them to gain something of their own personal interest or to put a curse on someone they hate or want to take revenge on. These "chosen" people do things for their own interest but also take in requests from other people in exchange for something valuable such as money, land, loyalty, etc. They also instil authority in people based on how loyal they are to them.

Using the term witch to categorize such accusations does not mean that these accusations are treated in the same manner in all societies. People may recoil from using the term witch, because it suggests the horrors of witch hunts in early modern Europe or in contemporary Central India or many other parts of the world. In these cases, the actions against accused women could range from gross degrading behavior to social ostracism or even murder. Among the Meitei we do not find such extreme behavior, but there are forms of ostracism and unspoken avoidance.

To our query "Who are the people affected by *hingchabi*? Women, men, rich, poor?", a student who grew up in Kolkata, said:

> *Hingchabi*, or black magic, mainly affects women. This is due to the prevalent hot temper, intense feeling of jealousy and impulse to extract revenge in the Meitei culture and even among tribal people. Usually, when a person gets rejected in regard to love or business, the man would seek revenge and try to harm the girl or the wife. The *maiba*/*maibi* needs some belongings of the woman in order to perform black magic on her. It might be her hair, blood, clothes, a photograph, etc. Usually, she would then fall ill, pass

A discussion with the shaman/healer.

out, have her house set on fire, get lost in the woods, or sometimes even lose her life.

Most often, however, is the propitiation of spirits through offerings of various types. The *maibi*, who is called in, is asked what she (the spirit) wants. Discussions with various people revealed that the offerings required were quite meagre – not going beyond a chicken. This should be compared with a few mithun that are often required as offerings among the Galo and Adi of Arunachal Pradesh.

The consumption offerings required to overcome the *hingchabi* could be connected to redistribution to offset incipient forms of economic inequality. The victims of the evil eye are said to be those who are better off and lead to jealousy. The better off are not charged with having used illicit means, such as extracting human blood to feed the serpent in Khasi mythology. But being better off, they are supposed to lead to jealousy.

While offerings are required to offset the likely effects of the evil eye, the *hingchabi*, mainly women but also a few men called hingchaba, are socially ostracized. Again, not in the manner of being forced to leave the village and live on its outskirts, but in discreet avoidance. The accused woman is also not named *hingchabi*, but through local conflicts and rumors, people come to know who is supposed to be causing the trouble. But, as with much of the other societies in Northeast India, the woman is not openly named. Thus, there is an idea of women who cause evil, and women are usually blamed for some unexplained illness. The action to deal with this evil, however, is not as virulent as among indigenous peoples in Central India or as was the case in early modern Europe.

The two authors, after a discussion with a group of *maibas* and a *maibi* (centre).

Maibis

The *maibis* are women shamans or traditional priests who go into a trance and treat the possessed to ward off evil spirits. People are said to be possessed when an evil spirit enters them at a certain point of time in their lives. *Maibis*, too, get possessed, get into a trance and act as an intermediary between spirits and the people as the shamans do. They are ritual specialists and faith healers. *Maibis* were supposed to foretell the future. Thus, they played multiple roles. Knowledge about the *maibi* tradition was orally carried from one generation of *maibi* to the next (for details, see Singh, 2018). They were very important in the pre-Hindu religion of the Meitei. Even the king was said to have to listen to the advice of the *maibis*. When Hinduism became the state religion, the *maibis* could not be displaced and continued to retain important roles in the Meitei kingdom and society. They continue to have important roles right till the present though, perhaps, they are not as important as they used to be (Singh, 2018).

Maibi (female) and *maiba* (male) are religious functionaries of Sanamahi religion, but their functions are more than those of traditional priests. A *Maiba*, who has priestly and ritual functions, is different from a traditional physician. Meitei society has both a traditional medicine man as well as a *maiba*. The former is called doctor or ojha and the latter is addressed as *maiba*. Unlike *maibis*, the *maibas* are not supposed to be "chosen people" and do not get any intimation of their calling by a deity. They are trained by seniors and take up the tradition of herbal healing. The *maibas* have an unspecified connection with a female deity, which possesses them, conveying a message that they know each other even before they meet for the first time.

The *maibis*, as mentioned above, are intermediaries with spirits. They also act as intermediaries with the evil spirits, the *hingchabi*. When a person feels that one is being hounded by *hingchabi*, they would approach a *maibi*. The *maibi*, when possessed, would then intercede with the *hingchabi*, ask her what she wants and try to reduce her demands to something reasonable, such as an egg or a chicken. Such intermediation may also be required in advance of an event and the *maibi* would then reveal what sacrifice needs to be undertaken for the safe conduct of the business. As pointed out by Hodson, the Meiteis are very superstitious and ask for the performance of various rituals before undertaking an activity, whether it is agriculture, house construction or travel. This gives the *maibis* much to do in society.

An individual woman may become a *maibi* through two processes: First, she may become a *maibi* after being possessed by a certain deity, after a "sacred call" from a male deity for her sacred duty. She is called a "chosen one". Second, she becomes a *maibi* by training, without any call from a deity, but is likely to go through intensive training. Singh (2018:149) reported that "more than 95% of them are chosen ones". The new *maibi* calls her teacher Ima Guru (mother teacher) regardless of her age.

Maibas have important roles and responsibilities in both domestic and community affairs. At the domestic level they perform various rituals like acting as a medium between the world of the spirits and the human world; conduct ancestral worship and appeasement rites. They also engage in fortune-telling. At the community level, they have key roles in the Lai Haraoba festival and perform once a year. The Ima *Maibi* evokes the spirit of deities, who would be worshipped in this festival. In carrying out all these roles, many *maibis* are given support by institutions of the state. Along with this, the *maibis* also earn money for performing the rituals at local and family levels. "Superstition constantly sends them to consult their *maibis* and pundits, who earn an easy livelihood by prescribing remedies to allay their fears" (Hudson, 1908/2023:122)

The Ima Guru (mother teacher) dressed for the Lai Haraoba festival.

Interestingly, the concerned literature suggests that *maibis* are more powerful than *maibas*. But our interviews with a transwoman leader and others categorically stated that in day-to-day affairs, *maibas* are more powerful than *maibis* in making decisions and conducting spiritual and political affairs.

Maibis in a ritual activity during the Lai Haraoba festival in Imphal.

Women in the Market and Public Space

Women's participation in the market is often noted as a feature of Meitei society, with the famous Mother's Market (Immi Market) dating back to the 14th century. They are usually retail traders, with wholesale trade being the preserve of non-Meitei, such as Marwari or Punjabi. However, the large-scale participation of Meitei women as traders is quite remarkable. If every woman is also a weaver, currently, most of them also produce cloth for sale in the market. Thus, what is otherwise another part of women's unpaid household labor is turned into income-earning labour. Those who act as traders, buying cloth from other women and selling the goods in the market, become income earners in two ways, both as weavers and as traders.

Trading gives women an income-earning activity. As income earners, their contribution to the household economy is easily recognized. Even if they are expected to spend the money largely for the benefit, their cash contributed is likely to give them a better position in household bargaining.

Along with participation in the market, Meitei women are also known for their mass political participation. They carried out notable struggles against British rule. In Independent India, they have carried out struggles against the Indian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Meitei women seem to have limited participation in high-level decision-making bodies, such as the state government, but they have a high political participation at the local and mass level. This both reflects their political agency and contributes to it. Despite that, however, Meitei women are seen as reflective of their gender roles as mothers. The market is called the Mother's Market, just as the Naga Women's Association is the Naga Mother's Association. Whatever they do is identified as part of being a mother, not a woman as such, who may or not be a mother.

Identity and Agency

In the preceding pages, we discussed a contradictory position of women in Meitei society, i.e., 1) the *hingchabi* evil spirit system and its adverse effects on a significant number of women (and men) resulting in fearful social existence and 2) Meitei women

A shop owner in the women's market, Manipur.

having a powerful agency in religio-cultural, political, and economic spheres. This agency is derived through their roles as Meitei and trading activities in traditionally established women's markets in Manipur. Our analysis of this contradictory position of Meitei women raises two questions: First, what can policy do to institute women's right to equality, dignity, and freedom from fearful existence? Second, is agency devoid of feminist concerns for the dignity and equality of all women beyond borders enough to empower women to bring freedom from patriarchy, masculinity and freedom from gender-based violence?

The Meira Paibis are considered the guardians of Meitei society, both with regard to opposing social evils like alcoholism and civil conflicts. The role of Meira Paibis in opposing the men who were directly or indirectly engaged in the burning of Kuki villages, sexual attacks and parading of naked women received mixed reports, for example, reports by Patricia Mukhim, the editor of Shillong Times and Kuthar; 2023; and Agarwala 2023 who questioned the role of Meira Paibis that …."conversations with, many Meira Paibis made it clear that most of them were not guided by feminist principles. It was the community that took precedence over gender for most women's groups in Manipur," (Agarwala, 2023: 10). Our two local researchers, however, confirmed that Meira Paibis and other women activists from Meitei community conducted a sit-in protest and mass condemnation against the atrocities on the Kuki women.

As an Imphal researcher put it, "Sure, it is a women's movement, but most of the causes they espouse are for the community. They hardly talk about themselves, their bodily rights, their reproductive rights. Perhaps the 2004 Kangla Fort protest was for one the few times that they spoke out against sexual violence women faced" (quoted in Agarwal, 2023: 10). When community rights are defined against another community with regard to access to land and forest resources, then it can surely turn into support for ethnic cleansing and even the sexual violence that has been of the civil conflict in Manipur.

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 changing the pervasive patriarchy, masculinity, and the privatization of resources, leading to a silent demise of concerns for women's rights beyond patriarchal determinism and the steady loss of social, economic, and political powers of women in their own society. Patriarchal determinism about women's position in the Meitei society leads women not to raise a critical voice about loss in their position and silently accept growing male control over resources and decision-making, and worse, even be bystanders in gender-based violence within and beyond gender-based violence.

In our individual interviews with 21 students/ youth from Meitei and Kuki-zo indigenous groups, there was only one person who said she did not believe in the *hingchabi*, or an evil spirit. Others categorically stated that though people's perception of the evil spirit is slowly changing, and its relevance is decreasing, *hingchabi* still have an important role in their belief systems. "The majority still somewhat fear and believe in the '*maibi* changba'," "People believe that it is something that cannot be helped with science and technology and traditional rituals can only be a solution to such problems", in most cases caused by "anger, jealousy, revenge, hatred, dislike and even heartbreak or unreciprocated affection etc.". Those who caste *hingchabi* do so out of a desire for domination and power, thinking, "what does it matter if she rejects me? I can make her ill. Or, if a company is making more money, I can still drive them out of business". Another student at a different meeting said,

"I don't think these incidents could ever be permanently stopped as there is no remedy." Spirits like *hingchabi* or kaosi "cannot be removed from the earth, and neither they can be reformed, their essence is that of an evil spirit. But perhaps a more understanding approach could be taken by witnesses that could include prayers for both victim and perpetrator and not mete out cruelty or brutality to the latter".

Agency is generally defined as the capability to think and act about one's strategic interest. Our conceptualization of women's agency has six major dimensions: having unmediated (not through marriage relations) right to control and own resources; freedom from fear of violence within the home and outside in streets and workplaces; ability to think and act to secure their strategic interest like change in gender norms and claims-making for resource control and ownership of land and property, having representation and voice in community decision-making and influencing policy and inclusion in spheres of traditional and modern knowledge and technology (Kelkar, 2011; Kelkar and Nathan, 2020).

Our concern here is women's "cultural agency", i.e., agency wrapped in the existing social and patriarchal cultural norms. The legitimacy of their cultural agency is seen in an implicit social condition that they conform to the demands and patriarchal norms of the community. Yet the very fact of *hingchabi* or witch branding shows that women have been attempting to redefine their ideas and roles to achieve well-being and strategic interests that are different from that of male-dominated social norms and patriarchal definition of agency.

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.

This framework for addressing *hingchabi* 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 globalized 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.

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.

Conclusion: Policy and Social Action

At a general level, we have raised four policy and social actions required to eventually end witch persecution and witch hunt 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; (3) concrete evidence of witchcraft and building community support to dismantle power and authority of the ojhas, *maibis*, and *maibas*; and 4) enabling environment for women's agency with feminist components that include women's right to dignity, bodily integrity and human rights in their own homes and community and beyond borders of ethnicity.

Recently, in the 47th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in June-July 2021, the Human Rights Council drew the attention of the state parties for the "Elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks". 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 resistance, such as Chhutni Devi in Jharkhand, Sangkhumi from Mizoram, and Birubala Rabha in Assam, who were recently honored with the Padma Shree award for their work of capability and self-esteem development with the alleged witches. Also, we have an example 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 rights 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.

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

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COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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

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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: 4 Academics 1 Journalist 1 Administrator 2 *Thlen*-keeping households 7 Ojhas/herbalists 2 Affected by *thlen*
		Marbisu village	1		
		Madanriting village	1		
		Pynursla village	1		
	Garo Hills	Tura	1	9 individual interviews	The 6 interviews include: 1 Late *ojha's* wife 1 Nokma (village head) 1 IG Police (retired) 1 Herbalist 1 Tiger-woman 1 Academic 1 Wife of late tiger-man 1 Son of late tiger-man 1 Organic farmer
		San Awe village	1		
		Migri village	1		
		Khasiapara (Daini village)	1		
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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Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Gender, Culture and Capital in Mizoram, India

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Cover design by Pallavi Govindnathan

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG SOUTH ASIA

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

In line with our conceptual framework for earlier studies on Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, we have tried to explore social beliefs, patriarchal gender relations and ritual practices in the growing market economy of Mizoram in Northeast India, in this study. In our work, we engaged with specific Mizo beliefs rooted in superstition, alluding to witchcraft, good spirits, evil spirits and supernatural beings (Lalrinchhani, 2020;

Rohmingmawii, 2023; Behera, 2014). The practice of witchcraft in Mizoram among the Mizos has been regarded as a practice of the pre-colonial period, mostly told in folk narratives. With the spread of Christianity, there has been a gradual disappearance of magic and witchcraft in Mizoram, and the incidence of such practices has been regarded as the dark past (Rohmingmawii, 2023). In the folk narratives of the Mizos, there are accounts of the practice of dawi (magic/witchcraft/sorcery) and dawithiam (magicians/wizards/witches) in the present-day Mizo society, though such references are scarcely found in written accounts.

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

Methodology

In the initial period of 10 weeks of our research, the two authors of this study were engaged in a systematic literature review that is considered unbiased and more gender inclusive with a feminist approach than the traditional anthropological narratives. In discussing with our research team of three younger scholars and women's rights activists, we tried to explore people's beliefs in witches, evil spirits (like *ramhuai*, khawhring) and the role of traditional healers. In the first phase of this research, we identified local research assistants who would be collaborating with us. This was followed by an additional review of the literature and newspaper reports about witch branding and evil eye in English and local language sources. A search by Google Scholar and a critical review of three Ph.D. theses produced on Mizo society and culture from the Department of English of Mizoram University was of immense help in finding relevant material, studies, papers and archival sources.

We decided to focus on the period from 1991 to 2022, keeping in view the emerging women's movement in India, feminist writings and the opening of the Indian economy with attention to the accumulation process in indigenous societies. Throughout the study, one of our concerns was whether this accumulation process has played a role in changing traditional beliefs and socio-cultural practices.

After the systematic literature review of the subject in March 2023, we conducted fieldwork among the Mizo people in the Aizawl area of Mizoram. We conducted 14 detailed interviews, as explained below.

Meetings with our two local researchers, Lalhlimpuii Pachuau and Hmingthanzuali – explaining in detail the purpose of our research objectives. Our discussions in the field centered on the following four points:

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

S. No.	Participant Names	Occupation/Field
1.	Sangkhumi Bualchhuak (Padamshri Awardee)	She explained her work on Mizo Women's Association, she did not believe in any ritual that attacked any woman.
2.	Pachuau (Assam Regiment Retiree)	Practicing journalist, he discussed *ramhuai* (evil spirit), and how they go away with a ritual.
3.	Male local leader	90-years-old, who talked at great length about evil spirits.
4.	Another male local leader	He explained the historical existence of *ramhuai*.
5. & 6.	Meeting with 2 women lawyers	Discussed gender-based violence in Mizo society and rapes go unreported and unpunished.
7.	Prof. Sailo (Mizoram University)	Explained the existence of evil in Mizo society
8.	A woman. Former YMA President	She was once accused of being a witch
9.	A local healer	He explained the purpose of appeasing the evil spirits.
10.	A young man who was attacked by a *ramhuai*	He was attacked by a *ramhuai*. He showed the ritual of traditional practices how to appease a spirit and drive her away to the forest.
11.	A Ph.D. Scholar	Works on human-animal interactions and tiger and human relations.
12.	Meeting with a local woman	Explained how a woman's sexuality is controlled, any transgression of norms led by patriarchal society is said to be due to the evil spirit.
13.	Hmingthanga	An 85-year-old man, narrated stories of evil spirits
14.	Ms. Roseia	Narrated the Mizo belief in evil spirits and ghosts
	Total	**14 (6 Women and 8 Men)**

Research support both for the fieldwork and translation from the local language into English and vice versa, was provided by our two local researchers. We are grateful to them for varying kinds of field support, such as finding contact persons for our interviews and finding key persons, social activists and villagers under difficult physical conditions on a sensitive subject of culture and belief systems. Our learnings came from the fieldwork, a series of frank and candid discussions with farmers, academics, shamans/priests and social activists.

Qualitative research is characterised by voice-based discussions and an observation-based inductive approach to building knowledge. To understand the role of social beliefs and practices about ritual attacks and branding women as *ramhuai*, we engaged with our field research through individual interactive discussions within the community with thought leaders, Padamshree awardees, farmers and *ramhuai*-affected women and men. We were frank and candid in explaining the purpose of our study, i.e., to look at inter-related factors of transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of agricultural economy and a technologically oriented society with patriarchal state control resources and governance. This transition is marked by new inequalities caused by new production and consumption patterns, new forms of communication and emergent women's agency that are super-imposed over traditional beliefs and cultural practices, leading to an increase in social gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes caused by growing capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a significant percentage of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

In the countryside with local researchers

In our introduction with the interviewees, we further explained that our study intends to explore social beliefs and ritual practices as well as cultural and economic concerns that give rise to gender-based violence like witch hunts and *ramhuai*; yet at the same time create social and legal spaces for human rights-based discourses, questioning the practice of *ramhuai* and witch hunts. As a research outcome, we would like to see the social systems of Northeast India, where *ramhuai*, or witch hunts, will not be seen as a normal part of indigenous cultures.

To our surprise, our explanation of the purpose of our research was well-received with a polite silence and nodding of heads. We speak from the standpoint of those who are directly affected by traditional practices that are still gender unjust yet covered within the existing customs and social norms. Through our previous knowledge of the subject of witch hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understand that a hierarchical gender social order provides a different perspective and worldview on inequality and marginality. These result in frequent, even contradictory answers about social beliefs and ritual practices related to marginalized voices, a lack of resource control and marginal representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As researchers, our challenge lies in presenting a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field and dismantling dualism and contradictions in field discussions.

Three Major Streams of Thought

We noted three major streams of thought on witch persecution and witch hunts. The first can be seen in anthropological studies on misfortune and the community role of witch accusations within the cultural context of indigenous and rural societies [see, for example, E. E. Evans-Prichard (1934/1976) and Mary Douglas (1970)]. They account for the development of the notion of witchcraft as a prominent occult praxis that occurs as part of conflict resolution systems in human existence. These notions are part of indigenous peoples' faith in supernatural powers, which were supposedly superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women living in the margins of the community would be blamed for causing crop loss, 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 were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children. The capitalist society made women's bodies the fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women such as midwives, abortionists and herbalists with the knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal power and create generations of subjugated women with domestic labour class, a condition for capitalism. Older women were attacked because they could no longer provide children or sexual services and, therefore, were considered a drain on the creation of wealth in the social system. 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 stream is that, in agreement with an earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan 2020), this research combines a political economy approach with an analysis of culture and patriarchy. We relate cultural aspects of witch persecution and witch 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 the transformation to the social-economic order. We often tend to ignore that the androcentric principle is necessary for an objective analysis of the social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we saw a crucial role played by men's monopolization of productive resources, such as land and housing, and ritual knowledge, which is 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 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.

Background

Mizoram is one of the eight states of Northeast India, with a population of 1.097 million, according to the 2011 Census of India, and has a literacy rate of 91.33 percent. The Mizo people inhabit what used to be known

as the Lushei Hills. They were not subject to any kingdom until the coming of British rule. Among themselves, too, though village chiefs were basically from the Sailo clan, there was no supreme chieftainship or any supra-village authority. Villages existed as their own political units, carrying on swidden agriculture on the hillsides. When productivity in swidden fields fell after 5 years, the village shifted to another location. This shifting or migration meant that the Mizo did not accumulate much, so migration was easy.

Villages were located on the top of hills with defensive ditches with bamboo staves built around possible lines of attack. Critical to the defense of the village were the young men. After puberty, young men shifted from their parents' homes to the youth dormitory. They stayed there until marriage. The youth dormitory was important for young men to learn from their seniors and provided the force to defend the village. Besides defending the village, the youth were also important in raiding other villages. The objective of these raids was to secure captives and loot what there was. Since all these villages carried on swidden cultivation, one could presume that there was not much to be looted. The result seems to have been that raiding was not as important as it was among the Nagas, whose terraced cultivation systems provided regular surpluses, unlike swidden cultivation. But raiding was part of the economic system with its consequences for patriarchy and masculinity.

The Mizo raided each other's villages, both to take captives and loot whatever was available. This would increase the importance of warriors, particularly young warriors, and experienced leaders. In particular, it would increase the dependence of women on men as warriors, since the warriors were essential to the survival of the village. Since vegetable foods, including food grains from the swidden fields, were a large part of calories consumed, the dependence on men as hunters was not great. But the dependence on men warriors as defenders of the village could have given rise to the higher status of men as defenders of women and children, and that would become the base for men's domination of the political sphere.

A view of the Mizo countryside

Recognizing that the Mizo, like other indigenous peoples in Northeast India were societies organized around not just cultivation and hunting, but also raiding would provide a way to understand the growth of patriarchy in these societies. Of course, women, and even children, could have played a role in the defence of villages. But there can be no doubting the special and important role of men as warriors in the defence of the village.

Defence against raiding also requires a united community that follows rules and decisions taken by the leaders in warfare. It is likely that the transition from earlier domination by women to one by men took place with the growth of raiding. The paucity of ethnographic material makes verifying and detailing this line of analysis difficult. Ethnographic investigation among Mizo villages such as those on and across the Myanmar border as well as among related indigenous peoples, such as the Kuki-Zo across the India-Myanmar border, may help to resolve these issues of the formation of patriarchy.[1]

Further, the continuation of united village communities is reflected in the contemporary importance of the Young Mizo Association (YMA). The YMA even seems a continuation of the young warriors, who lived together in the --- house at the entrance to a village and were critical to the safety of the village. While the YMA now allows women to become leaders, just one woman has become a local YMA president. The YMA remains a strong patriarchal organization whose writ runs in the villages. They lay down the norms to be followed and implement them quite thoroughly. They decided on and implemented the parcelling of some collective lands into private plantations for the cultivation of tree crops, a positive step in increasing productivity. They also forced women with HIV/AIDS out of their village (Patricia Mukhim, personal communication). Thus, the important role of the patriarchal YMA would make it difficult for women to be assertive, whether in local affairs or in electoral politics.

Patriarchal Culture and Social Relations

The Mizo are patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal, domestic violence is a silent crime that many women suffer throughout their life. The neighbors refrain from interfering or helping the women; they consider it a “family matter”. “There are a number of incidents where a husband killed his wife but the neighbors refused to intervene or prevent it” (Local Records of NGO Working for Human Rights in Patnaik ed. 2008, pp. 385). In Mizo customary law, women did not own land or other property, except for the little that they could carry as dowry on marriage. Men were considered to be the breadwinners. Women carried out most of the labor in the swidden fields and did most of the work at home. They woke up earlier than men, started the process of cooking and then woke up men before they went to the swidden fields. There are writings that describe the gender-based division of labour in traditional Mizo society, men concentrated on defense and hunting, and women did all domestic work, food-centered productive and reproductive roles. Household work, i.e., looking after the household and children, drawing water, collecting firewood, pounding rice and cooking were the duties and responsibilities of women, while all the men and boys would go outside for hunting, raiding and clearing of forest for swidden fields, Women also did the tough work of cultivation, as men did, but they were kept out of any management roles of swidden fields (Lalrofeli, 2023: 77). This did not allow

1. For a global analysis of the connection between agricultural cultivation with regular surpluses and the rise of patriarchy see David Graeber and David Wengrow 2021.

Discussion on gender and social relations in Mizo society with local personalities

women any leisure. Despite doing most of the work at home or outside, "women do not have any substantial say practically in all the decision-making matters whether at home or outside" (Hmingthanzuali and Rekha Pande, 2009: 132).

Largely, the domestic space was the realm of women, and the public space was male. Their roles hardly ever split into each other's realm, and a woman was never allowed to enter zawlbuk (Boys/male dormitory in the village where all young men (fighting age) sleep together and are always ready for war or to protect the village from raids by other villagers and wild animals). The male head of the household controls the social-economic and religious affairs. Churches and political organizations had a negligible presence of women (Jangu, 2019).

If a boiling pot of *bai* (assorted vegetables that are cooked with either ash or vinegar, fermented pork fat or sodium bicarbonate) overflowed while a woman was busy tending to other household chores, the man who sat next to the fire would not touch the overflowing pot but instead called out to his wife, *'Nu-i, I bai chhuan a liam ania'* (Wife, your bai is overflowing). To tend to the overflowing pot was considered extremely unmanly.

Patriarchy is also reflected in the various sayings about women and men that denigrated women. What women said was ignored as being of no value. "Flesh of the crab is no meat; words of a woman are no words. Do not pay heed to what a woman says. Let a woman and a dog bark as they please." Wives were thought of as being entirely replaceable, as "worn out fencing and women can easily be replaced" (Mahapatra, 2008).

Women needed to be threatened or even beaten. "Unthreatened wife and unthreatened grass of the field are both unbearable." Women, drums and dogs were to be beaten – that is the way they were to be kept under control. Their knowledge was also belittled, "Wisdom of women does not reach beyond the village stream," meaning that women knew nothing about the outside world, ignoring the

A young Mizo explaining the rituals

fact that women did much work in the forest, both in cultivation and in gathering food and timber. These sayings seem to have generated an inferiority complex among women outside their homes, which makes them hesitant to participate in politics and governance (Jangu, 2019).

Mizo legend, however, attributes the cultivation of paddy or wet rice to a woman. Though women were not supposed to participate in hunting, the *Lasis* were the female deities of the forest. Hunters prayed to them for success. Female deities were also protectors of the forest (Hmingthanzuali and Rekha Pande, 2009). All of these legends point to the possibility of a time when women may have had a higher status in Mizo society than at the time when the British colonialists began to record their practices and beliefs.

In Mizo rituals, those carried out by men were generally related to blood – sacrifices for a good hunt or some other positive outcome. On the other hand, women's rites were related to herbs and plant materials. One can easily understand men's blood rites as following from their involvement in hunting and warfare, both largely forbidden to women, while women's rites followed from their involvement in agriculture and gathering. Along with this, men prayed to women deities for success in hunting.

Beliefs: Ramhuai and Khwahring

The Mizos are overwhelmingly Christian. But underneath Christianity, there is an underlying veneer of their pre-Christian beliefs, which include beliefs in evil spirits, called *ramhuai*, that are supposed to cause misfortune. It is believed that the spirits inhabited trees, hills, big stones, and water springs and mostly, sacrifice was made to evil spirits as there was the fear that they cause illness or death. When people fell ill, they used to attribute it to a *ramhuai* and would find out the sacrifices needed to appease that spirit, or *ramhuai*, and cure the sickness (Careyand Tuck, 1976: 197). This was particularly so in the case of times when there were many sick people in a village. As Shakespear, a colonial administrator in the Lushai Hills (as Mizoram was then called) pointed out, "..all tales about

[Ram] Huais either begin or end, 'There was much sickness in our village'…" (Shakespear, 1975: 67).

The *ramhuai* were believed to be of varying shapes, "some resembling humans, others grotesque and huge in stature above the ordinary humans. Some had curly hair and eyes set in a vertical line down the center of the brow… *ramhuais* had the faculty of taking on any shape; no constancy has ever been attached to their form. Besides, no one has ever really seen a *ramhuai* in its supernatural settings, at least that is the belief and, if anyone alleges, he has, his story is usually discounted and he himself considered not too nice to know" (McCall, Reprint 2015:69).

Chhuanliana is in his early 90s and has always lived in Aizawl, except for the few years he lived with his family in Sialsuk village. It was in the late 1960s/early 1970s in Bethlehem Veng area, an outskirt of Aizawl town, he saw balls of fire in the air in the forest just across his house. It was almost like a murmuration of birds in the sky. He thought it was quite unusual but when we asked him if he thought that was the work of *ramhuai*, he said he firmly believed it was not. He went on to say that back in the day, a lot of people considered such phenomenon as works of *ramhuai* and what he saw would also be categorized as tau (supernatural spirit) that moves around the forest as a ball of fire or torch. He believed it was a burning gas in the air rather than works of *ramhuai*. He credited his refusal to believe what he saw as a work of *ramhuai* because he was taught from an early age both at home and in Sunday school that Christians should not fear *ramhuai* of any sort because Jesus had conquered all the evil spirits.

He also narrated an incident that happened in the early 1930s when a *ramhuai* was thought to visit the house of a man who had recently passed away. All the young men, who had come together to comfort his young widow left the house one by one for they thought his spirit used to come and visit them at night. Chhuanliana's father, who was a teachers' training instructor in the then Lushai Hills wanted to prove them wrong. With his students, he spent the night near the house of the deceased man and waited up till midnight. At around the early hour of the morning, they found out that it was his widow who played tricks on everyone in the hope that all the young men would leave her house except one particular young man that she fancied.

He further narrated that before the majority of the Mizos were Christians, there were instances where women were accused of having khawhring (an evil spirit that enters the body of women) but he himself had not witnessed any such incident. He mentioned that some women were accused of having khawhring out of jealousy. Their fellow women mostly did this.

In another interview with Lalbiakthanga Pachuau, he said that Mizos do not deny the existence of *ramhuai* and other evil spirits. But he claimed that they do not have power over people who believe in Jesus. Since a very high percentage of the Mizo population has accepted Christianity, the fear of the evil spirit or *ramhuai* has been greatly removed. However, he talks about Mizo's belief in spirit that every human being has. The spirits of some people leave their bodies before they die, and he reiterated that this is not to be confused with *ramhuai*. Such spirits do not harm people, though some people may find them scary.

Some *ramhuais* were more venomous than others. Phung (another evil spirit) was very dark and large, a frequenter of village streets, who had the power of inculcating madness and causing fits, of making epileptics. Khawhring was responsible for causing sadness, for he could change and ruin the spirit of a person, who would then soon be known by all to be possessed of an evil eye. "Khawring was of a gluttonous disposition, consumed by a passion

for possessing the riches of others" (McCall, Reprint 2015, pp 69-70).

There are two types of traditional healers among the Mizo to deal with various illnesses. One is the healer, usually a man, who bases his diagnosis on reading a person's pulse. The other is the shaman, usually a woman, who goes into a trance and can get information about the sacrifice required to appease the *ramhuai*. The women shamans were thought to be more effective than men healers.

This belief in the existence of evil spirits that caused sickness was common among indigenous peoples in not just Northeast India but also Central India (see Kelkar and Nathan, 2020). Such beliefs also decreased in intensity as people learned to deal with health problems. For instance, in the 19th century, in what is now the state of Chhattisgarh, cholera was attributed to "cholera witches" (Macdonald, 2021). But as people learned to deal with cholera with oral rehydration and keeping water sources clean, the notion of cholera witches disappeared. When something cannot be explained, there can continue to be a belief in causation by evil spirits.

Along with learning how to deal with diseases, the new religion of Christianity, whether of the Pentecostal or Baptist varieties, taught the Mizo that the Holy Spirit or belief in Christianity would protect believers from all harm. This did not dispute the existence of evil spirits but only changed how they dealt with them. In the pre-Christian tradition, *ramhuai* was largely dealt with by appeasement; with Christianity, appeasement through sacrifices was replaced by protection through being a Christian believer.

In an important way, this replacement of appeasement by belief in Christianity does not challenge the belief in evil spirits and even persons who cause evil by using supernatural powers. This could enable the reappearance of explanation through evil-causing spirits, particularly in times of stress and crisis. Alternatively, even in daily matters, through a seemingly casual attribution of misfortune to the "evil eye", followed by the avoidance of persons who were thought to possess the evil eye. These casual, seemingly throw-away phrases reveal the continuing influence of pre-Christian belief systems, although moderated, on current behavior.

Authors and local researchers, after an interview with local personalities

The Mizos always lived in fear and were afraid of evil spirits, and their religious energies focused on those evil spirits through sacrifices, which they call inthawina - known as ceremonial cures. The Puithiams or Sadawt (priests) were invited to heal or treat the illness and undo black magic done on the victims by performing some kind of countermagic (Angom, 2020). Like the Mizos, the Bru community in Mizoram also has a strong belief in evil spirits. The southern Bru were fearful of the northern Bru, as northern Bru were more involved in the practice of black magic and witchcraft (Lalrinchhani, 2020).

Further, there was the belief that only certain tribes were experts in witchcraft/magic: Hmar (sub-tribes – Lalruanga, Hrangsaipuia, and Zangkaki) and Vaiphei. It was the belief that witchcraft/magic was taught to Lalruanga by a heavenly being called Vanhrika, and as per the oral tradition, it is mentioned that the magic is passed from one dawithiam (wizard/shaman/witch) to the other (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

The Practice of Witch Hunts

Shakespear writes that the Lushai are "firm believers in witchcraft" (1975: 108). He refers to several tragedies related to this belief and, one might add, the resulting persecution of those suspected of carrying out witchcraft. Among the Mizos, the practice of witchcraft is more commonly associated with men than women, though there is a reference to a women dawithiam named Zangkaki (LalparmawiiKhiangte, 2018) and the practice is performed in two ways, viz., chanting and by giving something to eat (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

It was also the belief that the person engaged in witchcraft could cause death or even cast a spell on a victim and make him/her suffer from chronic or wasting disease. To come out of such a magic spell, there was the belief in countermagic (dawisut) (Dokhuma, 1992 cited in Rohmingmawii, 2023). Further, the belief is that items such as bone, tiger's fang, lock of hair, or fur/feather are deposited in the stomach of the victimized person, due to which the person cannot be cured of the chronic disease and eventually would die. Another belief was that the liver of the dawithiam would cure a victim from a magic spell and would also offer protection from future attacks and with such belief, the liver of the dawithiam is extracted when he is killed (Lianthanga, 1999).

Strangers with displeasing appearances and unkempt hair are generally considered as dawithiam and such people are approached with fear. There are instances wherein such suspected strangers were killed (Lianthanga, 1999), and there are also other instances where people tried getting rid of the suspected persons from the community. Reasons for such reactions were that counter-magic was very expensive, and not many were able to perform it.

Before the colonial rule and the advent of Christianity, the practice of killing the suspects as dawithiam was prevalent among the Mizos. The chiefs pronounced the death penalty on the suspects, and, in general, the suspects were mostly the weaker sections like old men, old women and young boys (Lianthanga, 1999). While the richer and more powerful members of the society were hardly accused of witchcraft, it was mostly the weakest who were targeted, which is similar to the findings on witchcraft in Africa (Pritchard, 1976) and more broadly across India and Africa (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020). There are several cases where jealousy was the reason to accuse someone of being a dawithiam. Sometimes, such accusations were also made against the rivals to take revenge. Sometimes, the reason was also serious hostility and enmity.

In 1885, there was a case of mass killing reported in the village of Chawnthleng, wherein a person belonging to the Vaiphei clan was accused of being a dawithiam. He was tricked and killed by the order of the chief and later, the other Vaipheis of the village were targeted and

killed by the villagers. After killing them, the raw liver was eaten by the chasers (Lianthanga, 1999). Oral narratives highlight several such mass killings in Hmuizawl (Kalkhama's village), Lungleng (Dokapa's village), Thingsai (Lallianhleia's village), Khuangthing and Muallianpui (Lianthanga, 1999). Mostly, the minority clans of the village, viz. Hmars and Vaiphei were targeted and killed (Lianthanga, 1999; Rohmingmawii, 2023).

Rohmingmawii (2023) also highlights other cases of mass killings and how such instances of murder were stopped by colonial rule. During the early part of the colonial rule, such killing of a suspect had taken place in the villages of Thingsai, Khuangthing and Muallianpui, by breaking open the houses at midnight and killing people. Following this incident, there was a celebration in the villages for such execution. However, the accused were identified and imprisoned by the British government. Later, after the colonial rule, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills District, Col.J.Shakespear did not allow such murder on the grounds of suspicion and gave the suspect a chance to take shelter in a distant village, which reduced the cases of such murder (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

Usually, counter magic was performed by priests, particularly Sadawi, and only a few Sadawi were regarded as witch doctors, who were assumed to have the power to heal the sick through counter-magic. The treatment is mainly in the form of sacrifices of fowls and other domesticated animals. Counter-magicians are expected to be very powerful in order to counter the attack of dawithiam, which can even cause the death of the Sadawi and due to this reason, only a few Sadawis were available, and they were expensive too (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

Khawhring

Along with going into a trance and finding required sacrifices, some women were also said to be possessed or to become khawhring. This was said to be the result of jealousy, either of another woman who envied her beauty or by a man rejected by the woman. The charge was also made on women who were talented. The woman charged with khawhring was driven out of the village, never to be seen again. It would obviously be difficult, if not impossible, for a single woman to survive in the forest. She could only be taken in by some other village or die. There was no third option.

Only women could be khawhring. There was an idea that women should not stand out, whether for talent, wisdom, or beauty. While such women could be denounced as khawhring, this did not happen in the case of outstanding men. Rather, outstanding men as hunters and war leaders were honored. Men's talents were feted, but not those of women.

Khawhring is an unusual form of levelling. Many indigenous peoples with subsistence economies had forms of levelling through redistribution. Persecuting those who were supposed to have accumulated by illicit means was carried out in a number of ways. Among the Khasi, they were persecuted, even killed for supposedly worshipping thlen, the serpent that had to be fed human blood. Men were often the victims of thlen accusations.

Among the Mizo, however, it is women's acquisition of talent or beauty that leads to khawhring accusations and persecutions. Unlike among the Khasi, this persecution is not for acquiring wealth but for being more capable and talented. What this does is to convey the message that women should not try to stand out for their capabilities. This would also mean that they should not be assertive for fear of being said to have acquired their capabilities by being possessed by khawhring. Finally, what this means is that women's agency in building their capabilities is curtailed. While they are expected to be good household managers (women manage household resources,

including money), they should not be assertive in their ways, as they would run the danger of being denounced and expelled as khawhring, leading to death in some cases.

There was no such curtailment of men's capabilities, whether as hunters or war leaders. Accumulation and the resulting inequality were accepted. Particularly, the Sailo clan was accepted as being superior to the others and were village leaders.

Thus women, with the threat of khawhring and death by expulsion hanging over them, were actively discouraged from becoming outstanding. This seems to continue into the present. We were often told that women are reluctant to enter politics and take up leadership roles. Mizo women are there in all spheres of contemporary life, whether in professions or employment, even as butchers. But they are under-represented in politics. Though persecution as khawhring is not a practice anymore, the idea that women should not strive to be too capable may well continue to have an effect on current practice.

Conclusion: The Inner Realities of Folklore

Our field conversations enabled us to gain insight into the culture and worldview of Mizo women and men. The hegemonic forces of culture and belief have become ingrained in the contemporary narratives about women and men, bringing into existence the fear of *ramhuai* or *khwahring*, with a degree of disconnectedness to their urban existence. At the same time, however, we noted a belief in evil spirits shaping the Mizo ideas and values and, in turn, shaping social practices and institutions.

In our conversation with a man in his early 90s, he narrated incidents when he saw balls of fire in the air, almost like a murmuration of birds in the sky. He thought it was a work of supernatural spirits like *ramhuai*, but on our further questions, he added that back in the day, many people considered such phenomenon as the work of *ramhuai*, but he did not believe or think like the others. From an early age, he was taught at home and in Sunday Schools that Christians need not fear spirits of any sort; Jesus has conquered all evil spirits. He thought it was the burning of gas in the air. He talked about another form of *ramhuai* called Phung (a mischievous and ugly supernatural being, a female), usually employed to frighten children into obedience. He narrated that in the pre-Christianity days in Mizo society, there were many instances where women were accused of having *khwahring* (an evil spirit that is thought to enter the body of women), but he himself has not witnessed any of that sort. He explained two reasons for the decline in the belief in evil spirits: Sunday school teachings and the rapid urbanization of Mizo society, leading to living away from forests.

In another interview with a man in his 80s, he credited the Church with people losing their fear of *ramhuai*. But when we asked if he had encountered any supernatural being or the work of *ramhuai*, he narrated two incidents where he saw a bright light moving around in the neighbor's kitchen garden. He felt uneasy about this, and then, within a week, their family members died without much illness. He concluded by saying that Mizos do not deny the existence of *ramhuai* and other evil spirits. However, a very high percentage of the Mizos have accepted Christianity and feel protected by Jesus.

Our other question was about the position of women in Mizo society. During our discussion at a tea stall in Aizawl, four men told us almost in one voice, "Women have done very well in the Mizo society, but when it comes to making decisions, it is the duty of men to make wise decisions that will benefit everyone involved. It is okay for women to be in the discussion and make important decisions only when the family does not have able men. In the presence of able men, it is embarrassing for families to allow

The President of Young Mizo Association (YMA)

their daughters to have too much opinion." At another meeting with a prominent women leader, the President of Sairang branch of the Young Mizo Association, she said that to be in the leadership, women need to be hardworking and should not demand special treatment.

Language acts as a means of control in Mizo society. By means of jokes and subtle words, society tries to control its girls and women, dismissive of their ideas and abilities. In the preceding pages, we discussed degrading and humiliating statements by men about women in Mizo society. About the traditional practices and belief system, Mizos have found a new place in the Christian structure to locate their traditional beliefs and fear of *ramhuai*. Jesus is believed to be all-powerful and put all the evil spirits under his control.

In this study, we have pointed to the role of raiding as a component of the socio-economic systems of the Mizo and other indigenous peoples of Northeast India. Raiding necessarily involves defense against counterraiding or raiding by other villages. This makes women and children dependent on men as warriors and protectors in a way that does not occur with hunting. This would provide an important factor for the domination of men in village politics and organization and be a path for the overall domination of men, which is patriarchy.

The present socio-political situation in several parts of the Northeastern region of India shows that "the politics of identity has proven capable of being pervasive and divisive for indigenous cultures grappling with post-colonial and neo-colonial issues" (Fanai, 2021:98). However, there are feminist and social science discourses that critique their indigenous culture for carrying "the burden of identity", which assures development of an inclusive and gender-responsive identity and human rights-respecting cultures (Patricia Mukhim, 2023).

It is important to note that much has changed in the outlook of Mizo women and men in the past several decades. In academic institutions,

women have begun to pay attention to issues of feminism and gender relations in the Mizo patriarchal society and there is an increase in the number of women writers. “Resources in the form of folk tales and folk songs also show that women often tried to speak out against injustice” (Hmingthanzuali and Mary Vanlalthanpuii, 2023: 5).

Civil society organizations have been advocating for legal changes (i.e., an effective law) to punish the perpetrators of the *ramhuai* and khawhring spirits and to make the practices of shamans/healers illegal. However, any legal change alone may not end 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. Second, a policy change in the belief about the existence of witches, evil eye 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. 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 and ritual attacks on women, who successfully fought against being branded/persecuted as a witch.

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

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Cover design by Pallavi Govindnathan

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG SOUTH ASIA

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

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

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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, deaths and so on. Accused

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**	

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

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COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

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Introduction

In line with the conceptual framework of earlier studies on witch hunts and ritual attacks in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, we have tried to explore in this study social beliefs, patriarchal gender relations and ritual practices in the growing market economy of Sikkim in Northeast India. Within the Lepcha community of Sikkim, there are ritual practices related to the supernatural powers of some women and men. These practices sometimes lead to the branding of individuals (largely women) as witches, accusing them of poisoning with an unnoticeable contact or through food and clothing, which is believed to bring harm, sickness and even death to others in their community. Our understanding of witch hunts represents persecution and 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 and households

A view of Upper Dzongu

that are socially perceived as possessing 'the evil eye' called *barmo* and *ning* in the local languages of some indigenous peoples of Sikkim.

Several anthropological studies of the indigenous peoples of Sikkim have generally described the traditional lifestyle of Lepchas, their knowledge of medicinal herbs, religious healing and spiritual practices (Bhasin, 2007; Palit and Banerjee, 2016). These studies have been largely missing a critical reflection on harmful practices as part of belief systems (Bain, 2018; Joseph, 1999; Palit and Banerjee, 2016). This study endeavors to explain the impact of beliefs, cultural encounters, capitalist relations, and the gendered systems within the indigenous societies of Sikkim, with a focus on the Lepcha community in Dzongu.

After working with indigenous women's movements for more than 25 years, we embarked on this ambitious research study on the rights of women and some marginalized men in the Lepcha society of Sikkim from a human rights and feminist perspective. In this study, we have tried to understand the belief system and ritual practices related to the *barmo* and *ning* in Sikkim. Furthermore, we sought to explore the specific directions of change in the *ning* belief system at the nexus of patriarchal culture and capitalist trajectories in the transitional society of Lepcha in Sikkim.

The imagination of *ning* or *barmo* is not limited to the practice of branding them as witches, *muun*, and *boongthing* (the healer/shaman); it also includes the worldview or cosmology that breeds beliefs in the *barmo* and *ning* and their ritual attacks – a supernatural power to hurt or heal others. Through our work on witch hunts for over two decades, we have come to understand that ritual attacks and branding of *barmo* and *ning* are caused by beliefs (without concrete evidence) in the ability of some women and men to use mystical, supernatural powers to harm or help others within the community. It is a manifestation of social control or jealousy, a distinct character of socio-economic changes due to structural forces or traumatic experiences in the transition to a growing patriarchal capitalist economy.

Our study critically engages with indigenous beliefs and ritual practices in the Lepcha society of Sikkim and challenges the dominant traditions of some scholarly works and anthropological writings. This is, however, a preliminary attempt to raise some critical questions from a feminist perspective; and it does not cover all aspects of cultural beliefs and ritual practices in Sikkim or in other indigenous societies. It is important to say at the outset that this study is not intended to devalue positive aspects of indigenous culture and religions or ritual practices, such as belief in the conservation of natural resources. What we have intended to show is that there are other elements of indigenous beliefs and ritual practices that have adverse impacts on indigenous women. There is an urgent need to change these beliefs and practices and transform them into human rights-respecting cultures that accord equality and dignity to women.

Methods of the study

A systematic literature review that is considered unbiased and more political and scientific in approach than the traditional narrative reviews was employed to explore people's beliefs in witches and ritual attacks, like *ning* (the concept of the poisoner and evil eye in Lepcha society). In the first phase of this research, we identified research assistants who would be collaborating with us. This was followed by research of news reports about ritual practices in English and local language sources. Search by Google Scholar was of great help in finding relevant books, studies, papers and archival sources.

We decided to focus on the period from 1991 to 2022, keeping in view the emerging women's movement in India, feminist writings

and the opening of the Indian economy, with attention to the accumulation process in indigenous societies. Throughout the study, one of our concerns was whether the growing accumulation process has played a role in changing traditional beliefs and social and cultural practices. After a systematic literature review of the subject, in September 2023, we conducted fieldwork in Gangtok, Kabi, Lingdong, and Upper Dzongu regions of Sikkim. Our discussions centred on the following points:

1. With the shamans, women and men, our questions were about their practice, who visits them? For what kind of illnesses? How do they treat their patients? Why did they become shamans?
2. With academics, we had free discussions about socioeconomic conditions, gender relations, the belief system and witch practices, and changing patriarchal norms, if any, examples.
3. With individual women and men, we discussed their work routines. Who plays a dominant role in decision-making in small and major matters? Who controls finances? What kind of control do women have on land and its produce?
4. General questions, when do they go to shamans for what kind of illnesses, fever, stomach problems? Do they go to medical practitioners? What is the basis of their preference between modern medicines and traditional herbs given by ochai or shaman?

S. No.	Type of Person	Description
1.	Three graduate students	Sociology Department, Sikkim University
2.	A well-known shaman	Kabi
3.	A woman shaman (mun)	Practicing in Gangtok
4.	A male shaman	Practicing in Dzongu and Gangtok
5.	Kachyo Lepcha	Department of Education, Sikkim Government.
6.	A male Shaman	Practicing and living in Dzongu
7.	Senior monk	Practicing and living in Dzongu
7.	Homestay Manager	Upper Dzongu
8.	A healer/*boongthing*	Upper Dzongu
9.	Homestay Owner	Upper Dzongu
10.	Grandmother of another homestay owner	Upper Dzongu
11.	Shaman/healer dealing with accidental deaths	Lingdong
	Total	**14 (5 women, 9 men)**

In the fieldwork, we were accompanied by two graduate students at Sikkim University: Cholamoo Lepcha and Soofim Lepcha. In the difficult terrain of the Upper and Lower Dzongu area, they provided us with varying kinds of support, such as finding contact persons for our interviews and identifying key persons like *Boongthing* (Shamans), and mun and interpreted for us on sensitive subjects of culture and belief system. Our learnings came from discussions in the field and a series of interactive meetings with Profs. Kachyo Lepcha and Shankar Narayan Bagh of Sikkim University. We are grateful to both the professors and their students for the support they extended willingly including very frank and comprehensive discussions even in the rainy cold evenings.

After an interview with a *boongthing*

We were frank and candid in explaining the purpose of our study, i.e., to look at inter-related factors of transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of agricultural economy and a technologically oriented society with patriarchal state control over resources and governance. This transition is marked by new gender-specific inequalities, caused by new production and consumption patterns, new forms of communication and emergent women's agency that are super-imposed over traditional beliefs and cultural practices, leading to an increase in social and gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes caused by growing capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a large number of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

In our introduction with the interviewees, we further explained that our study intends to explore social beliefs and ritual practices as well as cultural and economic concerns that give rise to gender-based violence like witch hunts, *barmo* and *ning*; yet at the same time create social and legal spaces for human rights-based discourses, and exploring the practices of *barmo* and *ning*. As a research outcome, we would like to see the social systems of Northeast India, where the *ning*, and witch hunts, will not be seen as a normal part of indigenous cultures.

To our surprise, our explanation of the purpose of our research was well-received with a polite engagement in discussions. Through our earlier knowledge of the subject of witch hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understand that a hierarchical gender social order provides a different perspective and worldview on inequality and marginality. These result in frequent, even contradictory answers about social beliefs and ritual practices related to marginalized voices, a lack of resource control and marginal representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As researchers, our challenge lies in presenting a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field and dismantling dualism and contradictions in field discussions.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Various social movements and indigenous peoples have been engaged in discourses of indigeneity and politics of identity assertion. The practice of witch hunts is seen as a marker of the exclusive identity of indigenous peoples and is set against forces of globalisation

and the related cultural homogenising of the Indian state, which attempt to bring in global standardisation and make inroads into a world dominated by western values and symbols (Nath, 2014; Robertson and White, 2003).

We noted three 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. In this analysis, the practice of witch hunts as it exists today is located within a narrative of increasing inequality and the cultural and political marginalisation of indigenous and rural peoples in Sikkim.

Within historical accounts of colonialism and later struggles against the central government of India, witch persecution or killing is understood to be a part of indigenous identity, an action necessary to preserve the moral fibre of society. There have been cases where individuals who have killed the so-called witches have gone on to surrender themselves after the act and justified their actions as upholding the moral fabric of their society. These notions are part of the indigenous people's faith in supernatural powers, which are considered to be superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women living at the margins of the community, are blamed for causing bad weather conditions, natural disasters, diseases, deaths, etc. Accused of causing these detrimental events, violence against the accused, such as flogging, rape, burning alive and otherwise murdering the accused, is seen as a socially acceptable tool for weeding out anti-social elements (witches). The socially privileged kabiraj or ojha continues to be more powerful. He is seen as someone who is capable of driving out evil spirits from the bodies of possessed women and also as someone who not only heals but is also capable of causing harm.

The second stream of thought, as seen in post-modernist studies, is in the context of the contact between indigenous societies and capitalist modernism, as seen in John and Jean Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches as modernity's malcontents, and Peter Geschiere's work on Africa's capitalist modernism (2013). Silvia Federici's new book *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women* (2018) explains that capitalism and patriarchy together produce 'witches' who were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children. Capitalist society has made women's bodies the fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women as midwives, abortionists, and herbalists with knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal power and create generations of subjugated women as a 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. Across many of the research sites and also in several African countries, 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 brutalised physical elimination.

The third stream, in agreement with an earlier study (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020), 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 often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu, 2001:1-4). However, there are, at the same time, processes of dismantling power structures and bringing in transformation in the social, economic order, and feminist researchers have recognised that the analysis of the androcentric principle is necessary for an objective analysis of a social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we see a crucial role played by men's monopolisation of productive resources like land and housing and of ritual knowledge, which is a socially valued higher 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/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 and Sikkim in this case.

The definition of a witch is "one who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Needham, 1978:26); later, in 2004, this was modified to "a person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to other humans" (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/Nathan, 2020:4). In fact, people may not possess such occult power to cause harm to others.

Historical research suggests that the Lepcha community had a matrilineal system. However, assimilation with mainstream Sikkim society shifted the system towards a patriarchal institutional system. Once the community switched over to the patriarchal system, women's role in all public and private decision-making decreased, bringing a deterioration of both women's status and knowledge. Property rights and the control of resources in the hands of the women later became a matter of cultural concern and a masculine system with men controlling land, forests, and knowledge. Any form of material rights, including over land and lineage, for women became a matter of community concern, while masculine identity became something to be admired and acknowledged as part of the Lepcha culture.

In recent years, civil society and academic discourse have largely concentrated on the 'purity' of indigeneity and traditional cultures; they have stayed away from recognising cultural diversity and plurality of perspective that come from cultural sharing and mutual learning from human rights-respecting practices in both indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. The idea of 'purity' of culture, like that of colour, caste, or race, especially in marginalised groups, generally ends in representing them as trapped in the past and, by implication, unfit to deal with human rights-respecting practices and their social and economic benefits.

This study is an attempt to introduce a human rights-respecting approach to cultural diversity with a focus on witch hunts in the context of indigenous peoples' social systems. It is essential to work for the erasure of *barmo* and *ning* practices and see them as part of the cultural identities of the past. Their histories must be understood in a manner respectful of the cultural rights of women and plurality of change from matriliny to patriliny and then to patriarchal societies and the adverse impact of this on women's equality and dignity. Of course, women's adverse social position was further complicated and strengthened by the colonialist attempt to control indigenous peoples' resources like forests and land

(Kelkar, Nathan and Walter, 2003). To avoid the processes of a market-led world, the associated patriarchal greed for power and control, and the commercialization and corporatization of forests, land and other resources, efforts must be made to maintain and promote the diversity of human rights respecting cultures in line with international standards of human rights for all women and men.

Early History and the Concern of Losing Lepcha Culture

The Lepcha people have historical importance in the hill areas of Sikkim. They are known to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim. Dzongu area of North Sikkim, where we conducted our major part of the fieldwork, has been considered the homeland of Lepchas (Bain, 2018). There is a law to protect the rights and resources of Lepchas in Dzongu area. The Lepcha language is taught in government schools; the Constitution of India guarantees religious freedom. The lands and the forests of Lepchas (and Bhutias) are protected from sale to other communities. The main source of their cultural identity and ritual practice is the oral traditions. The legendary traditions of the Lepchas show that their origin has been somewhere near Mount Kanchenjunga, situated in West Sikkim.

The Lepchas mainly do cardamom and Paddy cultivation. They are skilled in fishing and also in organic farming, which they do as a source of income and livelihood. They live primarily in the far-flung vicinity deep inside the hills and valleys, where they are isolated from the outside world. In many places in these areas, there is no road connectivity, and they have to walk miles away up and down the sloppy hills for the barter trade/exchange of goods. Due to this remoteness, they lack many basic facilities and schooling infrastructure. However, with recent changes - migration and modernization, they have developed contact with the outside world and a noticeable transition in the socio-economic condition of the people. Children in most of the families in Dzongu area are in schools, moving out to towns and cities for higher education and seeking jobs. Alongside agriculture, at least one member of the family has a government job or works in the private sector. There are Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for the employment of economically weaker families in society, especially the women in remote rural areas, which allows them to lift themselves both economically and socially.

The Lepchas, who are basically forest dwellers, worship nature, trees and natural objects, good and bad spirits, *barmo* and deities. Until the 19th century, the dominant mode of their livelihood was shifting cultivation. It was later, in 1888, that they started terraced cultivation as the modern mode of agriculture; and were forced to give up shifting cultivation when the Maharaja of Sikkim put a curb on the utilization of forest resources. The traditional Lepcha houses consisted of two floors. The upper floor was used for their own living and the lower floor was for animals: pigs, goats, etc. (Subba, 1985). However, modern houses are well-furnished with electricity and water connections.

According to the 1981 account, “The Lepchas did not have a joint family system. The women have equal rights with men. Female progeny is favoured. Women are respected and allowed to take part in community functions... A bridegroom is ordered to prove his worth; he has to render hard labour in the cardamom fields and, at least for a year before getting married, is expected to live with the girl’s parents and the bride price is claimed by the parents” (Naresh n.d. based on Rudranand and Sonam Wangli, 1981).

During our interviews in Dzongu, we noted a concern about the vanishing of Lepcha culture. This raises the question of what has caused this fear that their own culture is vanishing. Jeremy Bentley’s study of 2006 points out 3 factors for causing the fear among the Lepchas:

First is the religion. The introduction of Buddhism among the Lepchas and, more recently, the advance of Christianity. Although there is a noticeable co-existence of Buddhist rituals (acceptance of Lama's roles) and traditional religious Lepcha beliefs, there are, however, some cases of disagreements between the two beliefs, such as the rights of *boongthing* and *muun* (the Lepcha ritual specialists) which generally include animal sacrifices but this is not allowed in Buddhist rituals conducted by a lama. This is also evident in funeral rites, the bodies are burned during the Buddhist funeral rites but buried according to the traditional Lepcha ways. During our homestay in the Upper Dzongu area, one of the authors (Govind Kelkar) noted a dislike for those women and men who had converted to Christianity. They were seen as "thinking too much of themselves and unaware of the Lepcha culture and traditions".

Second is the migration of workers from Nepal, whom individual Lepchas employed to work on land and the construction of roads and houses. Mutual day-to-day interactions with these workers resulted in some close relations, including some marriages (though generally disliked by the Lepcha community). Such marital alliances brought in the strengthening of gender inequality. If a woman married a Nepali man, she would lose her share of property, religious group affiliation and even her citizenship in India. However, when a man married a woman from the Nepali community, his Lepcha status was not affected since property rights and social standing in the Lepcha society of the Dzongu area were defined by the male line. These problems were compounded by a fungus infection in the cardamom fields and Nepali workers were not required to work on cardamom fields. As a result, there was a further widening of distance with the Nepali community.

Third is the education factor. In the last 50 years, the literacy rate in Sikkim has improved tremendously, from 17.74 percent in 1971 to 81.42 percent in 2023, as per the latest population census. However, in the difficult terrain of Dzongu area, not many schools and transport infrastructure are there. Many households sent their children to study in Gangtok, who were able to visit their parents infrequently. As a result, the younger generation missed stories of their culture and traditions. They are drawn or attracted to the modern lifestyle which is seen in opposition to the Lepcha culture and traditions.

Gender, Sexuality and Property Rights

Historically, the Lepchas followed the practice of matrilineal descents; the lineage and inheritance were passed through the female line. This accorded high social status to women (Bhutia, 2017). The lives of Lepcha women were free from many patriarchal and discriminating inequalities (Bhattacharya, 1994). Women were quite open, or not hostile or adverse to the influence of modernity, as long as these were not incompatible with their traditional faith and women's rights.

In the present-day Lepcha society of Dzongu region, women are gifted properties by their parents after marriage, mostly, such gifts include small pieces of land (vegetable plots close to the house), ornaments, livestock, utensils etc., but not paddy lands. In case a woman marries outside her community – a non-Lepcha man, then she will have to sell the land to her community if the land was acquired before her marriage (Eckman, 1996). A widow is entitled to inherit the property of her deceased husband. However, such rights are extended only till her lifetime; after her death, the property will go back to the male members of her deceased husband and she would have no right to sell, mortgage or transfer the property (Bhattacharya, 1994). This law is not applicable to other women in Sikkim, as per Order No 1 of the Chogyalon issued on 02 January 1897. However, later, when

the Hindu Succession Act was extended to Sikkim in 1989, the equal inheritance rights to Hindu women (daughters, wives and mothers) this law became applicable in Sikkim, but not so in the case of indigenous peoples of Sikkim. The property rights of Lepcha women continued to be governed by customary laws, limiting the inheritance rights of the women in the Lepcha society (Bhattacharya, 1994). However, the Sikkim Succession Act in 2008 abolished the Kipat system (the inheritance of property through the male line). The right to inherit ancestral property was granted to all Sikkimese women. Strangely enough, this law, too, was not applicable to a certain community/tribe/sector to a woman who had married a non-Sikkimese man. In most cases, Lepcha women continued to be governed by their customary laws.

A Lepcha woman, therefore, can never own a landed property; it is always the male heir who can inherit land or house. In case a woman is left with immovable property, she should first acquire a male member, either through marriage or adoption, to inherit such property. Gorer (1984) shared a case of a rich parent with two daughters who were unable to give his land/housing to any of the daughters. He was able to transfer only the movable property to these two daughters; the right to land was given to the Mandal (head of the village), who handed over the property to his son.

In the case of self-acquired property, the Lepcha women have ownership rights and can dispose of or transfer the property as per their choice. They also have the freedom to buy, sell or gift the property without any gender-based restrictions (Bhutia, 2017). While in Dzongu, we tried to explore the Lepcha history of transition from matriliny to patriliny. We were told, “Our oral history does not have any knowledge of such a transition. Now we follow what is happening in other traditions and cultures” (Govind Kelkar’s interview with the owner of the homestay).

Subba (2020) noted that in the Lepcha society, if people of the same clan get married, it is regarded as incest and sin, and the couples are boycotted and isolated from the villagers. However, with regard to marital relations, polygamy, monogamy, polygyny and polyandry are followed among the Lepchas. The system of bride price is there is Sikkim; the groom not only has to pay the bride price but also has to provide service to the father of the bride. However, in the current times, this practice of working in the bride’s house or for father-in-law is no longer followed. After the girl’s parents accept the bride price, the girl or the wife becomes the property of her husband’s family. In case of the husband’s death, the wife is married to another member of the same family and in case she is reluctant for such marriage, the girl’s family will have to replace her with a second girl or woman. This does not happen in case of the wife’s death; the husband can marry another widowed woman.

All the above examples about the increasing decline in women’s property rights and disappearing practices of the bridegroom’s duty to work in the family of the bride prior to the marriage, as well as the increasing control over women’s sexuality in the martial household show that the present day Lepcha society has significantly altered in favour of a socio-cultural system that is rapidly progressing towards a patriarchal system. The Lepcha society is in a transition state from matriliny to patriarchy; however, incomplete.

The Beliefs

Cultural beliefs and traditional practices associated with supernatural causes of sickness, evil spirits and demons have been passed down through oral traditions and folklore in Sikkim (Bhutia, 2021, Palit and Bannerjee 2016). While existing studies discuss practices related to supernatural beliefs and the role of Shamans and Buddhist masters, limited studies point out practices

and accusations related to the beliefs about the existence of barmos and *nings* (poisoners and witches) (See, for example, Gurung and Santha, 2023; Erschbarmer, 2019; Balikci, 2008; Gorer, 1938). The *barmo* is a type of witchcraft believed to be performed maliciously by women who are trained in black magic by their mothers (Balikci, 2008:119). It is believed that they can transform themselves into a black cat or owl and wander around the village at night to look for individuals to suck his/her blood which causes weakness and leaves a bruise or teeth marks on the skin of a person. *Boongthing* (the male shaman) is considered powerless against a *barmo*; only the jhakri (a ritual specialist of Nepali origin) and yeba (a shaman) are consulted to deal with the curse or effect of barmos).

A *boongthing* invited at the homestay

Also, through counter-practice, a *barmo* can remove a curse on someone's lineage. In her study of Tingchim village, Balikci (2008) discusses Nagshang (the holder of tantric knowledge and ritual specialist with Buddhist tantric powers as well as ritual skills of *boongthing*), who is socially regarded as exceptionally skilled in meditation and tantra. He uses his powers to eliminate curses and exorcise various forms of evil.

It is important to note that acquisition of poisoning, attacks by a *ning* and sending of curses is mostly done in cases related to land disputes. When a *boongthing* tries to diagnose the causes of illness, and when he is at the point of establishing its links with witchcraft or poisoning, it is believed that nopa (supernatural being that is inclined to cause obstruction, damage or trouble) is instructed by the enemy to cause the ailment (Balikci, 2008:382). This threatens the agent, who is uncovered by the shaman is seen to be the kin, a villager, an outsider or the patient himself (Balikci 2008:217). We also learned in our fieldwork that several villages have become a target of such acquisition of *ning* practice, poisoning or cursing, which is mostly related to their poor social status and gender.

Accusations: Women as Poisoners

Accusations of being a poisoner are generally made against a poor or successful woman. In Tingchim village, Balikci narrated a case of a Tibetan woman who got married to a poor Lepcha family. She was accused of being a *barmo* or a poisoner. In many cases, poor migrant women from Nepal were accused of being a *barmo*. However, such accusations were also made against successful, independent women, as they had caused jealousy in others (Balikci, 2008: 222). In particular, Lepcha women who were running restaurants were frequently accused of being a poisoner. It is believed that these women get into a ritual contract with the supernatural being to get wealth, knowledge and power, and they administer poison to the food or drinks of the customers. To counter this poison, Lepchas use a wooden cup, which is considered an antidote against poison (Govind Kelkar's field notes). Our field researchers narrated stories of Lepcha belief that a poisoner woman enters into a contract with the supernatural 'owner of poison or *ning'* that she has to identify victims to administer poison at regular intervals; if not, she would be forced to administer poison to

her own child. It was made obligatory on her part to pass it on to another person before she dies. The symptoms of poisoning include vomiting, headache and paralysis. The cure of this was the Lepcha herbal medicines and mantras given by a *boongthing/yaba.* If not cured in time with these medicines and mantras, the person could die as a result of poisoning.

Balikci (2008:225) narrated the case of a successful widowed woman in the Lepcha community. Despite her husband's death, she was seen to be strong and capable of managing her household and fields with the help of her children. The villagers persecuted her by filing a number of land dispute cases and spread the rumour that she had taken possession of these fields through poisoning. This acquisition was confirmed during a curing ritual, wherein the spirit of one dead victim entered the body of a ritual specialist. He said that she had poisoned the victim. Since she was believed to be a successful poisoner, most of the people treated her with respect for fear of offending her but they would not accept even a cup of tea from her. As in many cases of witch accusations in Jharkhand, the male members who accused her were her cousins and nephews (Kelkar and Nathan 2020). In this case, her close relatives wanted to prevent her from enriching further.

The poison is believed to have several impacts: 1) if the possessor of the poison throws it away, the supernatural element attached to the poison would destroy the possessor; 2) the poison has to be frequently used on a person; if not, the possessor would be attacked; and 3) If no one was identified to administer the poison, it should be administered to the poisoner's family member (Gorer, 1984:133). While discussing these cases, Gorer argued that the poisoner was being used as a scapegoat, and such accusations by Lepcha accusers are nothing but the expression of their repression and transferred aggression, and we would add, mostly affecting women. Further to this argument Balikci (2008:269) argued that North Sikkim has become a dangerous place for an outsider, who could be labelled as being a poisoner, and in such accusations, successful women are victimised. The accusation of a woman being a *barmo* or a poisoner is imbued with all negative qualities that a woman is seen to display, which includes jealousy and being selfish to the extent of even killing someone to achieve her aim.

Ning: Food Poisoning

There is a general belief in the practice of *ning* throughout the Sikkim society. *Ning* is properly known as kophot or mystical food poisoning. There is, however, no concrete evidence about kophot. It is believed to be invisible to the human eye, but the person who uses it can see it. *Ning* is used in different invisible forms; usually it is in the food that one consumes away from home in a restaurant or a shop. A person affected by *ning* rarely survives. To get over the *ning* poisoning, there are some herbal medications, but these are not known to the common people. Only the user of *ning* knows the medication. Therefore, all old and young women and men are cautious of eating in an unknown place or restaurant; they are afraid of being poisoned with the food or drink in that place.

It is generally believed that the ningkeeper cannot practice on her/his own sweet will or on a regular basis. There is a time limit for them 'to make sacrifices'; it can be weeks or months. However, when this certain period is over, the ningkeeper has to make a sacrifice (administer poison) or else someone from her own family would die. *Ning* once with you, cannot be killed or gotten rid of unless and until she passes it on to another member of her family. We were repeatedly informed in the field 1) It is usually the women who are the users of *ning*, though a male can be the owner of *ning*; 2) *ning* is practiced by wealthy persons in the community in order to maintain their riches and status.

In an interview with two graduate students of Sikkim University, they narrated their personal history about *ning*:

> Growing up, we were made aware of the presence of *ning*. Whenever we were at our relative's place, they never allowed us to go out in their neighbourhood as they were worried we would get affected by *ning*. So, when a person is deemed a *ning* user, there need not be any kind of evidence to prove his affiliation with *ning*, the society will try to avoid those people at any cost even to the point of ostracizing her. The rumors can be purely baseless in someone's narration, but once the people start believing that rumor it is unlikely for that person to prove his innocence, people will always be careful in keeping contact with that particular person.
>
> Most people who are suspected to be a user of *ning* are the wealthy in the community, they were successful without any valid reason. If we are critical about it, we may call it jealousy; the whole story about the *ning* can be said that some sections of society were envious of the good fortune of one certain family, and they started the rumor of *ning*, but, as this phenomena is part of a belief system and people witness strange things which does not have a scientific explanation, one is compelled to believe in their stories and belief systems like this one. According to one of my relatives, they stopped being in contact with one of their own family member after they heard that the family member was using *ning*. From, her narrative, I could see that, even though they had just heard the rumor, they never went and inquired about it but cut her off from their family.
>
> In another case, a family used to run a canteen in her village/township. Back then, they used to go for lunch at her place, but once the rumors started that she used *ning*, they stopped contacting her. Sometime later, the family member's daughter passed away, followed by the death of another child. The one who was rumored to be practicing *ning*, survived for some time more and recently, she too passed away. From this, we can see that the belief system is so strong that one cannot escape from it. If you are seen as a user of *ning*, no matter if you are a family member, society will ostracize you, and eventually, you will lose your dear ones.
>
> When I asked people about their knowledge of *ning*, most responses I got from them were that they were scared of it. They said they are scared of eating around places just anywhere. In my high school days, my principal often warned us about a canteen nearby, which used to sell tasty momo. Since many of the students started falling sick after eating in that canteen, the school authorities forbade us from eating in that canteen. And there was one more canteen which got shut down after the whole family passed away one by one in a short time. People believed that they used to use *ning*, which is the reason why the entire family died.

In a meeting with a *yaba boongthing* in Lingdong: He said that he was able to treat victims of *ning*, but he could not disclose the name of the one practicing it. The name cannot be disclosed publicly because both *boongthing* and *ning* are rituals practitioners for ages, and they are restricted by the law where one is justified only with a valid proof. And there is no evidence for *ning*; if their name is announced their relationship may be affected, this is for both *ning* and miksor, the evil eye.

Yaba Boongthing in Lingdong, Lower Dzongu

For the *ning* treatment, a boongthing/yaba gives the victim a special amulet to wear around the neck and asks them to recite three mantras and whisper them in front if she/he was aware of the keeper of *ning*. He shared two cases of the *ning* effects:

1. In one case, the ning is so strong that the victim will die on the spot with severe cracks in the teeth with dry, purple lips and tongue.

2. In the other case, the process of the effect of the *ning* is slow and gradual. The victim may slowly start having pain in her/his joints, pain in the chest, and body swelling and the body mass may slowly start decreasing to the point of only weak bones.

There is a belief that the keeper of the *ning* practices it for wealth and a long-life span. The *boongthing* explained that in actual practice, the *ning* keeper cannot eat meat nor drink any liquor or even badmouth anyone. But as they consume meat, they are indirectly connected to blood sacrifices and are forced to choose a more destructive path as they become more accustomed to blood sacrifices; they have to exterminate someone in a year to keep the *ning* satisfied otherwise, they have to prey someone from their own family, even their own children, which is horrifying. They have a certain day to hunt for their prey, it may be through:

1. Cold Food/anything cold beverages
2. Eye contact
3. Shoulder touch
4. Mouth (as in conversation)

Yaba concluded by saying, “Be aware of anyone touching your shoulder; it is a significant yet fragile part of the body. Do not let anyone touch it,” especially referring to the keepers of the *ning*. Also, avoid consuming something cold, “eat hot food and drink something hot,” *ning* affects only in cold food and water.

In the discussion with a former professor at Sikkim University Dr. Kachyo Lepcha narrated his experience of fieldwork in Dzongu area, where he stayed with a household known for keeping *ning*:

> I stayed there for three weeks but nothing happened. I was well aware of the warning given to me by my aunt about the consequences that if I were not careful I would suffer like everyone else. She gave me a piece of black ginger to keep in my pocket, saying that it would protect me. On my return my aunt was shocked when I returned back home without any illness. I did get some fever due to over straining but nothing happened. Every day, the family insisted that I eat well, but nothing happened to me, I kept safe and sound. After a couple of years, when I visited again, I saw a black fag stuck outside the household. The villagers had placed it to warn people as an indication of the keeper of *ning*. I heard that the *ning* was administered

to their own son because people had stopped visiting that household. The husband, who was a teacher, due to frustration caused by rumors about his family, died due to over-drinking. But others assumed it was a punishment for their bad deeds. The daughter of the household was married off but she was not able to bear any children and again, the villagers believed that it was all because of the mother's wrongdoing.

Dr. Kachyo concluded by saying, "There is no practice of keeping *ning* in the history of the Lepchas; the outsiders brought it in. For a long, it has been practiced by businessmen for wealth and their long life."

Muun and *Boongthing*

The Lepchas have ritual specialists: *muun* (female shaman) and *boongthing* (male shaman). Their main role is to mediate between the natural world of common people and the spiritual world. Both the *muun* and *Boongthing* are seen as having the powers to exorcise evil spirits; they are known to understand the innermost thoughts of human beings whether evil or holy. "Their spirits were created in place of deities and after making vows and oaths, they were then left on earth to continue their duties" (Foning, 2019). But to do so, they had to acquire spiritual powers by eating specific food and offering prayers to deities and guardian spirits, including deities of earthquakes, famines, droughts, and other disasters.

The *muun* is known to have historical knowledge of Lepcha people; she invokes the spirit of the land and acts as the medium between the mother creator and humans. She is viewed as the healer, spiritual guide, diviner and ritual specialist. The *muun* receives guidance and knowledge from the spiritual world in order to solve problems and overcome conflicts within the Lepcha society. With

A boongthing in Upper Dzongu

the growing patriarchal and market forces, however, *boongthing* is regarded senior in spoken wisdom and knowledge. We notice in the fieldwork that *boongthing* was often called to do away with potential ills and damages in the family. The *muun* would be called to give medicines to seek and offer protection (through mantras and prayers) to the newborns.

In an interview with a 35-year old *muun*, she narrated to us how she became a *muun*:

Muun Boju was a spiritual healer who in her vision saw that I was destined to be a *muun*. I was too young to accept it and there were some years after the vision was seen. However, it was an unfortunate episode, when my father passed away, that affected me very much. There was a ritual performed by a *boongthing* during my father's death ceremony and I found myself having palpitations, I was scared, it seemed as if my heart would come out. Around this time a *boongthing* saw my symptoms and explained it to me, that my spiritual awakening was to be a *muun*. My niece from Kalimpong even had the same vision. At midnight, it was around 2:30 am my body started shaking and shivering and puzzled I asked around if anybody felt the earthquake.

A *muun* in Gangtok

A *boongthing* in Gangtok

After all these episodes, I finally started guidance and training from my niece for my spiritual awakening as a *muun*. My brother, *boongthing* Kunzang also guided me in my spiritual journey. I did meditation for nine days in the forest without having any food. That was my first time! After I came out of the long meditation, I was still fresh. During the Guru Puja (a grand ritual which is done only once a year) I danced barefoot on top of cold water and both my Guru, and my mother were worried about me.

I had never prayed to God before, but after my father's death and my spiritual awakening as a *muun*, I literally cried in front of the altar, contemplating all of the selfish deeds of human beings. People are becoming greedier and more selfish, exploiting the land of their birth and building concretes and dams, harming the fragile terrain of this earth in so many immeasurable ways.

During the ritual, we ask for forgiveness, to the Deity for all human misdeeds on the land and guard us from any incidents and illness from happening. The Lepchas are the nature worshipers and the *muun/boongthing* are like a sacred bridge connecting them with the wonders of what nature has to offer. We have a deep connection with the nature and a deep respect for the nature.

Conclusion: Transformation in People's Perception

At a general level there is common knowledge that social practice like *ning* have come from outside and its origins are not seen in the history of Lepcha culture. Our interviews with the Lepcha academics and *boongthing* clearly indicated the alien nature of *ning*. We further noted in our interviews that the *ning* is practised by some rich people in order to accumulate and have a longer span of life. There are cases of buying the *ning* in the market at a very high price, which common people could not afford. Strangely, women are the carriers of *ning* and are punished for non-compliance with their task (administering *ning* at a regular times). With the exception of a few academics, such beliefs and practices are embedded part of people's perception in Lepcha society, including youth and the older generation. They think that a disease is caused by the displeasure and actions of supernatural beings, and if not exorcised by a *muun* or *boongthing*, the person may die. We also noted that social beliefs and practices of *ning* and *barmo* result in creating distrust among each other and this damaging social capital of Lepcha people. The question is: what policy and actions are needed to bring transformation in such belief systems.

Based on our understanding and discussions with key people in Lepcha society, we have raised four policy and social actions required to end witch persecution and witch hunt practices eventually. These include the following: (1) change in patriarchal mindsets and attitudes towards women; (2) effective state mechanisms against *ning* persecution and witch hunts; (3) concrete evidence of witchcraft like *ning* and *barmo* and building community support to transform power and authority of the *boongthing* and *muun*; and 4) enabling environment for women's agency with feminist components that include women's right to dignity, bodily integrity and human rights in their own homes and community and beyond borders of ethnicity.

Recently, in the 47th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in June-July 2021, the Human Rights Council drew the attention of the state parties for the "Elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks". 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 resistance, such as Chhutni Devi in Jharkhand, Sangkhumi from Mizoram, and Birubala Rabha in Assam, who were recently honored with the Padma Shree award for their work of capability and self-esteem development with the alleged witches.

Despite all the above-stated concerns, some educated Lepchas have become more aware of their cultural identities and are engaged in protecting and reviving their culture and traditions (Bently, 2009). We noted this in our discussion with a *muun* and a couple of Lepcha faculty members as well as students at Sikkim University. Importantly, some Lepcha associations or Non-Governmental Organizations, including one in Dzongu area called MLAs (Mutani Lom Aal Shezum) have come up to promote women's activities through SHGs to produce traditional crafts. These are sold at cultural shows and other events. A major achievement of these associations has been to promote change and develop an understanding in the community that change does not cause any loss to the culture. Culture is recognised with a shared history and traditions and has always adapted to changing contexts, incorporated new human rights and feminist elements and transformed previous ones. Such culture is likely to accord an indigenous Lepcha identity with dignity and equality to all women and men.

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

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COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG SOUTH ASIA

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rubber sheets being dried in a village

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

Our discussions in the field centered on the following points:

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Underpinnings

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender Relations in Tripura Society

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

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

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

The Belief Systems

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meeting with a village *ochai*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Persecution of Witches

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A women who was accused as a witch

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

> *A year and three months ago, the Ochai told us that Sukhi is possessed. We did all kinds of things to get rid of the spirit – sacrificed food and goats. The sacrificed animals were consumed by all those who went to the priest, along with the priest and his helper. As a ritual, they all went to the cremation ground to cook and consume the food. Later they also went to the medical doctor – but could not be cured (Later they told us that whenever they went to the doctor she got better. However, they could not afford to continue that treatment, they found it expensive and at a distance). There are two witches (one man and one woman) in this village who have caused this. Her older sister was also possessed and died. Another son and daughter also had died. We do not discuss the suspect witches for fear of repercussions.*
>
> *The ochai is from far away village, we pay him Rs.1,150 for treatment each time he visits. He is also from our community of Jamatias. The mother added that "the witch comes in the night. She has seen her shadow walking in the dark. "I have sold two plots and fishpond and cattle to get ritual done" to drive away the evil spirit. The evil spirit does not want her to prosper, she has more land and rubber trees than others in the village.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion: Structural Changes and Beliefs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conclusions: Traditional Cultures and the Growing Burden of Patriarchy

This is an interconnected world, connected by global flows of ideas, knowledge, technology and concerns for the dignity and equality 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 evil eye, women poisoners, the thlen and the tiger men and women 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 these studies, we looked at the eight states of Northeast India, known for their diversity of gender and cultural systems, 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 works of Christian missionaries influenced the culture of the indigenous peoples 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 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. 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).

Northeast India is not a monolithic region, as its usual image is projected. The region has a diversity of cultures, languages, and belief systems. However, three things are in common: Firstly, the simultaneous existence of the past in the present. The past is not simply a time that has passed; it is in existence in the present. Simultaneous existence, however, does not mean equal relevance in cultural and social matters. Powers come into the picture in relation between the two systems. The hegemonic role of the state becomes important in these relations between the two systems, the attempt to introduce Hinduism

or Christianity in the society. Second, accumulation processes. Earlier production was basically for self-consumption, with some surpluses being bartered for goods like iron and brass (in Arunachal Pradesh) that were not produced locally. In recent years, transport, communications, and economic links have grown with the rest of India and beyond. There has been growth in market-oriented production, particularly handicrafts and horticulture (kiwis, cardamoms, rubber, etc.) Some forms of accumulation seem to have started even before these market relations were established; for example, the number of Mithuns and their sacrifice came to be connected with the status of a person/ household. Mithun sacrifice seems to be related to the witch hunt or the evil eye attacks. As one key informant told us, "Jealousy of those who do better is often the reason for the witch accusation". Third, the patriarchal gender relations, a steady decline in women's social, economic, and political position, led to a change from matriliny to patriliny and gradually to patriarchy in civil societies of Northeast India. These societies have instituted norms and regulations for women's exclusion from decision-making and control over resources.

Through our earlier studies (Kelkar and Nathan, 199:2020), we noted that various social movements and indigenous peoples have been engaged in the discourse of indigeneity and politics of identity assertion. The practice of witch branding is seen as a marker of the exclusive identity of indigenous peoples and is seen as set against the forces of globalization and the related homogenising of the Indian state, making inroads into the Indian Hindu values and symbols.

We have tried to see the dynamics of capital and culture, how it has contributed to the strengthening of patriarchy, all-pervasive masculinity within the home and in the community and the privatisation of resources leading to a silent demise of concerns for women's rights and the steady loss of social, economic and political powers of women in the traditional societies, as evident in case of Rabha, Bodo, Garo and Lepchas. For instance, in the matrilineal Garo Hills of Meghalaya, a daughter was recognised as the rightful owner of community lands. If the household had no woman to inherit this right, the clan member may appoint another woman of the clan as Nokma (the village head). The Nokma's husband was supposed to assist her in the management of village affairs. However, with the growing patriarchal forces, men have acquired the centre stage in making decisions, and now the Nokma's husband is the Nokma.

This study is a critical analysis of cultural practices, mainly among indigenous peoples in Northeast India, as well as an attempt to understand the human rights-respecting cultural rights of everyone without discrimination and violence in the case of diverse practices. 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 in one part of the globalized world can affect development elsewhere and lead to discrimination, xenophobia, and related violence, such as witch branding and hunting. 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. Cultural sharing is common everywhere, despite attempts to portray societies as being defined by just one culture. The studies in this Compendium clearly demonstrate the importance of cultural sharing, whether of Christianity or Hinduism, with animism or other cultural-religious systems.

In the general system of economy in the Northeast states, women do not have any right to land or ancestral property. They are excluded from the village councils (kebba, dorbars, gaonburas), even in the matrilineal Meghalaya. Women are excluded from ritual

spheres. In some cases, like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, there are no gender-specific restrictions on who can be a healer or priest (nyibu and boongthing); the existing practices, however, make it easier for men to be initiated into the priesthood. Unlike in other Northeastern states, the Meitei women of Manipur have an important social and spiritual role in both economic and ritual spheres. They are seen as 'the chosen people' who are capable of making direct contact with the evil spirits that affect people. But despite women's economic and spiritual agency, women appeared to be trained to maintain the patriarchal system, as we noted in the Introduction of the Compendium, how a significant number of them stated that the husband's hitting of wife is justified. Patricia Mukhim rightly points out, "If you are schooled in patriarchy, you will act out patriarchy" (personal communication).

The cultural gatekeeping, particularly by the relatively rich people, has promoted social injustice, evil eye branding and violence against women and some marginalised men, as we clearly noted in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Sikkim. Major factors that caused witch hunts and ritual attacks included: 1) the reaffirmation of male dominance on land and property; 2) women supposedly causing illness and harm in their own communities; 3) a widely shared belief system that the existence of witches makes society weak from within and therefore witch hunting is justified; 4) jealousy caused by some households or individuals having more food and fields that were more productive, that a particular household became relatively rich by some mystical supernatural powers; and 5) assertion of women's agency. If a woman tried to be socially independent of male control, more articulate or transgressive of the community's social norms for women, even the hairdos or dressing.

Our discussions with ojhas/ochais and key leaders in several research sites indicated:

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

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 themselves and the comments of outsiders.

We have tried to see women's agency through the dynamics of capital and culture and how this has contributed to changing the pervasive patriarchy, masculinity and the privatisation of resources, leading to a silent demise of concerns for women's rights and the steady loss of social, economic and political powers of women in their own society. Our definition of women's agency has five major dimensions: having unmediated (not through marital relations) right to access, control and own resources; freedom from fear of violence within the home and outside in streets and workplaces; ability to think and act to secure their strategic interests and if necessary change gender norms; decision-making over their reproductive work, including birthing and nurturing; and having representation and voice in the community and influencing policy (Kelkar and Nathan 2020:202-203).

Patriarchal determinism about women's position in the Meitei society, for example, leads women not to raise their critical voice about loss in their position and silently accept growing male control over resources, decision-making and, worse, to be bystanders in gender-based violence.

Indigenous women have powerful agency in religio-cultural, political, and economic spheres, e.g., Mother's Market and Naga Mothers Association. This raises two questions about the contradictory position of women in several states of the Northeast: 1) the *hingchabi* evil spirits system and its adverse effect on women (and men) resulting in fearful social existence; 2) whatever women do is identified as part of being a mother, not a woman as such, with rights of her own. An answer to these questions would be that women have a 'domesticated agency'. They have been asked to give up their right to own land and property in favor of their male relatives if they dared to oppose this, have been denounced as witches/poisoners/ the evil eye facing eviction from their homes and village, and often brutal torture and death (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020:203).

Our current knowledge of the Northeastern cultures and beliefs is largely based on the colonial descriptions of the early 20th century. The monographs written by ethnographers J. H. Hutton (1921, 1922) and Mills (1926) 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). As 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).

Belief in witchcraft thrives on a patriarchal platform; in many cases, women were branded as witches owing to their increased assertiveness or agency and increased economic control. (Drucker-Brown, 1993; Kelkar and Nathan 2020). Furthermore, as a result of changing gender relations owing to economic growth and capitalist systems, men feel they are losing control over resources because of the instability of land and property in newly introduced capitalist relations in indigenous societies. Neighbours and family members become a threatening force, whether as instigators themselves or through the strength of other instigators, and function as inactive spectators of the brutality and murders of the alleged witches.

The reasons for witch hunts in the majority of cases we have described were related to struggles over gender relations. Indigenous ways of thinking and their myths and stories

have created two categories of human beings: women, any of whom could be a witch, and men who are witch-finders, albeit not all men but only some who have knowledge of mantras and training from an ojha/kabiraj. Women who transgress gender boundaries or manifest their agency are in danger of being branded and presented as witches.

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.

We have argued for the universality of human rights where cultural expressions of communities or collectives do not harm the life, dignity and equality of individual women or men. Everyone has the right to control one's material resources and take part in decision-making processes that have an impact on their human rights-based social existence.

Both cultural and capital dynamics must inform the framework of addressing witch hunts and ritual attacks in understanding the ways in which homegrown ways of gender discrimination are part of the traditional cultures and capitalist patriarchy of the globalised world. The UN Secretary-General Report 'Field of Cultural Rights (2021) recently noted that "refusal to respect cultural mixing or mixed cultural identities leads to many human rights violations". The measures of human rights-based cultural identities are bound to create new norms of dignity and equality for rural and indigenous women and men.

There are examples of Padma Shree awardee women who were disowned as witches by their families, Birubala Rabha in Assam, Chhutni Devi in Jharkhand who successfully fought against the norms of witch branding, and the community attempts to persecute them. They have argued on the basis of "show us the proof of my witchcraft." This demand for proof can be an extremely effective tool to end witch branding and witch persecution.

Based on the women's voices from the research sites, we have raised five policy and social actions required to end witch persecution eventually:

- Change in the patriarchal mindsets and masculine attitudes through policy and community awareness building.
- Effective state mechanisms of policies and laws against harassment and persecution of women as witches;
- Concrete evidence of witchcraft and building community support to dismantle the power and authority of the ojhas/ochais/boongthing/the thlen keepers, the tiger men, and nyibus.

- Setting up decentralised healthcare infrastructure with attention to concerns of women and girls, endemic fever, malaria, etc., with examples of cholera witches in central India, the present-day Chhattisgarh, in the 1870s.
- Building capabilities of indigenous women, girls, men and boys with attention to human rights, respecting cultures and scientific thinking, as well as new production and communication technologies and gender-responsive egalitarian relations. These capability-building efforts must be accompanied by women's unmediated rights to land, property, and housing that can make women economically independent, thus enabling them to live with dignity and freedom in decision-making.

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Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks:
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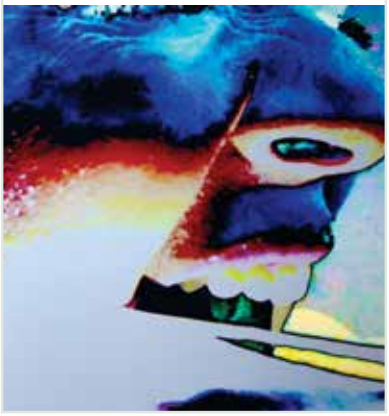
Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan

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

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan, Aparajita Sharma



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