

*WORKING PAPER NO.  
WP 004/2013*

Witches:  
Through Changing Contexts Women Remain the  
Target

Dev Nathan , Govind Kelkar and Shivani Satija  
Institute for Human Development  
New Delhi



NEW DELHI  
2013

*Published by:*

INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

NIDM Building, IIPA Campus, IP Estate, New Delhi-110002

Phones: +91-11-2335 8166/ 2332 1610 • Fax: +91-11-2376 5410

E-mail: [mail@ihdindia.org](mailto:mail@ihdindia.org) • Website: [www.ihdindia.org](http://www.ihdindia.org)

© Institute for Human Development, 2013

ISBN: 978-81-88315-40-6

Subscription Amount: ` 50/- / US \$ 10

# WITCHES: THROUGH CHANGING CONTEXTS WOMEN REMAIN THE TARGET

*Dev Nathan, Govind Kelkar and Shivani Satija \**

## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the phenomenon of witch-hunting among indigenous peoples in peninsular India. It looks at this phenomenon in a number of different contexts: the struggle over domination in the sphere of rituals, and also contestation in more mundane spheres, such as control over land and property and new forms of accumulation.

The phenomenon of witch-hunting is a form of violence, violence mainly against women but also at times including other members of the family. As violence, is it transformative, an attempt to change existing gender relations? Or, is violence constitutive of gender relations, a phenomenon that exists as part of ongoing gender relations? We will argue that witch-hunting has been both instrumental in changing gender relations, as well as constitutive of gender relations, initially instrumental and then constitutive.

The contemporary condition of indigenous peoples is one of rapid change, a change from subsistence economies to one of accumulation. The former is characterized by relative stability and the latter by instability and growing inequality. We analyse the nature of witch-hunts in the transitions that are underway.

What all this means is that there are various layers to the witch and witch-hunting phenomena. But in order to set the scene for the analysis, we first summarize the dimensions and extent of the witch phenomenon among Indian indigenous peoples. We concentrate on the situation of indigenous peoples in Jharkhand, since that is the area we have studied more extensively (see Kelkar and Nathan, 1991; Nathan 1997; Nathan, Kelkar and Yu Xiaogang, 1998).

## **Existence and Extent**

Whatever disputes there may be about the existence of witch practices by women, the denunciation and subsequent violence including killing, cannot be denied. This denunciation of women as witches and their persecution in various forms, we will summarize under the term 'witch-hunting'. The prevalence of witch-hunting was much commented on by British colonial administrators, such as Col. Dalton and W. G. Archer, and European missionaries, such as S. Bodding in the 19th Century, in his Santhal Dictionary and J. B. Hoffman in the 20th Century in Encyclopaedia Mundarica.

There are partial figures in the immediate post-Independence period. For the district of Malda, West Bengal, from 1950 to 1980 it was estimated that some 46 persons had been killed as witches (Chaudhuri, 1987: 160). National police data have been recording 'witchcraft' under motives of murder since 2001.

---

\* Respectively, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, and Duke University, USA, Landesa, New Delhi, and Institute for Human Development, New Delhi

Table 1 in the Annex is a summary of data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The NCRB data, unfortunately, are not gender disaggregated. But, we do know, from various accounts that the victims killed are largely women, with men being involved mainly as members of the household. There is some variation in this gendered picture among the major indigenous communities of Jharkhand, with an almost entirely female incidence among the Santhal, Ho and Munda, but less so among the Oraon people.

It should be noted that the data are likely to be an underestimate of the situation. Instances of witch-killing could well be listed under other categories, such as property disputes or personal vendettas. Nevertheless the numbers of witchcraft related killings are non-trivial. The period from 2001 to 2012 averaged 168 witchcraft deaths<sup>1</sup> nation-wide per year, with a range from 114 deaths in 2004 to 242 deaths in 2011<sup>2</sup>. The deaths were concentrated in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal, with one or two also in Bihar, Gujarat and Haryana. As one would expect, they were concentrated in the tribal-dominated states of peninsular India.

Jharkhand is home to the Association for Social and Human Awareness (Asha), an NGO led by Poonam Toppo, whose grandmother was denounced as a witch. Its activities were initially entirely focused on opposition to witch denunciation and witch-hunting, but have since expanded to take up development issues of children's education and ecological agriculture.

Asha has a figure of 371 witch killings in Jharkhand state from 2001 to 2008 (as reported in the *Hindustan*, 2012). This is about 50 per cent more than the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figure of 250 killed in Jharkhand in the same period. Asha also estimates about 100,000 women to have been charged with being witches, giving an average of a little more than three witch accusations per village in the state's 32,000 villages.

The official figures themselves are non-trivial and clearly warrant investigation and explanation. The estimates of one person killed in every 100 villages and three accusations per village are substantial. The phenomenon of witch-hunting cannot be explained by hysteresis, or the continuation of a phenomenon that continues though its cause has ceased to exist. There is a need to explain why it continues even in considerably changed socio-economic and political circumstances, right into the current era of market-based globalization. Of course, the Jharkhandi communities have not been immune to the impacts of market relations, with a history dating back to the early colonial period of supplying timber and lac. In fact, it was the destitution that followed a crash of lac prices that was the occasion for the Birsa Munda-led revolt at the end of the nineteenth century.

### **Witches and Witchcraft**

The first question that one has to deal with is that of existence of witches. Are there really such people, such women? Talking to people of the region there certainly is a strong belief in the existence of such women who practice a different form of worship labelled witchcraft, and thus—as per popular belief— gain certain powers to cause harm. But are there really such practices as gathering at night, in the sacred grove, where it is otherwise forbidden for women to enter, usually on the night of a new moon (*amavasya*), dancing,

<sup>1</sup> From the NCRB data we have taken both 'murder' and 'culpable homicide' to be witch killings.

<sup>2</sup> For details see Table 1 in the Annex.

possibly naked and uttering unknown chants? The Norwegian missionary, Bodding, who in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century recorded what he could of Santhal life, wrote, 'I am inclined to think that the practice of witchcraft by Santhal women is, to a certain extent, really secret worship, resorted to by women because they are not permitted to take part with the men directly and personally in ordinary public worship,' (1979: 224).

Some reputed contemporary anthropologists and observers have also mentioned in personal communications that they have witnessed such forms of secret worship by women. More recent accounts, though not first-hand, also testify to the continued existence of secret forms of worship by Santhal and other indigenous women (see Bosu-Mullick, 2000 and Mishra, 2003). What, however, has been noted as secret worship may well have been a normal form of worship in an earlier period. In the course of history it may have moved from centre-stage to the margins.

The Santhal and Munda both have myths of the manner in which the women-centred religious practices were relegated to the margins or came to be denounced as negative. Myths are not history, but they play a role in making a cultural account of how the history was created. And, once mythologized, these notions continue to play a role in people's understanding of contemporary events.

The movement of religious practices to the margins is the result of a struggle, a struggle in which formerly exalted practices and states, such as 'being possessed', are now derided and even cast in a negative light. It is in this struggle that the women-centred practices and rites came to be charged as being witchcraft. As Malcolm Gaskill points out, '... the charge of witchcraft was never uniquely associated with one faith or another, but generated by conflict between faiths,' (2010: 16, emphasis in original). Discussed in more detail elsewhere (Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang, 1998; and Bosu-Mullick, 2000) there was a conflict between women-centred and men-centred religious practices among various indigenous peoples.

What is important for our present analysis is that these conflicts, mythologized women as dangerous witches. There is an easy, even if unconscious polarization between 'the polarity of gender and the polarity of good and evil' (Gaskill, 2010: 30). There surely is not an invariant connection between women and evil, but many religio-cultural systems<sup>3</sup> posit such a connection among their founding metaphors.

### **Rebellion and Witch-hunting**

Two periods of adivasi rebellion in Jharkhand were simultaneously periods of intense witch-hunting. This was during the 1857 Mutiny, at which time the Santhal hul (rebellion) led by the brothers Sighu and Kanhu took place and later at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when there was the Birsa Munda-led rebellion in the Khuti-Ranchi area. Preceding these rebellions were periods of colonial rule. The colonial authorities, along with missionary priests, obviously opposed witch-hunting and killing.

There was a belief that witches flourished under benign British rule. In Africa too there was the belief that the colonial state protected witches by refusing to act against them

<sup>3</sup> See Nel Noddings (1989) for an analysis of Eve and the origin of evil in Christianity.

(Geschiere, 1997: 15). In 1837, Wilkinson issued a directive with specific instructions against witch murders (Sinha, 2007). When the political space of the colonial state shrank during the 19th century adivasi rebellions, there was a rise in witch-killings. In a parallel manner, one might note that the ending of apartheid in South Africa is said to have seen a rise in witch-killings. ‘The problem seems to be that as soon as a new political space is opened up, it is overrun by rumours about the use of sorcery and witchcraft’ (Geschiere, 1997: 7).

The Jharkhand adivasi rebellions combined anti-colonial and anti-women connotations. As colonial rule weakened, many women were killed as witches. But should the anti-witch drives of the adivasi rebels be seen as a type of James Scott’s ‘weapons of the weak’, as argued by Shashank Sinha (2007)? It would rather be more straightforward to point out that the adivasi rebellions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also contained within them anti-women aspects related to the traditional practice of witch persecution and killing.

Further, there was adivasi opposition to the witch-hunts (Ata Mallick, 2008). Even in those days persecuted women and their families approached the colonial authorities for help. Opposition to witch hunting then came from not just the colonial authorities alone, but also from sections of the community itself. Since quite large numbers of women were attacked and faced the threat of attack, there could have been substantial opposition. Chotrae Deshmanjhi a participant in the Santhal rebellion of 1855 said, ‘We were all afraid seeing such things. My two brothers suggested that we should leave the place immediately as we too have women and girls. They might be identified as witches’ (ibid.: 118, emphasis added). The Santhal myth, in particular, identified all women as actual or potential witches.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of the Adivasi Mahasabha in the 1930s and the Jharkhand Party in the 1950s both Hinduism and Christianity had spread among the indigenous peoples in Jharkhand. In addition, the attempt to create pan-Adivasi identities also led to ‘toning down internal tensions (witch-killings included)’ (Sinha, 2012).

### **Nature of Witch -hunting**

The types of events that constituted violence in witch-hunting are clear enough. They involved humiliation (e.g. being forced to eat human or animal excreta), trashing of the house, sexual and physical attacks on women and other members of the immediate family. The witch and sometimes her family could be banished from the village. At times, the women were killed.

Witch-hunting was not an inter-tribal matter; it did not involve members of one tribe attacking those of another as having witches. In that sense, it was not similar to head-hunting, which usually involved villages fighting each other. Witch-hunting was an internal matter, an intra-tribe matter. Those making the accusations and those being accused belonged to the same tribe. It was an internal struggle, a gendered struggle. Since any woman could be denounced as a witch it would have served to terrorize and inhibit all women from being forceful or insistent about anything.

More than just being members of the same tribe, the accuser and accused were usually closely related to one another, members of the same kin group or lineage. The accusations

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the Santhal myth of witch origin, see Kelkar and Nathan (1991); Nathan, Kelkar and Yu (1998)

usually centred around losses suffered by one family, or section of the family. These losses could be economic, such as of livestock or even the harvest; or the loss of family members through illness. Any kind of misfortune was explained in terms of the malevolent intentions of some persons, accused of using witchcraft to bring about misfortune.

These accusations were followed by the killing or driving out of the witch and the takeover of her land and other property by the accusers, since, most often the accused women were widows or otherwise single women. Such women had little familial support and thus could be easy victims. A struggle within kin groups is often about property. Witch-hunting truly is ‘the dark side of kinship’ (Geschiere, 1997: 11).<sup>5</sup>

In the struggle within kin groups, land was the central issue. In different tribes women had varied rights to land as widows, ranging from the right to full-use, to the right to merely be maintained. In the case of a widow without sons, the land then went to the nearest male kin on the husband’s side. Those male kin with a claim over the land were often the ones who initiated witch accusations in order to immediately takeover the land.

#### **Land and Subsistence Economy**

In the traditional tribal economy there was growth. A village could grow by bringing new land under cultivation. A kin group could also grow by bringing more land under cultivation. As sons got married and started new households they could bring new land under cultivation. More land, which also meant more households, strengthened a kin group.

The economy was not stagnant—there was growth, but at the extensive margin. Growth at the extensive margin meant that per capita income or consumption standards remained more or less constant. Higher production which might occur in a good year did not mean a higher consumption standard. The excess, over and above regular consumption or seed needs, was often consumed in feasting. Or, at times the surplus produce would simply be left to rot in the ground, as was observed in the case of swidden cultivators in Tripura (Malabika Dasgupta, 2002).

When such an economy could grow by bringing more land under cultivation there may have been less conflict over land within the village. But when colonialism set limits to the expansion of cultivation, claiming the forests as state property, then there would have been an intensification of land conflicts within the village. It should be noted that in both major adivasi revolts in the 19th century, the right to expand cultivation into what were claimed as state forests by the colonial state, was the key issue. The Chotangapur Tenancy Act that resulted from the Birsa Munda-led revolt, explicitly recognized the right of villages over their forests, legalizing the ‘khutkatti’ system.

The colonial state not only took over the forest lands stopping growth possibilities, it also took steps against witch killing. As mentioned earlier, in 1853 Wilkinson (of the famous Wilkinson Rules) criminalized witch killing, treating it as murder.

But even in a subsistence economy, there could be some possibilities for accumulation, particularly through forms of trade, which colonialism made possible. For instance, in

---

<sup>5</sup> This remark was made by Peter Geschiere (1997) about witchcraft in Cameroon or Africa in general.

Jharkhand there grew the trade in lac. In this subsistence economy, witch-hunting did function as a levelling mechanism, in the manner that seems to have occurred in Africa (Geschiere, 1997).

Among the Munda there was a system of redistribution that inhibited accumulation, rather than centralized it, as was the case among the Khasi of Meghalaya.<sup>6</sup> Any family that accumulated wealth was subjected to hisinga or envy. The wealth was supposed to be due to worship of the paltu or domesticated bonga or spirit. Success in accumulating wealth was then due not to individual or household effort, but to the spirit, the bonga. At some time the family would be required to give a feast to the whole village, which could leave the family even worse-off than the rest of the village.

The village feasting was a manner of redistribution, or rather consumption of the surplus. But it did not carry the negative connotation of wealth acquired through illicit or negative means, as through witchcraft. Thus it was different from the African case where any accumulation was due to witchcraft and led to persecution of the witch. Redistribution by feasting was a relatively benign form of levelling, compared to denunciation as a witch.

### **Change in Production Orientation**

Over time, the subsistence, or 'full belly'-orientation of tribal production began to change. New needs were created and grew, such as those for education and modern medical services. With better communication the possibilities for trading opened up avenues for increasing income. There was a shift from a subsistence form of production to accumulation.

However, the possibilities for accumulation were not equally shared by all households. There were inequalities depending on access to external contacts, education, etc. Not only were local goods, such as non-timber forest products (NTFP) traded, migration for wage labour also opened up.

When there is growth of per capita income in an economy where growth is possible only at the extensive margin, then that must come about through some forms of external economic contact. Some persons got jobs outside the village economy, in some form of migration. But with migration, and even more jobs, being limited, there could clearly be an element of jealousy when some households, and not others, received increased income.

A shift from subsistence to an accumulative mode of production is a very major transformation of the economic system. It is what may be called a civilizational change (Nathan and Kelkar 2003). The change is, as mentioned above, not just in the types of production carried out but also in the attitudes to production. Production is not just for meeting relatively fixed needs, but now has the objective of maximizing income.

Such a shift in thinking about economic production also has many social consequences. Reciprocity in sharing, works well when who does better is a random occurrence. Such change and sharing tend to cancel each other out over time. But when some households

---

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion of issues of accumulation among indigenous peoples see Nathan and Kelkar (2003).



have a regular access to higher income than others in the kin group, then sharing tends to break down. For instance, when one household has a member in a government job or other such salaried job, then the claims of kin over that income become a source of resentment. Those who do not have the benefit of having secured such a job become envious of those who have.

Envy, or *hisinga*, as we saw above, is a well-established concept in tribal socio-economic thinking. Earlier accusations of witchcraft did not include being economically better-off as a factor. But more recent accounts, such as Archana Mishra (2003) and personal communications with Poonam Toppo, of the anti-witch persecution NGO, Asha, mention the rise of being better-off as a factor in witchcraft accusations.

Thus, there is a new kind of background to witch accusations. 'The money she received from him [migrant husband] every month became the root cause for her brother-in-law's jealousy,' (Archana Mishra, 2003: 61); and in another instance, 'We were leading a calm and quiet life and my family was well-settled. Maybe this was the reason why they labelled me as a witch,' (ibid.: 95). These are new kinds of background elements in witch accusations, of households that do well or better than others.

In these examples the witch could be thought to have used evil or at least occult powers to secure some benefit for her family. The good fortune of these households is directly linked to the absence of good fortune of other less advantaged households. Such an analysis is explicitly made among the matrilineal Khasi of Meghalaya. When someone, other than those from the clans of the chiefs (*Syiems*) or priests (*Lyngdoh*) accumulated wealth, it was supposed to have been done by worshipping the serpent, *u thlen*. This accumulation was tantamount to drinking the blood of other clan members.

The notion of sanctioned and non-sanctioned wealth is present among central Indian tribes too. This is discussed in some detail in Bailey (1994), which we use over here to supplement material from our earlier work.

There was the wealth from land. The village head and the village priest usually had the better quality land in the village. If they were skilful and careful they could manage some accumulation, though their feasting obligations would usually dissipate any possible accumulation. But if some accumulation did take place, this was acceptable as a sanctioned form of wealth. This wealth, one should note, was something entirely relative. It might just mean having more grain, fruits and vegetables. Such extras could not really be accumulated and were justified on the basis of the redistribution involved in various rituals.

The other way of accumulating wealth was a kind of 'easy wealth' (ibid.: 79). This was due to luck, or more important, opportunistic behaviour or cheating. Even more important, however, was the fact that such easy wealth was accumulated by those who were not supposed to do so. This could be any family other than those of the headman and priest. It could also extend to multi-ethnic villages, with a combination of tribes and castes.

Among<sup>7</sup> the Munda and Ho, such a family is supposed to have tamed or kept the *paltu bonga*, or domesticated spirit. In the multi-ethnic village that Bailey analyses, the family is said to have kept a *devata*. Witches too have their own *bongas*. They could be used to damage another person's well-being. Between the witches and various *bongas* or *devatas*, the point is that there were sanctions for acquiring wealth. If acquired it should be shared with other members of the lineage. Those who did not do this voluntarily could be forced to do this through the mechanisms of either *hisinga* (envy) or the witch accusation.

That acquiring wealth and not sharing it, could spark-off *hisinga*, is seen in one key incident. The family of the sister-in-law of Ram Dayal Munda, one-time Vice Chancellor of Ranchi University and a member of the Congress Party's National Advisory Council (NAC), was killed by a group of men from the village. Not only had they become better-off, they had also given up drinking *haria*, or rice beer. Not sharing rice beer with your brotherhood is even taken as an insult, a sign of anti-social behaviour and of looking down upon other members of the brotherhood. They were asked to leave the village and when they refused, all members of the family who were in the village were killed. There was no witch accusation in this case.

If spirits could be used to accumulate wealth, they could also be used to damage another person's economic well-being. A market-based economy brings with it various risks. Very damaging could be the loss of uninsured livestock; cattle in particular represent large investments for agriculturist households.

With the growth of a new orientation towards accumulation away from subsistence production, the witch could use powers to: (i) accumulate, and (ii) to damage others. Those who did badly economically would try to find the witches who had damaged them. Those who did well would be targeted as witches.

Witch-hunting, then, serves as a levelling tendency. Here the distinction between witchcraft and witch-hunting is important. Witchcraft may be thought to be used for either a positive reason, such as accumulation, or a negative reason such as to destroy another. Overall though, witch-hunting is seen to serve only one tendency, that of levelling by not allowing accumulation by some.

The above analysis is different from that by Peter Geschiere (1997) of witchcraft in Cameroon. He thinks that representations of witchcraft strike a, 'precarious balance between "levelling" and "accumulating" tendencies' (1997: 16). That is correct as far as witchcraft goes, which can be used either to benefit oneself or harm others.

Witch hunting however would not have an accumulating tendency (unless it were exclusively, or preponderantly used to target the worse-off sections and enable the better-off to grab their land and other properties). A preliminary look at contemporary cases of witch-hunting does not show that it is mainly the worse-off who are the victims

---

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Samar Bosu-Mullick for discussions on these points.

of witch-hunting!

Further, as we saw about the Munda, the levelling function was served not only by witch accusations but also by requiring those who had more to offer as a feast to the village.

Before going on to next section we would like to again reiterate that there is a difference between two groups of those who get ahead of the rest. The first group of those who enter into professions (or, even government jobs) and either completely move away from the village or depend on it only in a nominal sense. There would certainly be a substantial number of claimants on the income and property of such persons and families, but their having moved away makes them somewhat immune to levelling pressures.

The other group is of those who have moved somewhat ahead but still remain within the village economy. They may have some members who have migrated not into professions but as workers at various levels. Their families would continue to reside in the village and interact with them. This section is most vulnerable to levelling pressures. One would expect that it is among them that women are likely to be denounced as witches and subject to persecution.

### **Institutions and Economic Transition**

It is important to look at the overall impacts of witch-hunting. The literature on witch-hunting is trapped in an anthropological mode, if one may call it that. As a starting point it is necessary to look at how those involved look at these institutions. But even when going beyond how local people look at these institutions, it is necessary to place witch-hunting within the context of the transitions actually underway in tribal economies. In summary form, this is the transition from subsistence to an accumulating economy. In this transition what is the impact of witch-hunting?

This impact can be broken down to a number of aspects in order to be analysed. At a social level there is loss due to destruction of property, at least the witch's house and all materials in it. Land and other productive assets may not be destroyed in the course of witch-hunting, but the house usually is trashed and made unfit for dwelling. In any case, people are unlikely to stay in a declared witch-house.

Injury, banishment, or death, all result in a loss of labour power. There are seemingly mundane matters like the cost of treatment and the loss of income due to the inability to work during treatment and recovery, but these are real costs that must be attributed to witch-hunting. Premature death, of course, is the ultimate loss of labour power, reducing the productive potential of the household, lineage and tribe. With accumulation and the possibilities of migration the loss of such labour power, whether temporarily through injury or permanently through death, becomes particularly acute.

The above losses are concentrated in the households of the witches and through that have an impact on production in the village or tribe. But more important may be the impact of witch denunciation and witch hunting on the agency and initiative of women and even the whole tribe. Any woman, particularly one who is successful or part of a successful household, is in danger of being denounced and persecuted as a witch. This would inhibit women's agency in taking initiatives for economic betterment. It could also lead to attempts to conceal actual accumulation. Such attempts could have costs at least in terms of not investing in more visible, but higher-return arenas. Hiding money, rather than investing it, has a cost.

The inhibiting effect on investment is not just a matter of women alone, but would affect the households of which they are a part. Any successful household is likely to have women denounced as witches. All households would then either restrict or hide their accumulations and investments.

Accusations and witch-hunting would thus affect the agency of women and their ability to use or even build upon their capabilities. These inhibiting effects spread from women to their households, which in effect impacts the whole village and tribe. A resulting low-level trap could be broken by a collective decision to take up new and promising activities. But the continuation of suspicion and envy, hisinga, would make such collective decisions difficult.

Finally, there is no doubt that witch-hunting and killing are a gross violation of human rights. It may be argued that such practices are part of the culture of the concerned indigenous peoples, but cultural practices have and do change.

#### **Witch-hunting as Anti-modern**

That witch-hunting continues to occur in a modern context does not, therefore, make it a modern practice. We have seen that it is an anti-accumulative practice. That this is framed in terms of levelling does not make it modern. Rather, one could argue that there are two kinds of levelling. There is a levelling practice that inhibits accumulation and brings down or levels those who get ahead of the rest. There can also be a levelling practice of collective ownership based on accumulation in a market-based economy. Witch-hunting is a levelling practice of the former type. Taking modernity to mean at least accumulation, one can argue that witch-hunting is anti-modern at the economic level.

More important, however, is to frame modernity in terms of more equal gender relations. On this count, there can be little doubt that witch-hunting and accusations are thoroughly anti-modern. They inhibit the agency of women and are a threat to all and any women of the tribe.

#### **Witch-hunting in Changing Contexts**

We have looked at witch-hunting in three different contexts. First is that of setting up masculine domination in the ritual and political spheres. This is also the period of displacement of women-centred religious practices and their replacement by men-centred

religious practices. It is in this clash of religious and ritual systems that women's religious practices were denounced as witchcraft. The key aspect of this process was women not having a voice in governance, in conjunction with their ritual devaluation.

The second context is that of the patrilineal descent system. Women's land rights were reduced over time. Witch accusations and the killing or driving out of witches were among the forms of oppression used in this process, which established and re-established women's economic dependence.

Analytically we can distinguish these two spheres of political and economic affairs and the context of political and economic domination by men and dependence of women. But they may well occur simultaneously and at various points of time.

The third context of witch-hunting is that of transition from subsistence to an accumulative economy, and the decline of reciprocity. In this context the target is not just women, but may also include their households.

But across all three contexts the constant is the denunciation of women as witches and their being hunted in various ways. This oppression of women in ritual, political, economic and family or kinship spheres, or patriarchy, is the constant through all these contexts.

The violence of the witch-hunt seems to have had a constitutive role in establishing women's subordination. But it also has an instrumental role in continuing to keep women subordinated. The likelihood of any woman being denounced as a witch has an effect on all women, persuading them to follow established practices and not deviate from the norm.

Patriarchy strengthened over time, extending men's domination from the ritual and political spheres to the economic sphere. But with the growth of the market system and the substantial possibilities for women's independent economic activities we may see a weakening of patriarchy. But this economic weakening needs to be accompanied by a weakening of strongly held cultural beliefs of the need to control women.

#### **Nature of Violence**

Witch-hunting, even when it does not involve killing, is an extreme form of violence. It can involve destruction of a house, being forced to eat human and animal excreta, and physical and sexual assault. Either banishment or killing is often the end-result. With any woman likely to be branded a witch, this violence is a threat against all women of the tribe.

Was witch-hunting and killing instrumental in converting gender difference into gender hierarchy? Henrietta Moore (1994: 139) poses this question about violence about women in general. Looking at the Santhal myth of the origins of women as witches and men as witch-finders, one can certainly put forward the thesis that the violence of witch-hunting and killing was instrumental in turning gender difference into gender hierarchy. Thus this function of the violence of witch-hunting may be viewed as instrumental—that is, violence employed to establish a patriarchal gender-hierarchy and its belief system.

But, having established gender hierarchy in the form of patriarchy, what then explains the continuing violence of witch-hunts? One might use the term violence as constitutive of gender relations to explain the continuing role of witch-hunts. This formulation is a little different from Moore's question: 'does violence enter into the cultural construction of personhood in different ways for women and men?' (1994: 139). The violence of witch-hunting clearly enters in different ways into the cultural construction of women and men in these indigenous communities. Women are the victims (or, largely the victims), while men are the perpetrators of that violence. Women are the witches, who can be subject to violence; while men are the witch-finders who can initiate violence. Having played an instrumental role in establishing gender hierarchy, the violence of witch-hunting then continues as a constitutive part of gender hierarchy.

### **Dealing with Witch-hunting**

Dealing with witch-hunting surely requires police action. But it is not necessary that this will be a deterrent where people believe that their actions are justified by a moral code or social norms that they adhere to. There have been reported instances where after killing the woman, the perpetrators have turned themselves in at the police station. In the case of the Munda family hisinga killing mentioned above, the killers went directly to the police station. Nevertheless, police action alone is not sufficient. It needs to be accompanied by a change in social norms.

How norms change is a difficult matter to analyse. In Weber's analysis the Protestant Ethic, a macro-level change in norms, brought about a change in norms and behaviour at the micro-level. Saving and accumulation now become acceptable in social behaviour. This is, in a sense, a top-down change—a macro-level change in beliefs bringing about a micro-level change in norms and behaviour.

But there are also examples of changes in norms which have come about not through top-down changes but more from a bottom-up movement. Micro-credit, when it started in Bangladesh, went against the then established norm of women not being income-earners. There were religious sanctions against women entering into micro-enterprises. As Jean Ensminger and Jack Knight point out, 'When we have sanctioning of deviant behaviour, we have evidence for the existence of a norm,' (1997: 3).

But over time, women's participation in micro-enterprises has spread through the country and a new norm of women contributing to household money earnings has come to be accepted as a norm.<sup>8</sup> "Some actors will eventually focus on a particular outcome and others will in time follow suit, establishing a convention" (Ensminger and Knight, 1997: 3). With tens of millions of women running micro-enterprises, it amounts to that many millions of women deviating from an older norm who in the process, '... make possible the assertion of a new one' (Keesing, 1975: 140, quoted in Ensminger and Knight, 1997: 1).

There is a social (and individual) selection of one norm over another. The change in norms accompanies the actual change in women's economic behaviour. The selection of women's micro-enterprises at both individual and social levels must mean that it is

superior in providing a better economic result. In the economic context of poor women, the fitness landscape would favour the selection of a norm that provides a better economic outcome for poor women.

Ensminger and Knight put forward three mechanisms of changing social norms, ‘... coordination of focal points, competitive selection among contracts, and bargaining’ (1997: 3). Focal points here would be those who take up activities resulting in accumulation. The spread of these activities could be a factor in changing current norms. Whether those activities spread or not, however, depends on whether they are likely to be selected by large numbers of people. These activities should be economically superior to others in order to be selected. These two mechanisms—of focal points and selection—then really turn out to be just one mechanism, of being economically superior. An economically superior practice is likely to spread, overcome old norms and, in the process, establish new norms.

Bargaining could also enter into the picture in the sense of undertaking some redistribution through feasting to buy-off those who do not benefit from the new norms. But there is a contradiction through such kin-based redistributive claims and incentives for individual accumulation. The stronger the former claims, the weaker will be the incentive to accumulate. More important than bargaining could be the possibility of drawing all or most into the accumulative process. In the absence of such inclusion there are bound to be tensions in accumulation. There will also be a contradiction between buying out those not benefiting and incentives to accumulate. The substitution of state-based redistribution through taxes in place of kin-based redistributions, rather than bargaining, could be a way around resistance to the new norms.

The above analysis relates to dealing with the witch problem in so far as it relates to the spread of a new economic system based on accumulation rather than a subsistence economy. The inequalities resulting from individual property and capability-based growth, exacerbate tensions in this transition. It is likely that a collective form of such a transition would reduce the resulting tensions in such a transition. As analysed elsewhere (Nathan and Kelkar, 1998 [Nathan, Kelkar and Yu]; and the Chongqing experience) collective economic entities, even collections of entities owned by a village as a whole, are possible within a market-oriented system of accumulation.

Moving beyond the strains of the civilizational transformation of economic systems, there still remains the issue of gender relations. How does one deal with the gender-relations issue, irrespective of whether it appears in the context of an economic transition, a relatively stagnant land-based economy or an even more stagnant tea plantation labour economy?

There have been some movements to oppose witch-hunting.

How do they frame (Goffman, 1974) the anti-witch hunt campaign?<sup>9</sup> The category of superstition or questioning the supposed existence of witches is one such frame. Others are

---

<sup>8</sup> See Kelkar, Nathan and Jahan, 2003, and Nathan, 2005, for an analysis of this change in norms.

those of women's development, whether through reducing their vulnerability or reducing their dependence on men, and that of justice. The issue of development is not posed as we have put it in this paper—as one of transition from subsistence to accumulation, but the development schemes taken up (setting up women's micro-enterprises) point in that direction. In this regard there is NBPDC or North Bengal People's Development Center is working in the North Bengal tea plantations, while Jharkand NGO Asha has also expanded its ambit from witch denunciation and witch-hunting, to take up development issues of children's education and ecological agriculture (Soma Chaudhuri, 2008).

Justice and the issue of superstition are related. They could be translated into the field of culture. What is called superstition is the cultural belief in the existence of malevolent women with extra-normal powers to cause harm. Linked to this is the attribution of misfortune (e.g. death of a person or livestock) to acts by some human. There is the further belief that unauthorized persons who accumulate wealth do so in an illegitimate manner, a transgression compounded by their failure to redistribute their gains.

Thus the questioning of beliefs that support witch-hunting relate to some aspects of the culture of indigenous peoples. It is often argued that such cultures and their practices are not to be questioned, leave alone opposed. Nowadays in India, there is even a claim to a right 'not to be offended' by criticism. But when cultural beliefs and their resulting practices violate currently accepted notions of human rights, then it is human rights that are superior to cultural practices.<sup>10</sup>

### **Future Research**

In this paper we have put forward the thesis that the context of witch-hunting has changed from the acquisition of land in a largely-subsistence, patrilineal economy to a levelling tendency within systems of accumulation. It would be useful to conduct a survey across a number of states to document the relative importance of these two contexts of witch-hunting.

### **References**

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony, 2005, *Identity and Ethics*, Cambridge, MA: *Harvard University Press*.
- Bailey, F. G., 1994, *A Witch-Hunt in an Indian Village: Or, the Triumph of Morality*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>9</sup> This section draws on Soma Chaudhuri (2008).

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue see Nathan et al. 2012. In a more general context, but one which is important for framing the debate on human rights and culture see Appiah (2005).



Bodding, Paul Olaf, 1979, 'Some Remarks on the Position of Women among the Santals,' in J. Troisi, ed, *The Santals*, Vol. 6, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute (mimeo).

Bosu-Mullick, Sanjay, 2000, 'Gender Relations and Witches among the Indigenous Communities of Jharkhand, India,' in *Gender, Technology and Development*, 4, 3: 333-358.

Chaudhuri, A. B., 1987, *The Santals, Religion and Rituals*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications.

Chaudhuri, Soma, 2008, *Tempest in a Tea Pot: Analysis of Contemporary Witch Hunts in the Tea Plantations of Bengal*, PH.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, [etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-07292008.../somawitchhunts.pdf](http://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-07292008.../somawitchhunts.pdf), last accessed 3-2-2014.

Dasgupta, Malabika, 2002, "Objective Functions in Economic Models of Decisions on Production; Evidence from Swiddeners in Tripura," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 (340: 3556 – 9).

Ensminger, Jean and Jack Knight, 1997 'Changing Social Norms: Common Property, Bridewealth and Clan Exogamy,' in *Current Anthropology*, 38, 1: 1-24.

Gaskill, Malcolm, 2010, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geschiere, Peter, 1997, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.

Geschiere, Peter, 1998, 'Globalization and Power of Indeterminate Meaning: Witchcraft and Spirit Cults in Africa and East Asia,' in *Development and Change*, 29: 811 – 837.

Holloway, Wendy, 1984, 'Gender Difference and the Production of Subjectivity,' in Henriques, J, Hollway, W., Venn, C., and Walkerdine, V. *Changing the Subject*, London: Methuen.

Kelkar, Govind, 2000, 'Witches: Asia,' in Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender, General Editors, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Women*, Volume 4: 2040 – 2043.

Kelkar, Govind and Dev Nathan, 1991, *Gender and Tribe: Women, Land and Forests in Jharkhand*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Kelkar, Govind, Dev Nathan and Rounaq Jahan, 2003, 'Redefining Women's 'Samman': Microcredit and Gender Relations in Rural Bangladesh,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 7, 2004, 3627 – 3640.

Mallick, Ata, 2008, 'Witch-hunting in 1857,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 27: 118-19.

Miguel, Edward, 2005, 'Poverty and Witch Killing,' in *The Review of Economic Studies*, 72, 4: 1153-1172.

Mishra, Archana, 2003, *Casting the Evil Eye: Witch Trials in Tribal India*, New Delhi: Roli Books.

Moore, Henrietta, 1994, 'The Problem of Explaining Violence in the Social Sciences,' in Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow, editors, *Sex and Violence: Issues in representation*

and experience, London: Routledge, 138-155.

Moore, Henrietta and Todd Sanders, 2001, editors, *Magical Interpretation, Material Realities, Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Post-colonial Africa*, London: Routledge.

Nathan, Dev, 1997, 'The Creation of Patriarchy in the Transition from Tribe to Caste,' in Dev Nathan, editor, *From Tribe to Caste: History and Anthropology*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

Nathan, Dev, 2005, 'Transforming the Economic Ethic,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jan. 27, 275-278.

Nathan, Dev and Govind Kelkar, 1997, 'Collective Villages in the Chinese Market,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 3 and 10, 951-963 and 1037-1047.

Nathan, Dev; Govind Kelkar, 2003, 'Civilizational Change: Markets and Privatisation among Indigenous Peoples,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 17: 1955-1968.

Nathan, Dev, Govind Kelkar, Yu Xiaogang, 1998, 'Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Struggles to Change Gender Relations,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 31: WS-58 – WS-69.

Noddings, Nel, 1989, *Women and Evil*, Berkeley: The University of California Press.

Partners for Law in Development, 2012, *Targeting of Women as Witches: Trends, Prevalence and the Law in Northern, Western, Eastern and Northeastern Regions of India*, pldindia.org, accessed 20-7-2013.

Partners for Law in Development, 2013, *Piecing Together Perspectives on Witch Hunting: A Review of Literature*, New Delhi: Partners for Law in Development.

Roy, Pamela, 1998, 'Sanctioned Violence: Development and Persecution of Women as Witches in South Bihar,' in *Development in Practice*, 8, 2: 136-147 Stewart, Pamela H., *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*.

Sinha, Shashank, 2007, 'Witch-hunts, Adivasis and the Uprising in Chotanagpur,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 12: 1672-1676.

Sinha, Shashank Shekhar, 2012, 'On Witch-hunting', *The Sunday Guardian*, November 3, 2012, [sacw.net/article3299.html](http://sacw.net/article3299.html), accessed 20-9-2013.

Stewart, Pamela and Andrew Strathern, 2004, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Annex  
Table 1: INCIDENCE OF KILLING (MURDER AND CULPABLE HOMICIDE) DUE TO  
WITCHCRAFT

States	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
ANDHRA PRADESH	20	23	38	25	75	26	33	23	27	26	29	24
ASSAM	3	1	1	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	5	1
BIHAR	1	1	4	0	1	11	0	0	2	2	0	13
CHHATTISGARH	16	4	14	11	9	10	8	15	6	8	17	8
GUJARAT	2	4	1	10	6	3	1	0	4	5	0	3
HARYANA	2	0	0	0	28	34	30	26	32	58	5	0
JAMMU & KASHMIR	1	0	0	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
JHARKHAND	22	28	19	0	26	30	50	52	37	15	36	26
KARNATAKA	0	0	0	14	0	0	0	1	1	1	77	0
MADHYA PRADESH	13	24	29	4	13	13	14	17	25	18	15	11
MAHARASHTRA	6	14	9	1	7	9	14	11	11	11	13	1
MEGHALAYA	0	0	0	22	1	0	0	3	1	2	3	0
ORISSA	30	39	26	0	25	36	28	23	36	34	41	32
PUNJAB	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
RAJASTHAN	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0
SIKKIM	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TAMIL NADU	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	0
TRIPURA	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	1
UTTAR PRADESH	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	0
WEST BENGAL	13	14	9	8	5	1	0	4	0	0	0	1
TOTAL STATES	129	153	151	114	197	188	179	176	186	182	242	121

**IHD WORKING PAPER SERIES  
(NEW SERIES)**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Title</b>
WP 04/2013	Dev Nathan, Govind Kelkar and Shivani Satija	Witches: Through Changing Contexts Women Remain the Target
WP 03/2013	Shivani Satija	Violence Against Women in Rural Bihar- A case of four villages
WP 02/2013	Sheila Bhalla	Behind the Post 1991 'Challenge to The Functional Efficiency of India's Established Statistical Institutions
WP 01/2013	Preet Rustagi, Dev Nathan, Amrita Datta and Ann George	Women and Work in South Asia: Changes and Challenges
WP 05/2012	Amrita Datta, Gerry Rodgers, Janine Rodgers and B.K.N. Singh	A Tale of Two Villages: Contrasts in Development in Bihar
WP 04/2012	Dev Nathan , Govind Kelkar and Shivani Satija	Witches: Through Changing Contexts Women Remain the Target
WP 04/2012	Janine Rodgers	Labour Force Participation in Rural Bihar: A Thirty-year Perspective based on Village Surveys
WP 03/2012	K.P. Kannan	How Inclusive is Inclusive Growth in India?
WP 02/2012	Sheila Bhalla	Notes on Land, Long Run Food Security and the Agrarian Crisis in India
WP 01/2012	Gerry Rodgers	Understanding Unequal Economic and Social Outcomes in Rural Bihar: The Importance of Caste, Class and Landholding
WP 03/2011	Dev Nathan and Sandip Sarkar	Global Inequality, Rising Powers and Labour Standards
WP 02/2011	Preet Rustagi and Rajini Menon	Gender Asset Gaps and Land Rights in the Context of the Asia-Pacific Region
WP 01/2011	D. Narasimha Reddy	NREGS and Indian Agriculture: Opportunities and Challenges
WP 03/2010	Gerry Rodgers and Janine Rodgers	Inclusion or Exclusion on the Periphery? Rural Bihar in India's Economic Growth
WP 02/2010	R Radhakrishna, C Ravi and B Sambhi Reddy	Can We Really Measure Poverty and Identify Poor When Poverty Encompasses Multiple Deprivations?

WP 01/2010	Alakh N. Sharma	Political Economy of Poverty in Bihar: Nature, Dimensions and Linkages
WP 03/2009	Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar	Markets, Technology and Agency: Indigenous People and Change
WP 02/2009	Aseem Prakash	Towards Understanding the Nature of Indian State and the Role of Middle Class
WP 01/2009	C Upendranadh and Rukmini Tankha	Institutional and Governance Challenges in the Social Protection: Designing Implementation Models for the Right to Work Programme in India
WP 06/2008	Dipak Mazumdar and Sandip Sarkar	The Employment Problem in India and the Phenomenon of the Missing Middle
WP 05/2008	Aseem Prakash	Social Conflict, Development and NGOs: An Ethnographic Study
WP 04/2008	Balwant Singh Mehta and Kerren Sherry	Wages and Productivity of Child Labour: A Case Study of Zardosi Industry
WP 03/2008	Sheila Bhalla	Scarce Land: The Cases of All India and West Bengal
WP 02/2008	T.S. Papola and R.P. Mamgain	Market Access to Small Primary Producers: A Study of Vegetable Growers in the Supply Chain
WP 01/2008	Preet Rustagi	Rural Child Labour Markets in India: Nature of Child Work Participation and Role of the Family
WP 03/2007	Alakh N Sharma	Flexibility, Employment and Labour Market Reforms in India
WP 02/2007	Preet Rustagi	Rural Child Work, Labour and Daily Practices: A Time Use Survey-based Analysis
WP 01/2007	R.P. Mamgain	Growth, Poverty and Employment in Uttarakhand
WP 04/2006	Sheila Bhalla	Common Issues and Common Concerns in the SAARC Region: Employment Generation and Poverty Reduction
WP 03/2006	Rajendra P. Mamgain and Balwant Singh Mehta	Employment and Earnings in Uttaranchal: Trends and Policy Issues
WP 02/2006	Preet Rustagi	Women and Poverty: Rural-Urban Dimensions
WP 01/2006	Dipak Mazumdar and Sandip Sarkar	Growth of Employment and Earnings in the Tertiary Sector, 1983-2000

