

‘Witch-Hunting’ among the Adivasis in three Northern Districts of West Bengal

Rajat Subhra Mukhopadhyay

Abstract: *The present paper gives an account of the still existing practice of witch-hunting found among the Adivasis in three districts of North Bengal, namely Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur. Based on interviews, case studies and other sets of supplementary data obtained from secondary sources, the paper examines the problem of witch-hunting among the Adivasis in the area from a gender perspective while recording the incidents of violence against women.*

Keywords: Witch, witch-hunting, evil eye, persecution of women, violence against women.

Introduction

The practice of killing people on the allegation of practising witchcraft is known as ‘witch-hunting’. Newspaper reports on ‘witch-hunting’ across the country are a clear testimony of violence against women. Today, witch-hunting is one of the least registered forms of gender violence where women are branded as witches (*dains*) and tortured. It is a superstitious belief that leads to the persecution and death of nearly two hundred women in India every year. Interestingly enough, the term ‘witch’ itself literally represents a ‘woman’ (*daini*) who is believed to have magical power, especially to do evil to others. It is the women who are identified as witches; men, too, are made the victims of this superstition, albeit much less in number. cannot be totally freed from this. Evans-Pritchard, a noted anthropologist, defined (1937) witchcraft as an ability to cast the evil eye that derives from an intrinsic quality of the evil doer that is not deliberate. It is purely a psychic act. He used the concept of ‘witchcraft’ as a belief in a mystical power innate in certain individuals and exercised by them to harm others. The witch is believed to be someone who, by employing her/his magical power and casting

an 'evil eye', can cause harm to men, women, children, cattle and even crops. A witch is believed to have the magical power to cause incurable illness and infertility. The witch-doctor (soothsayer) could hardly do anything to give any relief to a disease or ailment if caused by a witch. However, the witch-doctor is recognised as someone who can identify the person responsible for mischief and can prescribe the best way to counter it.

In local parlance, the witch is called a *daini/dan/dain/daain/churali*. It is believed that witches besides having caused acute sickness and pain, threaten a person's future health and enterprise. Witches are said to cause disease or any other calamity to an individual, a family or a whole village. Whenever there occurs any unnatural death either to any members of the community or to domestic animals, or on the occasion of natural disasters like drought, flood, famine, and so on, the tribals search for a 'witch' through whom the spirits might have cast their spell (Ghosh, 2005). The witch-doctor then identifies the witch and prescribes either banishment or killing.

Once a woman is declared a witch, vigorous actions are taken by the community members and co-villagers to punish her by stripping her naked, parading around the village; her hair is burnt off or her head tonsured, her face blackened, teeth pulled out so that she can no longer curse. The identified witches are whipped/ beaten with lethal weapons, sometimes forced to eat human excrement, and finally, they are put to death. A witch victim is often hanged, impaled, hacked, lynched or buried alive (Singh, 2011: 16). When these women are left to live, they are considered by the community men as inauspicious and harmful, and are compelled to lead a traumatised, secluded life. Witch-hunting in most cases constitutes an act of 'attempt to murder' and an extreme expression of violence against women in tribal society.

This paper aims to examine why mostly women are made the victims of this savage practice. The data for this paper have been collected through field visits in tribal villages, applying case study and interview methods on the survivors and the relatives of the victims. An attempt has been made to address the problem of 'witch-hunting' from a gender perspective, as a phenomenon of violence against women. The paper records the cases of atrocities against women who are branded as 'witches' in the pockets of three northern districts of West Bengal, namely, Malda, Uttar (North) Dinajpur and Dakshin (South) Dinajpur. The field visits were conducted between October and December 2014. The identified accused families were

interrogated, and their views were recorded. Local people and Panchayat members were also interviewed/ asked about the incidents. In some cases, the narratives of the victims were recorded in detail.

The Victims of Witch-Hunting

A. Malda District

Case 1

Sumi Murmu, a Santal woman of 35 years, was allegedly murdered by her brother-in-law and some others at Madhudanga village on suspicion that she was a witch and responsible for the illness of her brother-in-law's wife. Police exhumed the body from a field and determined that she had been murdered on January 22, 2002.

Sumi was missing since November 2001. On 4th December 2001, her husband lodged an FIR with the Gazole Police Station. But the police failed to trace her. Another FIR was lodged on 22 January. Police arrested a person whose name was mentioned in the complaint and learnt that he had killed Sumi and buried her body. The accused, along with eight others, had kidnapped Sumi and murdered her. His accompanied had fled the area.

Case 2

Sumi Tudu, a 55-year-old tribal woman, was killed after the villagers branded her a 'witch' at the Adivasi-dominated Dhamorgram village in Bamongola Police Station. Local people said that Sumi's kin, Janata Hembram and his wife, Dipali, had no issue even years after their marriage. A local *Janguru* (witch doctor) told the couple that Dipali was not conceiving due to the evil eye of Sumi, a suspected witch. Janata and a few others then informed Sumi's son Tala that they would kill his mother. Surprisingly, even Tala did not try to save his mother. As a result, Sumi was hacked to death on March 4, 2005, allegedly by her kinsmen and a section of villagers. Police arrested Janata, his wife and Tala for their alleged involvement in witch-killing and for the charge of murder of Sumi Tudu.

Case 3

Raima Tudu, a 66-year-old Santal woman branded as a witch, was hacked to death on Feb. 2, 2008, late at night. Raima was alone when her house was raided. She was murdered in her home at Borobari village under the

Raiganj-1 Gram Panchayat in the Gazole police station. According to the local opinion, she was killed by her two stepsons and close neighbours.

The body of Raima was recovered from the courtyard with marks of deep wounds. Her fingers were chopped off, and wounds were found on her private parts. She was ostracised by the villagers and her two stepsons when some children became sick. She was also threatened with leaving her home. The tribal women who had a son and a daughter of their own also owned one acre of land and a house on a two-*cottah* (3.2 decimal) homestead plot.

It was further learnt from the people of the area that after the death of a few people within a short span in the village, the village *matadors* (elders) had contacted a witch-doctor (*janguru*) in Bihar who held Raima's 'evil spirit' responsible for the death. Afterwards, a *Salishi Sabha* (kangaroo court) was held where a unanimous decision was taken to kill her. Surprisingly enough, Raima had been called a witch five years earlier as well. Other villagers had been boycotting her for the last five years.

According to the police, there was a strong reason to believe that her two stepsons and a section of villagers had been eying her property. As a result, she was brutally murdered. In the complaint the local police station received from Ganesh Soren, a close relative of Raima, nobody had been named in the FIR for killing the woman. However, a case of investigation was ordered officially.

Case 4

Jare Murmu (50), a Santal migrant labourer, after being branded a witch-man, was beheaded allegedly by his daughter Srimati Tudu and son-in-law Lakshmiram Tudu at Arjuntola village under Malda police station at night on December 6, 2011. The severed head was taken around 1.5km from the place where the Jare was beheaded. The duo, however, handed themselves over to the police. At the time of surrender, "they looked composed, seemingly having no qualms after having committed the murder", a senior district police officer said.

The local people said that Srimati had been suffering from some gynaecological disease for a long time. When the treatment that was being done by a quack yielded no result, the couple consulted a *Janguru* (soothsayer) at Kamalpur. The *Janguru* branded Jare as a wizard and told

them that the evil spell being cast by him was coming in the way of the Srimati's recovery. They had turned them hostile towards Jare. Srimati, her husband and brother (Nirmati) had gone to Jare's house at night. The next morning, the beheaded body was found lying beside a village pond. His body was found tied with a rope, and his head seemed to have been severed with a sharp weapon (*hausa*). The DSP, Malda, reported that the trio had been arrested and a case of murder had been initiated against the accused.

Uttar Dinajpur District

Case 5

Two Santal women, namely Chameli Soren (14) and Phoolmoni Hasda (44), were brutally murdered for their alleged involvement in witchcraft. Using daggers and scimitars, the residents of Agabahar village under Raiganj Police station murdered both of them, suspected of being witches, and dumped their bodies in a nearby bamboo grove. After the killings, the residents fled the area.

Two earlier deaths had set off the witch hunts, which ended in the murder of Chameli and Phoolmani. The deaths of two persons in consecutive days due to cancer and asthma made the Adivasis suspicious that there was a witch in the area.

At a meeting on April 2, 2012, the residents of the village suspected two poor women as witches and decided to kill both of them. The next day (3.4.12), when many of the villagers were at a fair in Bindol, at around 8 p.m., the perpetrators armed themselves with lethal weapons and went to kill them. At the time of the operation, no one tried to rescue the women branded as witches. The deceased's families lodged a complaint in the nearby Thana (PS). After the incidents, tension prevailed among the residents of tribal (Adivasi) villages. In most of the villages, mainly the male residents left their homes and took shelter elsewhere. A large contingent of police arrived in the village as soon as they heard about the incident.

Case 6

Laxmi Hansda (65), a Santal woman of 50 years of age, was beaten to death by a group of local people on March 29, 2003, in Borogonda village in Raiganj police station. Laxmi was accused of practising witchcraft.

As per information from the residents, the younger brother of Laxmi's husband, Sufal Hansda (55) of the same village, had been suffering from tuberculosis for years. Instead of admitting him to the hospital, his family members called a few *ojhas*. When his condition deteriorated further, a *janguru* was contacted and who gave a verdict that Sufal's suffering was due to Laxmi, who was a witch casting her evil eye on Sufal. So, initially, Sufal's family members kept her confined in their house. Further, a kangaroo court gave a judgment that till Sufal survives, Laxmi has to remain convicted in her house. And if Sufal dies, she would be beaten to death. Following Sufal's death, three of his sons and some agitated villagers turned up at Laxmi's house and axed her to death. No immediate arrest had been made since the suspected persons had all fled.

Case 7

Sima Hembram, a 50-year-old Santal woman, was hacked to death by a few villagers at around 8 p.m. on December 21, 2014. She was a resident of Sahapur village of Raiganj police station. Villagers attacked the woman, branding her a witch.

One of the sons of the deceased Sima told Subho Mardi, a villager died of some disease fifteen days back. His brother, Surgeon Mardi, met a *janguru* in this connection. The *janguru* said that my mother is responsible for Murdi's death. He announced in the village that my mother is a witch. A section of villagers raided our house at night. They took my mother to a field around 500 meters away from our house. They forced her to consume liquor and killed her using a spade. The people involved in the murder also consumed liquor. They were all thoroughly intoxicated when they killed my mother. Later, Surgeon Mardi was arrested for the murder of Sima in support of a few others. The local police were, however, clueless about identifying the particular reason behind the murder of this Adivasi woman.

Case 8

Khukibala Oraon (42), a resident of the Gandhabari area of Chopra police station, was branded as a witch by the villagers. She was stoned, beaten and then hacked to death on November 20, 2014. The police rescued the severely injured and nearly dead Khukibala and admitted her to North Bengal Medical College, where she did not survive.

Khukibala was a tea plantation labourer in the area and used to stay with her husband and son. On the night of 20th November, when she was engaged

in cooking, a section of residents raided her house. She was beaten mercilessly with iron rods and stones out of a suspect that she was suspected of having cast an evil spell in the area. Out of which in every year, three or four people die due to illness, and many people are found in an ailing condition. The police filed a case of murder against 29 people from the area, but failed to ascertain the actual reason behind the murder.

Dakshin Dinajpur District

Case 9

Turki Soren, a Santal woman of 45 years, was brutally killed in her sleep on September 26, 2002, by her kinsmen at Langrapir village under Bansihari police station. Her husband was severely injured in the incident. The armed attackers who slashed her throat with a sharp weapon. Among the prime perpetrators were Turki's elder brother and brother-in-law (sister's husband) and who confessed their alleged involvement in this murder to the police.

According to the local sources, many of Turki's family members and kin were getting sick quite frequently, and a few were suffering from acute diseases. So, some of the family members convened a meeting and invited a *janguru* for his opinion. In the said meeting, the Janguru suspected Turki as a 'witch' and the cause behind all such illnesses and sufferings of her family members. In the meeting, a collective decision was taken to kill Turki immediately. Police arrested six suspected family members of Turki who were involved in this murder and were in search of the Janguru from Bamangola, who was absconding.

Cases of survivors of witch-hunting

Malda District

Case 1

The Englishbazar police saved the 40-year-old tribal woman Bishakha Pahari from being burnt alive. She was the CPI (M) activist and former Upa-Pradhan (vice-president) of Englishbazar Gram Panchayat for five years.

Villagers accused Bisakha of robbing two girls of their voices using black magic. A meeting was held on August 5, 2003 at night in an adjacent village

to confirm the identity of the witch. The villagers conducted a ritual for this purpose that involved animal sacrifices. At the end of the ritual, the *Janguru* identified Bisakhas as the person responsible for the girls' plight. It was then decided that she and her family would have to pay the price with their lives. They had also planned to murder her husband and daughters.

The villagers cornered Bisakha and started beating her. The panic-stricken Bisakha fled and took shelter in the house of a mango trader named Ashok Chowdhury. Meanwhile, a police team, on being informed, arrived from Englishbazar P.S. The policemen rescued her and were about to take her away in their jeep when the agitated villagers pounced on them and forcibly took her away. Reinforcements soon arrived and freed her from the clutches of the mob. Had it not been for police intervention in time, Bisakha would have been burnt at the stake.

Bisakha, however, alleged that certain people had been plotting to accuse her of witchcraft since she was in the position of Upa-Pradhan of the Panchayat. Some of them were so vindictive that they planned to wipe out the whole family. She said that the villagers turned barbaric at the instigation of the then Panchayat Pradhan Minati Pahari. In the given situation, Bisakha thought that it would not be safe for her to stay in the village any longer.

It was reported that the sorcerer (witch-doctor) of the village, Sobha Pahari, was said to be under a magic spell at night, and it was she who declared that the girls' voices had been stolen by Bisakha. The villager apparently got agitated when the Janguru put a warning that all the villagers would lose the power to speak if Bisakha continues to stay in the village.

The scared and angry villagers rushed to her house and dragged Bisakha, her husband Bhadru Pahari and three daughters out of their house. The witch-doctor then pronounced her 'death sentence' and asked the assembled mob to carry out the hunting operation. The police, however, arrived at the spot in time and rescued them. They also lodged a case against seven of the accused involved in this case.

Case 2

Sukumar Kisku and his wife Budhia, both above 60 years, had been dubbed witches by their neighbours in Srikrishnapur village under Habibpur *thana* (P.S.) and were in danger of being lynched. They were rescued by the

police and taken to safe custody on January 26, 2008.

According to the information available from local sources, Sukumar's younger brother Hepna had a three-year-old daughter, Saheli, who died recently. Hepna and his family started suspecting that Sukumar and his wife might have cast a magic spell on Saheli to kill her. That suspicion got strong as Sukumar had returned from his brother's house a few days before Saheli's death, and where he reportedly said that 'her days were numbered'.

The girl's subsequent death made them believe more firmly that it was Sukumar and his wife who had used witchcraft against her. To confirm the matter, Saheli's family went to a soothsayer (witch-doctor) in Bihar. The sorcerer 'confirmed' the old couple's hand behind this death. He also foresaw more deaths in the village in the near future if the couple were allowed to remain alive.

After the family returned to Srikrishnapur, a meeting was held in the presence of the village head, Upen Kisku. In the meeting, it was decided that the couple should either leave the village or be killed. The villagers also slapped a fine of Rs 6000 on the couple as reimbursement for the money Hepna and his family had spent to visit the Janguru in Bihar. Sukumar and his wife, who were also present at the meeting, contested the decision and refused to pay any fine.

The couple who had one son, two minor daughters and some agricultural land argued that Hopna and some of his close co-villagers were alleging them as witches to grab their landed property. The couple further, however, further made it clear that under no circumstances would they leave the village. Local Panchayat Pradhan Sukumar Soren too said the charges of witchcraft were just a case of getting up. The persons involved in this matter were mainly interested in the 15 Bighas of land that Sukumar possesses. He also informed the police about the incident.

A police team arrived in the village from Habibpur Thana on 26.01.2008 and took the alleged ageing couple into custody. The police said that they could act immediately because they got the information on time. The law enforcers would later try to rehabilitate the couple at their village, who were at that time staying at the local police station.

Case 3

On October 27, 2008, the Englishbazar Thana rescued three tribal people, namely Nagen Pahari, Rabi Pahari and Santi Pahari, from the clutches of a group of local people at Kotwali Gram Panchyat (G.P.) who had hatched a plan to kill them, branding them 'witch'.

According to information available from local sources, Buli Pahari, the wife of Sitesh Pahari, a resident of Paharipara of Kotwali G.P., died a year back. Since then, the villagers had been trying hard to find out the reason behind the death. They did not take the incident lightly. A team from the village, headed by Sitiesh Pahari, left for North Dinajpur on 25.10.08 to consult with one Bishnu, a Janguru and a resident of Hatimari village near Raiganj. He branded Nagen Pahari as a witch and made him responsible for all the evils. The villagers' suspicion against the family further grew as another woman died of snakebite in the village in the meantime.

On 27th October, 2008, the irate villagers collectively mounted an attack on the residence of Narendra, Rabi and Santi with an intention to kill them. However, the self-proclaimed leader of the village, Lalu Pahari, somehow restrained them and decided to arrange a reconciliation meeting immediately. Police had to encounter the villagers' wrath when the team arrived to rescue the helpless three Adivasi persons.

Case 4

A Santal woman, Jhumri Mardi (50), was living with her two sons, Som Soren and Dhuliram Soren, in Burunagar village under Habibpur police station. Her husband, Mantu Soren, stayed in North India most of the time as a migrant labourer. She had three *bighas* (one acre) of land, which she used to cultivate for her sustenance. On which many, including her two sons, had their eyes.

Earlier, and about two years back, Jhumri was labelled 'witch' by some villagers. So she had to leave her village and started living with a relative at Kadirpur village, leaving her sons behind. However, she was in touch with her sons. Of late, Soneka, her 4-year-old granddaughter, came to stay with her for a few days. Soneka suddenly died while going to a field. The doctor claimed the child died of a snake bite. However, Jhumri's son Som held his mother's 'evil eye' responsible for his daughter's death.

Som began to gather the opinion of the villagers regarding her mother's evil

eye. On September 11, 2011, a group of villagers led by Jhumri's sons planned to kill her. But the news reached Habibpur Thana in time. Police raided the village at night and rescued Jhumri before being lynched as a 'witch'. She was initially taken to the police station and later to the Social Welfare Home at Malda.

Case 5

Hoponmoyee Murmu, a Santal woman of 62 years, has been living in poverty in Himsim village in Babupur Gram Panchayat under Gazole Thana. She has lived in a thatched hut alone for 15 years since her husband died. She has no children, no source of income and isn't on the BPL list.

Hoponmayee's brother-in-law, Duluj Baske, lives nearby with his family. His wife, Sajli Soren, has been suffering from fever for the last few days. Treatment by quacks hasn't cured her. Dulujis' relatives got involved in spreading a rumour that Sajli was under a witch's spell. They suspected Hoponmoyee as the witch. A kangaroo court was held in the village on 4th November, 2012. It was resolved that a team of villagers would visit a witch doctor in Jharkhand, and Hoponmayee, as the prime suspect, would have to bear the travel and other expenses involved in this job. The poor widow expressed her inability and refused to bear the cost. Hoponmayee said- 'I couldn't bear the expenses, and the very intention was clear. If I had gone there, they would have declared me a witch and killed me on the spot'. She alleged that a group of her neighbours has been eyeing her hut and on small plot of agricultural land.

Meanwhile, the infuriated villagers started campaigning against and were allegedly planning to kill Hoponmayee. Getting this smell on the night of 8th November, she, with the help of a neighbour, fled to Gazole Thana. Since then, she has not been able to return home and has been kept by the police in one of her relatives' houses at Gazole.

Case 6

Amti Murmu (65), a tribal woman from Dogachhi village in the Gazole police station, became scarred for life after her kin branded her a witch and sought refuge in the police station on February 17, 2014. She alleged that her grandson and his friends might kill her, acting on the diktat from a *janguru*.

According to a police source, Amti, the second wife of Mohan Mardi, was

subjected to ill-treatment by the son of Mohan's first wife and others. They alleged that she was exercising an evil spell, making others in the family fall mentally ill. Later, they went to a *janguru* at Alanpur village of Majhra gram Panchayat, and the witch doctor branded Amti a witch. He suggested she be bumped off to rid the family of the evil spell.

Local Thana and members of Raniganj-II Gram Panchayat were said to have summoned the accused in a bid to resolve the case. But the woman, far from assured, decided not to go back to her home. She was in fear that her alleged grandson and his peers, despite their confession to the police, would not leave her in peace and would try again to kill her. They were after the land bequeathed to Amti by her late husband. She alleged that, as she is refusing to transfer the five *bighas* of land to them, they were bent on burning her to death by spreading concocted stories. She asked the police and the administration to accommodate her in a government-run home.

Case 7

Chhotka Hansda and his wife Jaba Kisku, an aged Adivasi couple of Railpara village under Old Malda Thana, had fled their village, claiming the woman was branded a witch by villagers and that they failed to pay a penalty of Rs 10,000 set by the villagers. The incident took place on March 20, 2014.

The couple told the BDO of Old Malda block that they were branded as witches by a kangaroo court. They were blamed for the illness of some residents of the village. The couple, along with their two sons, Felu Hansda (19) and Balak Hansda (15), work in their own agricultural land, and their income is not sufficient even to run the family. So, it was beyond their capacity to pay the fine charged by the court. Chhotka Hansda alleged that after he had failed to comply with the verdict of the kangaroo court, he was physically assaulted and his teeth broken. Sensing a threat to their life, the couple fled from the village and sought refuge with their relatives at Madhaipur village under the same Block.

Case 8

Villagers of Sitaltola village of Raniganj Gram Panchayat in Gazole Police Station moved a 60-year-old Panda Mardi out of the village, branding him as a black magic practitioner. The helpless Panda and his wife lodged a police complaint on October 27, 2014, claiming that his two brothers and nephew attempted to kill him. They also ransacked his house. Police source

informed that Panda and his wife, Mangku Tudu (55), were attacked by former's brother Shyam Mardy, nephew Suniram Mardy and cousin Amin Mardy at night on October 26, 2014. Panda's four daughters are married, and his only son, Bablu, works as a migrant labourer.

For a few months, some members of Panda's family fell sick one after another. Shyam, Suniram and others suspected that Panda had cast a magical spell on the family. They even consulted a *janguru* from South Dinajpur who ratified their suspicion. Panda and his wife were asked to leave the village. As the couple did not comply, his kin members ransacked their home and roughed up the aged couple as well. Scared of being killed, the couple rushed to Gazole Thana and sought help from the police. They were there till the morning. The Panchayat Samiti President of Gazole and the local police assured them of their safety and security.

Uttar Dinajpur District

Case 9

Fulmoni Soren (50), a Santal widow, was living with her daughter in Paschim Mohanpur village under Raiganj Police Station. She was rescued from a group of villagers who had branded her as a witch, had planned to kill her.

According to information available from local people, Fulmoni had reportedly filed a case against neighbours Kalpana Murmu and her husband, Some Mardi, in 2003. A few days back, Kalpana had called on Fulmoni to request her to withdraw the case against them, but Fulmoni had refused to do so. After returning home, Kalpana reportedly had a fever. A section of villagers suspected Fulmoni's role behind it. They took her to a *Janguru* and who branded Fulmani a witch. A meeting was then held, and she was fined Rs 5000. Since the Fulmoni did not pay the fine, the villagers kept her confined to her house for hours. Tipped off by a relative of Fulmoni, she was rescued by the police on July 14, 2005 and who took her in their custody. She was scared of returning to her village. Police suspected that the brother-in-law of Fulmoni Bistu Tudu might have played a leading role in the whole incident to evict her from her homestead land. He, along with a few others, had been absconding since the incident took place, and there was an attempt to murder Fulmoni.

Case 10

Police rescued Maloti Oraon, a tribal woman, from the hands of some villagers, who had branded her a 'witch' and were deliberating to kill her on March 11, 2006. The incident took place at the Jhati Basti village of Panjipara under Goalpokhar Police Station.

It was learnt that one Binoy Mardi of Panjipara, working as a wage labourer in Delhi, had been suffering from chest pain for quite some time. But reportedly, when he returned to Panjipara, his native place, the pain in his chest increased to an unbearable level. Some villagers brought him to *Janguru* at Khagra village in the Kishanganj district of Bihar, where Binoy was declared to be under the spell of a witch (*phukseen*).

Consequently, the villagers held a meeting, in which they branded Maloti as the witch, who used to live close to Binoy's house. The villagers assembled at Maloti's house with lethal weapons. But a few residents informed the police about the matter. The police immediately rushed to the spot and rescued Maloti from the grip of the agitated villagers. Some of the villagers who tried to intercept the police were arrested. The local Thana also explored the possibility of rehabilitating Maloti in the village.

Case 11

Branded as a witch and on the verge of getting lynched, Reba Murmu of Dhalgaon, an Adivasi-dominated village under Raiganj Thana, narrowly escaped death on September 6, 2009, at night. Failing to lay their hands on the woman, the hackers took away a pair of cows from her house.

It is learnt that three people, including two women, died of various illnesses in the village in the last couple of months or so. Shaken by the frequent deaths, some of the Dhalgaon residents consulted a *Janguru* from Kishanganj. He branded Reba as the witch responsible for the deaths. Deciding to do away with the evil spirit, the villagers attacked Reba's house but failed to find her. Reba's husband, Barial Hembram, alleged that a section of villagers raided his house armed with scimitars and bows to kill his wife. When Reba fled, failing to locate Reba, they damaged the house. Fearing retribution, the other villagers did not come forward to help them. So, Reba complained to the Raiganj police on 7th September, 2009. Police attempted to arrest the persons behind the attack on Reba.

Dakshin Dinajpur District

Case 12

Police rescued an Adivasi minor girl, Rina Soren, on April 27, 2011, from the clutches of some villagers who were out to kill her after branding her a witch. The incident took place at the tribal dominated Bhadarpur village under Jahangir Gram Panchayat near Gangarampur Police Station.

According to local sources, a section of villagers assembled to discuss the recurrence of the ailment among the residents. They pronounced Rina a witch in the presence of her mother and started beating her. Police intervened at the proper time and rescued the girl. She was taken into safe custody by the police. However, no one was arrested in connection with this incident. The villagers said that two people had been suffering from chronic disease for some time. Their condition kept worsening, and the medicines had no effect. In the meantime, a ten-year-old girl, Minu Tudu, fell seriously ill and had to be admitted to the Gangarampur hospital. Her parents, Mafian Tudu and Sonali Hembram, first branded Rina as a witch. They physically abused her in the last week.

The situation turned critical when the village congregation pronounced Rina a witch collectively and decided to kill her. When the mob was physically assaulting the girl, a villager informed the police. When the police tried to dissuade the villagers, they chased away the police team. A large contingent of the police force arrived sometime later to find out the culprits involved in this operation. Sanjib Soren, the brother of the victim, said that they had pleaded with the villagers to leave Rina, who has been accused baselessly.

Why are Women made Witches?

Tables and case studies furnished in the preceding sections and in the Appendix clearly reveal a greater vulnerability of tribal women to witchcraft accusations and lethal attacks, through such aggression occasionally includes other family members (including males). It is quite interesting that the tribals (mostly Santals) attach any unnatural mishap like death, draught, infertility, etc., to some imprecatory of evil spirits (*phuksin*) and search for a witch through whom a spirit casts its spell. They often detect a woman who is believed to possess such a spirit. Even a section of educated tribals still has faith in such superstitions, like the existence of witches and the power of

‘evil eye’.

Ashwini Soren, an itinerant Santal intellectual, explains that Santal animism includes good and evil ‘spirits’; there is no provision under Santal jurisprudence for killing a ‘witch’. He says, ‘you have not seen Durga, but you believe in her. Similarly, we have not seen a *phuksin*, but we know it exists. And the most we try to do is purge the person possessed’ (Chakraborty and Chatterjee 1999:1). So, once a woman with evil eye is detected, the help of the village community is sought since a witch is considered to be a very dangerous public menace, an enemy to humanity. As a result, a person like Moni Tudu, a 50-year-old Santal widow of Saharpur village in Gazole Block of Malda, became a witch and was killed by her fellow villagers on November 30, 1998. And out of such a belief in evil eye, about 189 suspected witches were killed in Malda district alone during the period between 1988 and 1999.

In the region under study, witch-hunting is prevalent overwhelmingly as a gender-based targeting of women in tribal society, although there are a few cases where men too have been accused of being a witch. More frequently, however, men became ‘secondary victims’ while defending their wives or daughters and when they got targeted as witches. For instance, Chhotka Hansda and his wife Jaba Kisku (two aged couples) from the Old Malda Block have fled their village, claiming Jaba was branded a witch by the villagers and that they failed to pay a penalty of Rs. 10,000 set by the villagers. Chhotka alleged that after he had failed to comply with the verdict of the kangaroo court, he was physically assaulted and had his teeth broken. The incident took place on March 19, 2014.

The field data reveal that women are most lightly targeted as a witch and normally fall in the age group between 40-70 years. The gender based disaggregated data show that among the 25 identified witch victims, who were dragged to death, 23 (92%) were women. In the case of the survivors of witch-hunting, there was a similar trend. By marital status, the majority of victims were identified as widows. All of them came from poor but varied economic conditions.

The instigators of witch-hunting were largely those who were close to victims- either a kinsman, neighbour or immediate community. In most cases of witch-hunting, kinsmen were detected as primary instigators and/or supporters of witch-hunters, as observed in the following cases.

1. On August 28, 2000, one Rashina Mardi under Gazole thana sought police protection, saying that she is being branded by one of her relatives as a witch and he attempted to kill her.
2. A Santal woman, Sumi Murmu (35), under the same police station, was allegedly murdered on December 4, 2001, by her brother-in-law and some others at Madhudanga village on suspicion that she was a 'witch' and responsible for the illness of her brother-in-law's wife.
3. On May 16, 2006, Puja Mardi, a widow of 55 years, was beaten to death by her family members after being labelled a suspected witch at the Bujuvia village under the Gazole police station.
4. Amita Murmu (65) is scared for life after her kinsman branded her a witch in Dogachhi village of Gazole. She sought refuge in the police station on February 17, 2014. She said her grandson and his friends might kill her, acting on the diktat from a *janguru* (witch-doctor).

It has been observed that the women who are lonely, economically weak, elderly widows or spinsters, who are less or unhappy in conjugal life, are often targeted and victimised as suspected witches. The following cases may be cited in support of that.

1. Fulmoni Soren (50), a widow, was living in an Adivasi village under Raiganj police station of Uttar Dinajpur district with her daughter. She was rescued by the police on July 14, 2005, from a group of villagers, who, having branded her as a witch, had planned to kill her.
2. Munni Mardi, a 60-year-old Santal woman, was hacked to death on suspicion of practising witchcraft at Mali village in Malda police station at around 1.30 a.m. on May 25, 2003.
3. Hoponmayee Murmu (62), a widow, has been branded a witch and rescued by the Gazole police on November 11, 2012. She has been living in abject poverty in Himsim village of Babupur Gram Panchayat in a thatched hut alone for the last 15 years, since her husband died. She has no children and no source of income.

While superstition and witch doctors (*janguru*) play a role in witch-hunting, the field data indicate more complex counter-narratives, offering accounts of material gain, jealousies and inter-personal conflict. On this question, Evans-Pritchard long back noted that beliefs about witchcraft are linked with misfortune, jealousy and rivalry and that these beliefs can be regarded as an expression of conflict (1937: 77-117).

Economic interests like grabbing property and land (Ghosh and Bondyopadhyay 1988), socio-political interests like defaming one, wresting power from other competitors, or just to wipe away an immediate rival; the charges of witch accusation are being framed and often executed in consultation with the *Jangurus*. A closer look reveals that most often, behind the façade of witchcraft accusations, there is a more sinister design. The vested interest of the persons accusing the ‘witch’ generally surfaces in the form of personal enmity or the desire to usurp the victim’s property and other divisive issues.

It is thus evident that the causes of witch-hunting cannot be simply located in the irrational belief in ‘witch-craft’, but in some other surrounding facts that are of public interest or political importance. In many cases, the greedy relatives, with an eye on the victim’s property, who try to pass themselves off as a witch and ultimately murder her at the opportune moment. The following cases may certainly support that logic.

1. On August 6, 2003, the Englishbazar police in the Malda district saved the 40-year-old Bisakha Pahari from being burned alive, in charge accused of practising witchcraft. The villagers had hatched a plot to kill Bisakha, a CPI (M) activist and former Upa-Pradhan (Vice-president) of Englishbazar Gram Panchayat. Villagers accused her of robbing two girls of their voices using black magic. Bisakha, however, denied the charges. She alleged that the villagers turned barbaric at the instigation of the present Panchayat Pradhan (President), Minati Pahari, who had been plotting to accuse her of witchcraft since she got the position of an Upa-Pradhan.
2. A 66-year-old Raimat Tudu, branded as a witch, had been hacked to death in Gazole village of Malda, allegedly by her stepsons and a few neighbours on February 2, 2008. From prima facie, there was a strong reason to believe that her two stepsons and a section of villagers had been eying her property, which includes three *bighas*

(one acre) of agricultural land and a house on a two-*cottah* (2.30 decimal) plot. The victim had a son and a daughter of her own.

3. It was on August 27, 2006, that the residents of Babanbari village under Chakulia police station of Uttar Dinajpur district branded a Santal widow, Manju Hembram and two others, Mangal Murmu and his wife Saniya Soren, as witches, and allegedly conspired to kill them. Local people informed that Manju's husband, Kanu Hembram, suddenly died after falling ill a few months back. The villagers immediately started to blame Manju for her husband's death. Under the leadership of Bochan Soren, the elder brother of the deceased Kanu, along with some residents of the village, allegedly branded the trio and conspired to kill them. Some villagers complained that Bochan Soren branded the three as witches because of a personal enmity.
4. At Sukandighi in Malda district on August 4, 1993, six persons (four women and two men) were killed as witches. Four were the members of one family. A report in *The Statesman* (August 8, 1993) says, 'On the surface, it appears to be an open-and-shut case: illiterate, superstitious tribals get drunk and then, in an attempt to ward off evil spirits, brand six people 'witches' and hacked them to death. Extensive interviews with villagers, old-timers and the relatives of those killed reveal that beyond the gruesome episode that wrecked this village on that night, lies a web of rural politics and personal feud.

A suspected woman allegedly involved in witchcraft practices is often socially ostracised, and even her close kinsmen or family members refuse to help, support or contact her, leaving the ill-fated lady to the mercy of witch-hunters. Many of them suffer from depression and other mental illnesses due to their expulsion from the immediate community. Some illustrations in this respect are given below.

1. Sumi Tudu (55) was killed on March 4, 2015, after the villagers branded her a witch at the tribal dominated Dhamorgam village under Bamongola thana in Malda district. It was learnt that her family members, Janata Hembram and his wife Dipali Hansda, had no issue since their marriage. A local *janguru* said that Dipali was not conceiving due to the casting of the evil eye by Sumi, a

- suspected witch. Janata and a few others then informed Sumi's son, Tala Hembram, about the matter. Even Tala did not do anything to save his mother. Ultimately, Sumi was hacked to death, allegedly by the villagers in support of her family members.
2. Raima Tudu, a 65-year-old Santal woman under the Gazole police station, was brutally murdered by a group of locals suspecting her a witch. Raima was ostracised by the villagers when some children in the village became sick within a span of a few days. She was threatened to leave the village before she was killed. Nobody came forward to save her life.
 3. One Ratan Turi, a resident of Sitagram village, had complained to the Raiganj police station, dated 6. 8. 2004, alleging that some villagers have started boycotting him and his wife Sonia Turi, suspecting them to be witches. He further alleged that the villagers were conspiring to kill them and asking them to leave the village immediately.

It is to be noted that sometimes not only the suspected witch but all the members of her family are forced to leave the village and settle elsewhere. That destroys the family socially as well as economically. The family also lost social honour and dignity. Often, the vacant house of the family is burnt to ashes.

The above-noted experiences and encounters of the tribal women with the witch-hunting practices make a point certain that any one of them and at any time could be branded a witch and persecuted. That is a great threat to the women of the tribal community and a unique expression of gender-based violence in *Adivasi* society. Victimisation of women by branding them as witches is a clear case of violation of human rights to survive. So, there is a need to look for an answer that – why women largely remain as the main victims of witch-hunting?

In the field, we looked for some possible answers to the question of 'why women are identified as the main targets of witch-hunting?' But unfortunately, the majority of the respondents (mostly tribals) failed to offer any satisfactory answer to this particular 'question'. They said that they could not think of any reason why the women were singled out as suspected witches than men. But all they admitted was that women were more liable to witchcraft,

even when the reasons for it were not all that clear to them. And for which we have to look for some other recourse.

Conclusion

Violence against women has been a subject of considerable importance in contemporary sociological studies. A large number of studies have been conducted on this particular topic, and a quite extensive literature is available on it. Witch-hunting is a legacy of violence against women in our society in general and tribal society in particular. Even then, we do not have much empirical data on the witchcraft-related femicides in our country.

The present study was a preliminary attempt to explore the problem of gender-based violence in tribal (*adivasi*) society with special reference to witch-hunting. The aim was to record and examine the femicidal violence associated with witchcraft accusations in the region through interviews and case studies. It was an attempt to enquire into the trends of witch-hunting practices among the tribals of the study area and to identify the complex conditions and causes that help perpetuate those practices.

This research was not a conventional study on witch-hunting. Nor aimed to offer any answer to the question- 'how to combat witch-hunting', a point which has a policy implication. The study, therefore, does not offer any suggestions or recommendations. The study mainly provides some insights into witchcraft accusations and witch femicides in the *adivasi* society in parts of northern West Bengal. The three northern districts of West Bengal under the coverage of the present study were namely Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur.

Witchcraft is the supposed power of a person to harm another by occult or supernatural means. The term witch (*dains/dayan*) literally represents a woman who is believed to have such powers to do evil to others. Witch-hunt is the process of prosecution or execution of a witch, often involving mass attack and lynching.

The findings of this study reveal a great vulnerability of women in the age group between 40-70 years to witchcraft accusations and lethal attacks. Among the 25 incidents of witch-killing in the region under study during 2000-2015, 92 per cent victims were women. In the case of the survivors

of witch-hunting, there was a similar trend. Normally poor, the elderly and widows were identified as the main targets of witch-hunting. It has been observed that the women who are alone/lonely, economically weak, spinsters, issueless or lead an unhappy conjugal life often get victimised as suspected witches.

While superstition and witch doctors (*jangurus*) play a role behind witch-hunting, the field data indicate more complex counter-narratives, offering accounts of material gain, jealousies and interpersonal conflict. A closer look reveals that most often, behind the façade of witch-hunting, there is a more sinister design. The vested interest of the person accusing generally surfaces in the form of personal enmity or the desire to usurp the victim's property, or other divisive issues. Over time, the motives and patterns of persecution of suspected witches have also changed. The *jangurus* can be purchased and bribed, the witch may be acquitted of death if she pays a fat fine.

A tribal woman with suspected involvement in witchcraft often faces ostracism. Even her close kinsmen refuse to help, support or contact her. Once a woman is detected /identified as a witch, stern action is taken against her. The community members and villagers punished her by stripping stripped naked and forcing her to walk through the paths of the village to denounce her socially or by applying many other cruel methods. Finally, they are put to death. At the time of such operations, the villagers often take part in assaulting the branded *daini* or keep mum and avoid interfering in the matter.

From all practical considerations, witch-hunting in most cases constitutes an 'attempt to murder'. It is an example of an extreme form of gender-based violence that prevails in tribal society. The existing anti-witch-hunting laws have hardly succeeded in curbing the menace of the age-old practice. Even today, any *Adivasi* woman in the region can be branded a *daini/ dain* (witch) at any time and persecuted. Such a victimisation of women in the name of witchcraft is a clear case of 'violation of human rights' in the *Adivasi* society.

Note

This paper is an outcome of a field study conducted in three northern Districts of West Bengal during October to December 2014. It was a part of a minor

research project undertaken in the thrust area of 'Development of North Bengal' and approved by UGC under the SAP (DSR-II) scheme 2013-18. The author duly acknowledges the kind financial support received from UGC.

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APPENDIX**Table 1: List* of detected persons killed in witch-hunting in the Malda district**

Sl. No.	Date of killing	Name of the Victim	Sex	Age	Place of incident: Police Station & Village
01.	17.05.2001	Hopni Murmu	F	48	Habibpur, Vill- Ghosh Para
02.	22.01.2002	Sumi Murmu	F	35	Gazole, Vill- Madhudanga
03.	28.03.2002	Sajli Soren	F	36	Habibpur, Vill- Kachidanga
04.	07.10.2002	Champa Tudu	F	48	Habibpur, Vill- Sarbatipur
05.	18.12.2002	Dulali Hembram	F	45	Gazole, Vill- Sarsatule
06.	18.04.2003	Turki Kisku	F	50	Habibpur, Vill- Sajnedighi
07.	25.05.2003	Munni Mardi	F	55	Old Malda, Vill- Mahigram
08.	04.03.2005	Sumi Tudu	F	55	Bamangola, Vill- Dhamorgram
09.	16.05.2006	Purgi Mardi	F	55	Gazole, Vill- Bujuvita
10.	27.03.2007	Tala Murmu	F	65	Habibpur, Vill- Kendua
11.	02.02.2008	Raima Tudu	F	66	Gazole, Vill- Borobari
12.	26.01.2009	Arati Mardi	F	35	Old Malda, Vill-Dakin Varta
13.	06.12.2011	Jare Murmu	M	50	Malda, Vill- Arjuntola

*The furnished data (from Table 1 to Table 6) are tentative and not exhaustive

Table 2: List of detected survivors of witch-hunting in the Malda district

Sl. No.	Date of incident	Name	Place	Nature of injustice faced
01.	19.08.2000	Usni Rajbansi and family	Old Malda	Villagers planned to attack them. Police rescued the family
02.	29.08.2000	Roshina Mardi	Bakuldanga, Gazole (P.S)	Attempt to murder
03.	29.10.2000	Tulsi Hansda	Chhoto Gobiadpur, Malda	The villagers thrashed her and she suffered from multiple injuries

04.	06.08.2003	Bisakha Pahari & her husband	English Bazar, Kotoali area	The villagers wanted to burn them alive
05.	19.10.2002	A tribal woman	Malda	Accused of dabbling in witchcraft and physically assaulted
06.	23.05.2002	Sajoli Soren & family	Jharpukuria, Malda	Attempted to burn alive. Left the village
07.	02.07.2002	Dilip Munda & family	Aratpur village, Old Malda	Driven out of the village
08.	14.07.2002	Maya Hembram	Gun village, Old Malda	Attempt to murder. Rescued by police
09.	30.06.2003	Dalo Baisya Das & family	Jharpukur, Gazole	Left the village and took shelter to another village
10.	03.12.2004	Laxmidevi & three others	Saidal village, Malda	Threat to murder, asked to live the village
11.	01.04.2007	Chami Murmu	Borogachhi village, Malda	Attempt to murder, later physically assaulted
12.	27.01.2008	Budhia Kisku & her husband	Habibpur	Attempt to murder
13.	27.10.2008	Shanti Pahari & family	Paharipari, English Bazar	Attempt to murder
14.	09.03.2009	Bisu Kisku & family	Shyampur, Gazole	Attempt to murder
15.	07.06.2009	Sukhi Hembram & her daughter Mainu Hansda	Salkuri, Gazole	Attempt to burnt alive and later physically assaulted
16.	07.12.2010	Hupni Soren	Kutkuti, Habibpur	Driven out of the village. Absconding
17.	13.10.2011	Tala Mardi	Bhabul, Malda	Attempt to murder and physically assaulted with weapon

18.	11.09.2011	Jhumri Mardi	Kadirpur, Habibpur	Attempt to murder
19.	06.04.2012	Manjali Hansda & her husband	Andharu kothagram, Old Malda	Fined Rs.555 and physically assaulted
20.	12.11.2012	Hoponmoyee Murmu	Himsim village, Gazole	Attempt to murder
21.	02.02.2013	Lakshmi Murmu & her daughter	Mohanpur, Habibpur	Arson and loot. Attempt to rape
22.	18.02.2014	Amit Murmu	Dogachhi village, Gazole	Attempt to murder
23.	20.03.2014	Jaba Kisku & her husband	Railpara village, Old Malda	Fined Rs.10,000, physically assaulted & lost her teeth
24.	26.10.2014	Panda Mardi & family	Sitalatola village, Gazole	Driven out of the village

Table 3: List of detected persons killed in witch-hunting in the Uttar Dinajpur district

Sl. No.	Date of killing	Name	Sex	Age	Place of incident: Police Station & Village
01.	23.07.2002	Benjir Murmu	F	70	Goalpokar, Vill. Paclimmaria
02.	29.03.2003	Laxmi Hasda	F	65	Raiganj, Vill. Baroganda
03.	03.09.2010	Som Hembram	M	45	Itahar, Vill - Tilna-Hatath para
04.	02.04.2012	Fulmoni Hasda	F	44	Raiganj, Vill-Bazbindol
05.	03.04.2012	Chandi Soren	F	14	Raiganj, Vill-Bazbindol
06.	01.10.2014	Parbati Pahan	F	42	Kaliaganj, Vill-Balabonta
07.	20.11.2014	Khukibala Oraon	F	42	Chopra, Vill-Majjali
08.	10.12.2014	Kukibala Oraon	F	32	Chopra, Vill-Gandhagachh
09.	21.12.2014	Sima Hembram	F	50	Raiganj, Vill-Sahapur

Table 4: List of detected survivors of witch-hunting in the Uttar Dinajpur district

Sl. No.	Date of incident	Name	Place	Nature of injustice faced
01.	07.07.2003	Sukhi Soren & Sajli Hansda	Tarangapur, Raiganj(P.S)	Driven out of the village, Attempt to murder
02.	07.08.2004	Sonia Turi & family	Raiganj	Social boycott
03.	28.10.2004	Lalubabu Khalko	Dhuliagachh, Chopra	Attempt to murder
04.	15.01.2005	Fulmoni Soren	Paschim mohapur, Raiganj	Attempt to murder. Rescued by the police
05.	30.12.2005	Jasmi Murmu & her husband	Diyabari village, Chakulia	Physically assaulted
06.	12.03.2006	Maloti Oraon	Jhati Basti Panjipara, Goalpokhar	Attempt to murder
07.	27.08.2006	Manju Hembram	Babanbari village, Chakulia	Attempt to murder. Rescued by the police
08.	08.12.2006	Jabamoni Soren	Dimrulla village, Islampur	Physically assaulted & driven out of the village
09.	25.07.2014	Haru Oraon & family	Nanduvita, Chopra	Physically assaulted
10.	06.12.2014	Mugli Murmu	Barabigha village, Itahar	Attempt to murder. Rescued by the police
11.	20.12.2014	Khuki Oraon & her husband	Majjali village, Chopra	Physically assaulted

Table 5: List of detected persons killed in witch-hunting in the Dakshin Dinajpur district

Sl. No.	Date of killing	Name	Sex	Age	Place of incident: Police Station & Village
01.	26.09.2002	Turki Soren	F	45	Banshari, Vill-Langrapir
02.	08.07.2004	Sukarmani Murmu	F	60	Tapan, Vill-Halidana
03.	07.12.2011	Samina Hasda	F	50	Gangarampur, Vill-Dhandapara

Table 6: List of detected survivors of witch-hunting in the Dakshin Dinajpur district

Sl. No.	Date of incident	Name	Place	Nature of injustice faced
01.	06.04.2001	Two tribal women & one man	Kamardanga village, Bansihari PS	Assaulted. Rescued by the police
02.	07.11.2002	Kalidas Pauria	Ratinathpur village, Gangarampur	Driven out of the village for 5 years
03.	24.01.2003	Jaba Murmu	Malancha village, Balurghat	Assaulted and faced social boycott
04.	23.11.2009	Jatin Hembram	Gobindapur village, Balurghat	Physically assaulted. Rescued by the police
05.	26.09.2010	Johan Hembram	Nandore area, Balurghat	Driven out of the village
06.	29.04.2011	Rina Soren	Bhadarpur village, Gangarapur	Attempt to murder
07.	23.09.2011	Namita Roy	Hekendarpara, Gangarampur	Driven out of the village