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Culture of Violence or Violence of Cultures? Adivasis and Witch-hunting in Chotanagpur

Abstract: On account of its inability to conform to the 'rational', 'objective', and 'scientific' notions of history, witch-hunting has remained marginalised in the mainstream historical research. This article examines an aspect of witch-hunting – violence – that has not only led to the construction of certain cultural stereotypes around Adivasis, but has also raised debates related to human rights and culturally-sanctioned violence. Focusing upon the Chotanagpur region, which formed the 'Adivasi heartland' of the state of Bihar, and later the state of Jharkhand, it explores the nature and structure of violence related to witch hunting from around 1850s to present times. It looks into questions related to production of such violence alongside its manifestations, elements and constituencies over a period of time. With the help of some case studies, it also shows how such violence continues to acquire new forms and meanings.

Keywords: *Chotanagpur, tribal women, witchcraft, witch-hunting*

Introduction

One of the most serious constraints underlining research on witchcraft in India is that of sources. Absence of testimonies of women accused or killed on grounds of witchcraft suspicion is a serious handicap. In Europe, witchcraft was considered as *crimem exceptum* and witches were tried by the judiciary. Judicial records, wherever available, therefore serve as useful source of information. In India, the suspects were/are mostly killed in 'public trials' and in the judicial trials conducted after the killing, the emphasis was/has been on attempt to fix the responsibility for the 'murder'. No information is available on how the accused felt. Such records also do not say much about the tensions in the village, the personality of people accused of witchcraft, or of the many out-of-court settlements.[1] Building on a fragmentary source base, this article explores the trajectory of witch hunting over a century and half to look at questions of violence.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section discusses the linkages between gender and constructions of witchcraft among the Adivasis. The second studies witch hunts in the context of Adivasi socio-cultural milieu. The third section examines the role of other agents and factors which contributed, directly or indirectly, to the production and unfolding of such violence. The fourth part deals with the revival of witch hunts in postcolonial Jharkhand[2] and its implications. The concluding section emphasises the need to develop a framework for understanding witch hunting while underscoring its attributes and complex nature.

[1] Ajay Skaria, "Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India", *Past and Present*, 155 (May 1997), 110, 135.

[2] The districts that were separated from Bihar to form the new state of Jharkhand included Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Dhanbad, Palamau and Santal Parganas. Santal Parganas did not form a part of the colonial Chotanagpur, but it is included in most studies on the region on account of geo-cultural similarity and contiguous spread of Adivasi population. The Adivasis of the region are mostly patrilineal and include tribes like Mundas, Santhals, Oraon, Ho, Khariya, Pahariya, Maler, etc.

Constructions of Witchcraft

Belief in *bongas* (spirits, godlings) and *dains* (witches) formed an integral part of the religious and cosmological world of the Adivasis. Deeply ingrained in popular folklore, they played an important role in the ordering of social and economic relations and significantly informed their perceptions of health, medicine, and disease. Fear of *bongas* not only underlined celebration of all festivals, religious observances, ceremonies and rituals, but also played an important part in their economic life − agricultural operations, hunting, food-gathering. One of the chief functions of the Adivasi festivals was to win over the *bongas* and neutralise their harmful intentions. The central idea behind the Adivasi religious systems was to seek an alliance with the highest and the most 'helpful' spiritual entities and through them control the 'harmful' ones.[3] The evil powers had to be scared through exorcism or magic.[4] Adivasis thus made a distinction between 'white magic' (socially and psychologically beneficent) and 'black magic' (maleficent or evil): the minister of white magic was the medicine-man known as *ojha* or diviner, while one of black magic was the *dain*, a witch or sorcerer.[5]

Witches and witchcraft were almost exclusively common among the patrilineal agricultural communities (like the Mundas, Hos, and Santals), while remarkably absent among the nomadic foraging communities (such as the Birhor or Erenga Munda).[6] The constructions of witches were intrinsically connected to patriarchal structuring of Adivasi societies. In spite of Dalton's assertion that 'it is not only women that are accused of having dealings with the imps of darkness', witches hailed mostly from among the women. While a witch could be of either sex among the Mundas, Oraons, Hos, among Santals they were exclusively women.[7] Also, while both men and women could be potential witches, the language of the constructions of witchcraft kept the female dominant. Thus the words colloquially used to describe witches, more often than not, were *dain* (female) as opposed to *bishaha* (male). The fact that the traditional witch doctors (variously known as *ojhas, sokhas, deoklis, deonars, matis, or jan gurus*) were exclusively males also underlines the importance of gender tensions in the constructions of witchcraft, reinforced in the various myths regarding the origin of witchcraft among the Adivasis.

According to the Santal myth, women (dressed as men) duped the mountain spirit, Maran Buru, into teaching them witchcraft and acquired the art by an 'act of treachery'. Later realising this the spirit trained the men into the art of witch finding. The 'Legend of Baranda Bonga', popular among the Hos and Mundas, underscores that witches were by nature evil and notorious and could be controlled only with the help of *sokhas*. Even the Supreme Bonga (*Singa Bonga*) could not control his witch wife despite all his powers. Another legend, *Asur Kahani*, establishes that all evil spirits were incarnates of women, primarily Asur widows. Among other things, these myths reiterated the construction of women as witches and men as witch doctors and contained strong elements of gendered contestation.

[3] Sarat Chandra Roy, "Magic and Witchcraft in Chotanagpur", *Man in India*, 33.3 (1984 [1914]), 93.

[4] J. Troisi, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Santals* (New Delhi: Manohar: 1979), 204.

[5] Ibid.

[6] S. Bosu Mullick, "Gender Relations and Witches among the Indigenous Communities of Jharkhand, India", in Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan and Pierre Walter, eds., *Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia: Patriarchy at Odds* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 120. For links between patriarchy and agriculture in Adivasi communities of Chotanagpur, see Shashank Shekhar Sinha, *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters: Situating Tribes in Gender Studies* (Kolkata: Stree, 2006), 34-38.

[7] Troisi, *Tribal Religion*, 217-18.

Women's body and sexuality also formed an important component in constructions of witchcraft. In contrast to A. L. Barstow's assertion that witch persecutions in Europe were part of a 'deep-rooted misogyny' and involved the punishment of women for their sexuality,[8] elements of organised misogyny or 'sexual terrorism', could not be seen at least in 19th century colonial Chotanagpur. Nevertheless such constructions were certainly reflective of some kind of distrust of women and a fear of their sexuality. Among the Santals, it was believed that witches had sexual liaisons with the *bongas*[9] while among the Mundas, Oraons and Hos, women were seen as 'spiritually weak' and 'lacking in moral integrity' and therefore susceptible to possession by *bongas*.[10] Such notions were also common to both Catholic and Protestant constructions of womanhood in Europe. Elizabeth Reis, in her study of Puritan New England, argues that the Puritan construction of soul as 'feminine' and 'insatiable' was "in consonance with the allegedly unappeasable nature of women". On account of their passive spirituality and weaker bodies, "the devil could reach women's souls more easily and breach these 'weaker vessels' with greater frequency".[11] Sarah Ferber points to a similar connection between female passivity and vulnerability to the Devil in the context of Catholic Reformation.[12]

Drawing linkages between healing and witchcraft was not unknown in Chotanagpur. In Europe, one of the popular strands in writings–common among feminist writers, historians, and religious leaders–was that most women condemned as witches during the classic period of witch persecution (1500-1700) were in actuality unlicensed healers suppressed by the male medical establishment.[13] Studies from different regions in also India hint at/point to women's shamanistic roles. Verrier Elwin talks about Saora women's shamanism and that they were custodians of black magic and had unrivalled knowledge of herbs and plants.[14] In Chotanagpur, women's relationship with nature and forests, and their knowledge of roots, herbs and plants (particularly the medicinal ones), was quite established in the community domain and belief system.[15] Witchcraft definitely served as an idiom for exclusion of women from the medical profession. However there is not much evidence of an organised persecution of women shamans.

Besides their professional attributes and behavioural patterns, physical characteristics also formed an important part of the construction of witches. Those who were hyper-normal or of abnormal mental ability were regarded as intermediaries between the human and the unseen world, but there were also people suspected to be born with the 'evil eye' or 'mouth'.[16] Persons with unusual physical traits formed a vulnerable group. Generally old women with penetrating gazes, or those who were misshapen were most likely to be taken as witches.[17] They could easily fit in the 'old hag' image of witches. But childless widows or single or unprotected women were also accused of being witches. Barren women, the aged or infirm, and those who had long lived as widows were considered as

[8] Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witchhunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994).

[9] Edward G. Man, *Sonthalia and the Sonthals* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1983 [1867]), 152; W. G. Archer, *The Hill of Flutes, Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India: A Portrait of the Santals* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1974), 292.

[10] Roy, "Magic and Witchcraft", 120.

[11] Elizabeth Reis, "Damned Women in Puritan New England", in Darren Oldridge, ed., *The Witchcraft Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 261-62.

[12] Sarah Ferber, "Ecstasy, Possession, and Witchcraft", in Oldridge, ed., *The Witchcraft Reader*, 230-39.

[13] See Jane P. Davidson, "The Myth of the Persecuted Female Healer", in Oldridge, ed., *The Witchcraft Reader*, 257; Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 140-41; Barbara Ehreneich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (pamphlet, Old Westbury), 1973.

[14] Verrier Elwin, "The Saora Woman as a Shaman", in *The Religion of Indian Tribe* (Bombay: Oxford U. P., 1955), 171.

[15] Bosu Mullick, "Gender Relations and Witches".

[16] D. N. Majumdar, "Disease, Death, and Divination in Certain Primitive Societies in India", *Man in India*, 13.2 (April-September, 1933), 136.

[17] P. C. Roy Chaudhury, *Gazetteer of India: Bihar, Palamau* (Patna: Superintendent, Secretariat Press, 1961), 16.

[18] Majumdar, "Disease, Death, and Divination", 137.

[19] F. B. Bradley-Birt, *History and Ethnology of an Indian Upland* (Delhi: Mittal Publications: 1990 [1909]), 222. Also see, Rev. John Hoffman, "Arthur Van Emelen and Other Jesuit Missionaries", *Encyclopedia Mundarica*, Vol. 10 (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1990 [1950]), 2919-20.

[20] Paul Olaf Bodding, *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha: The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* (Delhi: Bahumukhi Prakashan, 1994 [1887]), 160. Henceforth *Reak Katha*. The first version of this Santal text was prepared by L. O. Skrefsrud in 1871 and was based on Skrefsrud's interactions with an old Santal guru Kolean.

[21] Ibid., 2916.

[22] S. C. Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs* (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1985 [1928]), 171.

[23] *Encyclopedia Mundarica*, Vol. 10, 2921.

[24] P. C. Roy Chaudhury, *Singbhum Old Records* (Patna: Revenue Department, Gazetteer's Revision Section, 1958), 271.

[25] Man, *Sonthalia and the Sonthals*, 29-30.

ones who could communicate with evil spirits and become their votaries. Most societies sought to recognise the difference between fertile and infertile groups – women who could multiply and thus add to the strength of the tribe, and women who, being infertile, served no very useful purpose to the community and therefore were believed to be prone to anti-social activities.[18] In some cases however, young and comely girls 'quite unlike the ancient hag of western fancy' also became victims of witch hunts.[19]

Witchcraft played an important role in the ordering of social relations. The Santal guru Kolean had told Skrefsrud, a Norwegian missionary: "Witchcraft is the great trouble with us Santals. Because of witchcraft, people in the village become enemies, doors of relatives is shut, father and sons quarrel, brothers are separated, husband and wife are divorced and in the country people kill each other".[20] "An accusation of witchcraft was enough to break a match", wrote the German Jesuit missionary Hoffman.[21] A husband could divorce a wife if she possessed an 'evil eye' (*najar*) or was a witch (*dain*) or if she brought sickness, misfortune, or ill-luck to his family.[22] The family of a person convicted of witchcraft was looked down upon the villagers and it was impossible for the grown up children of such a family to find a spouse.[23]

Witchcraft, Violence and the Socio-cultural Milieu

Were witch hunts and accompanying violence integral to the socio-cultural fabric of the Adivasis? Though the constructions of witchcraft changed over a period of time, what remained mostly constant was the belief in the maleficent magic of the witches and their intention to harm human beings, cattle and crops. For some, it was therefore justifiable to and kill the witches; it was their duty to protect the society from malign supernatural forces. Violence was an integral part of such hunts though its nature and structure kept changing. Wilkinson had noted that while there was remedy for angry *bongas* and ancestor spirits who could be appeased by sacrifices – first of fowls, then goats, and if these two didn't work then bullocks and buffalos – there was none for the witches who had to be *removed* (emphasis added).[24] Man writes: "[N]o reasoning with them, nor ridicule can dissuade them [Santals] of their belief in witches, and of the necessity of their being *at once murdered*" (emphasis added).[25] In some cases, the suspect was tortured till s/he succumbed to death.

Violence could also be invoked against close members of the family. In one case of the mid-19th century it was recorded that four women, including the sister, two nieces, and a nephew's wife of a man named Binaud said they could cure his eldest son who was ill. They gave his son a pill, but he died. Binund then ordered the four women to carry the dead body on a cot and followed them with a naked sword in his hand. When they reached the place where the bodies were disposed of, he killed all four women and then surrendered to the police. He was given

capital sentence. When examined, Binund and the witnesses described the four women as *real witches*, and the impression seems that they were *rightly served* (emphasis added).[26] Even in recent times we come across cases, where people have voluntarily confessed to killing those accused of witchcraft. On August 8 1998, Shyam Charan Mardi (a resident of Kashibera village of Dumaria police station near Ghatshila in East Singhbhum) beheaded Dooly Mardi for allegedly practicing witchcraft, took her severed head in his knapsack and hung it from a tree near his house. The next day, he went to the police station and surrendered.[27]

Having said this, one needs to put the phenomenon of witch hunts in a broader cultural perspective. Three things are important here. First, it was not as if all Adivasis were ever supportive of witch hunts. Second, witch hunts were common among Adivasis but not exclusively confined to them. Third, there were many other agents and actors who played in a role in the making of the witch and constructions of witchcraft from time to time.

Witch killings or hunts should never be looked upon as some kind of a universal response on the part of all Adivasis. There were many who did not support the idea, but were critical of it or opposed it. E. G. Man in *Sonthalia and the Sonthals* (1867) discusses several cases[28] in which husbands and parents requested the British assistant commissioner to intervene in the community witch trials. Similarly in Chotrae Deshmanjhi's account of the Santal *hul*, one comes across cases where some Santals are concerned over their wives or daughters being potentially targeted as witches. According to one such testimony: "We all were afraid seeing such things. My brothers suggested that we should leave the place immediately because we too have women and girls. They might be identified as 'witches'".[29] Sometimes the resistance to witchcraft accusations could take an extreme shape. In an incident reported to the police in 1880s, a man killed another with a sword while the latter was asleep because he had accused former's wife of practicing witchcraft.[30] Such instances were however rare and intermittent and mostly individual initiatives. A more systematic and organised critique of witch hunts emerges in the form of the Adivasi movements in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, which generally combined elements of socio-religious reform with political and agrarian issues.

Were the Adivasis solely responsible for the development of the occult and the production of accompanying violence? The available evidence does not seem to suggest so. Witch hunts were common to the Adivasis, but never exclusively confined to them. A report by Major Roughsedge written in 1818 describes an account of a Brahmin woman who was denounced and tried as a witch. Having escaped the ordeal by water, she was pronounced to be a witch, and deprived of her nose.[31] A *fatwah* issued in 1860 from the office of the (Acting) Law Officer of the Sadar Court, Calcutta not only banned witchcraft among Muslims, but also made some attempt at defining the legalities and complications concerning witchcraft.

[26] E. T. Dalton, "Trial of Queen versus Binund", *Report on the Police of the Chota Nagpore Division for the Year 1865* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1866), 44.

[27] Archana Mishra, *Casting the Evil Eye: Witch Trials in Tribal India* (Delhi: Roli Books, 2003), 68.

[28] Man, *Sonthalia and the Sonthals*, 152-53.

[29] Dhirendranath Baske, "Chotrae Deshmanjhi Reak Katha", *Bortica*, January-June, 2005, 13.

[30] J. C. Veasey, *Report on the Police of the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency for the Year 1884* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1885), 56.

[31] E. T. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India* [1872] (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1973), 200.

The Making of a Witch

The period between the late-19th and early-20th centuries was a defining moment in the history of witchcraft and witch hunting as these became linked to the colonial administration's effort to extend its political and juridical domain in the Adivasi heartland, the missionary zeal to convert the populace, and the ethnographers' and anthropologists' ardour to position the Adivasis in the evolutionary scale. This in turn resulted in compilation and documentation of literature and folklore related to witchcraft by the administrators, ethnographers, and missionaries. The literature produced was frequently circulated/reproduced in gazetteers, administrative reports and official literature. Representations of Adivasis as 'primitive' therefore went hand-in-hand with the organisation of scattered beliefs and practices related to witchcraft.

The emergence of ethnology as the 'most scientific framework' for the study of the linguistic, physical, and cultural characteristics of dark skinned, non-European, and 'uncivilised' people along with the development of Social Darwinism, wherein the dark skinned people were assigned their 'proper place' in the evolutionary scale, influenced many administrators, missionaries, gentlemen explorers, and scientific travellers in India.[32] Evolutionary racial ideas dominated the works of Hunter, Herbert H. Risley and J. Forsyth and their classifications on caste and tribe.[33] Most often than not, such classifications tended to primitivise the Adivasis in relation to religion (animism). Further, this primitivism was often emphasised in relation to the 'higher' Hindu castes or people of 'higher culture'. The treatment of 'animism' as a separate system of faith in the census operations helped create a new sense of hierarchy in the early decades of the 20th century by institutionalising the 'primitive' as 'animist' (1901 Census) or as following a different form of religion (1911 census). This neo-primitivism was emphasised in several contemporary ethnographical literature. For C. H. Bompas, the religion of the Santals was 'animistic', characterised by omnipresence of spirits who were propitiated by elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices generally terminating in dances and ceremonial drinking of rice beer.[34] Likewise, Thurston's multi-volume *Ethnographic Notes* dealt with several themes including marriage customs, idolatrous cults, sacrifices, hook swinging rituals, witchcraft, *mantras* (spells), earth eating, and other exotica. He tried to link the practices of the Adivasis with those of the Hindus and exaggerated their idiosyncrasies as evidence of supposed primitivism.[35] The beginning of the 20th century saw the emergence of professional anthropology in India. However, works of pioneers like S. C. Roy, D.N. Majumdar, Charulal Mukherjee etc. continued to be informed by prevailing notions of hierarchy reinforced by race, caste, and religion. Describing the Mundas and Oraons in racial terms, S. C. Roy wrote: "[T]he religion of the Chota-Nagpur tribes was a crude system of spiritism or animism ... and a strong belief in 'magic' and witchcraft was common to all tribes".[36]

[32] Vinita Damodaran, "Colonial Constructions of the 'Tribe' in India: The Case of Chotanagpur", *The Indian Historical Review*, 33.1 (January 2006), 48-50.

[33] Ibid., 48-49.

[34] Cecil Henry Bompas, *Folklore of the Santal Parganas* [1909] (Delhi: Ajay Book Service, 1981), 5.

[35] Bhangya Bhukya, "The Mapping of the Adivasi Social: Colonial Anthropology and Adivasis", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43.39 (27 September 2008), 106.

[36] S. C. Roy, "The Effects on the Aborigines of Chotanagpur of their Contact with Western Civilisation", *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, 17.4 (1931), 359.

The documentation and compilation of folklore concerning witchcraft by missionaries, ethnographers and anthropologists helped organise hitherto scattered beliefs and gave somewhat formal definitions to certain occult practices. It is important to note that such works contained detailed information on religion, *bonga* worship, witchcraft, exorcism rituals, and sacrifices. The circulation and dissemination of such material, often in indigenous languages, played an important role in circulation of the folklore related to witchcraft thereby making the missionaries unconscious catalysts. All these were conducive to the process of institutionalisation of the belief, the manifestations of which included construction and proliferation of several accounts and stories about spirits and witches around the early 20th century. Accounts by Archer, Bompas, S. C. Roy, Bodding, etc. carry detailed and illustrated descriptions on the secret gatherings of witches, collectivity of witchcraft, initiation and training ceremonies, ritualisation of the craft, etc.

How did the belief in witchcraft acquire substance and prominence? The development of witchcraft as an institutionalised set of beliefs was a prolonged and complex process arising out of a conjunction of a variety of factors in the colonial period. Ideas related to witchcraft were in circulation in the pre-colonial period as well. Such ideas started acquiring new meanings and constructs under the impact of tensions and uncertainties generated under colonialism. There was a widely held notion among the local communities that increasing occurrence of diseases, social disorders, deforestation and famines were the work of 'malevolent' forces. Such ideas had a particularly strong appeal in the context of growing pressures on the tribal economy.[37] Increasing occurrences of diseases polarised gender relations in Adivasi societies and witches (mostly women) came to be looked upon as agents sowing the 'seeds of sicknesses'. Bodding records: "There is no genuine Santal who does not believe in witches. This being so, it is not strange that a suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when people fall ill and do not recover".[38] Marine Carrin Bouez points out that the association of malevolent *bongas* with particular women was the immediate reason for the targeting of such possessed women. As disease, disorder, and famine became endemic in the second half of the 19th century, so did witch hunting. Women witches in such representations wandered at night sowing the germs of disease in front of doors, and while protective deities were constantly invoked to protect from the evil eye.[39] Diseases − particularly the epidemics resulting in multiple deaths − came to acquire new constructions and causal agents. A disease like cholera regularly known as *hawa dukh* (literally 'air affliction' – also indicating the origin of the disease) was now seen as being implanted by witches.[40]

Instances like barrenness, outbreak of diseases, epidemics, crop failures and deaths provided the social occasioning and pretext for carrying out witch hunts and gave the act a social legitimacy. When cholera broke out in Birhankitta village in Santal Parganas, a little girl Pania Soren and Jeona Murmu, a woman related to her, were taken to the *manjithan* (a place which serves as the memorial of the first

[37] Vinita Damodaran, "Gender Forests and Famine in 19th-Century Chotanagpur India", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 9.2 (2002), 147-49.

[38] P. O. Bodding, *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1986 [1925]), 38.

[39] Ibid., 148.

[40] Ibid., 64-66, 113.

[41] S. M. Naqavi, "Santal Murders", *Man in India*, 23.3 (1943), 242.

[42] Ibid., 244.

founder of the village) and killed. The choice of *manjithan* as a place for the kill was to "enlist the support of the village's founder to stop the disease".[41] In another case, Achi Kisku was killed by her two brothers because the son of one of them had caught small pox.[42] By ritualising such acts in the name of 'unhappy' spirits, witch-killing incidents were invested with a religious dimension.

Things became more complicated when the colonial administration imposed a ban on witch killings. The administrative and legal ban together with a systematic negation of witchcraft by colonial administrators (and Christian missionaries) was met with strong resistance. After their conquest of India, the British sought to outlaw persecution of witches – a practice seen as barbaric. In 1853, a ruling by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal equated witch killing with 'murder' punishable by death. It stated that "no plea of savage ignorance or barbarous custom should be permitted to stay the full execution of the law upon those who are found guilty of taking human life".[43] This happened not only in Chotanagpur (1853), but in other regions in western and north-western India such as the Dangs (1847) and Rajputana (1853).[44] What was unique about the new ruling was that witch killing was invested with criminality and equated with 'murder' punishable by death.

[43] Anindita Mukhopadhyay, *Behind the Mask: The Cultural Definition of the Legal Subject in Colonial Bengal, 1775-1811* (Delhi: Oxford U. P., 2006), 47.

[44] Skaria, "Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence", 135.

David Hardiman asserts that colonial administrators failed to acknowledge the degree to which the notion of witchcraft was socially embedded and universally believed in as matter of common sense.[45] One comes across some interesting similarities in the ways Adivasis in different regions reacted to the new ruling. Skaria points out that most Adivasis in the Dangs region responded to the ban with hostility and resistance.[46] The general sympathy for witch killers led to attempts by ordinary Bhils, their chiefs, and even local Rajput power-holders, to conceal killings from the British.[47] The result was that "the practice was driven underground rather than suppressed … local holders of power took action against witches because they were convinced that they had a *duty to preserve their society from malign supernatural forces*"(emphasis added).[48]

[45] David Hardiman, "Knowledge of the Bhils and their Systems of Healing", *The Indian Historical Review*, 33.1 (January 2006), 219.

[46] Skaria, "Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence", 138.

[47] Ibid., 138.

[48] Hardiman, "Knowledge of the Bhils", 220.

The ban was also resisted by the Adivasis of Chotanagpur. It led to the building of a counter, subversive discourse that sought to otherise and ridicule the administrators for failing to appreciate the power of the witches.

> The witches eat us and when we catch them and worry them just a little, the magistrates again turn the matter round and resort to imprisonment; we feel great distress; what can we possibly do, so that it might go well with us; we are utterly bewildered. Also when we explain it to magistrates they do not believe it; they say: Well then let her eat my finger, then only shall I believe she is a witch − and then they jail you. The witches do not eat using a vessel and a knife, quite so; by sorcery they send people off to the other world straightaway.[49]

[49] *Reak Katha*, 160.

Some sections of Adivasis believed that witches were flourishing under the *benevolent power* of the British was increasingly gaining ground and that the breakdown of the traditional village administration (under the British rule) had

only aided the process.

> Formerly the village headmen and his deputy were subduing them, and if they would not be peaceful, they would together with the village people, drive them away from the village after having disgraced them; but nowadays the magistrates have made them utterly audacious so that we men have become absolutely disheartened.[50]

Whenever the hold of the colonial administration on law and order loosened – as during the Santal *hul* and 1857 Rebellion – the ban on witch killing was systematically flouted and the region experienced perhaps the first mass witch hunts.[51] According to Dalton, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur during the Rebellion: "[A] terrible raid was made against all, who for years had been suspected of dealings with the evil one, and most atrocious murders were committed. Young men were told off for the duty by the elders; neither sex nor age was spared".[52] Sopaee, one of those convicted of witch killing in the district of Singbhum during the Rebellion later testified:

> It was just that we should be punished, but it is nearly three years since these murders were committed. The Bur peer was then in a disturbed state, and in all the village [not just his own] *it was arranged that all accused of witchcraft should be murdered* (emphasis added).[53]

The development of notion of private property under the colonial rule also added new dimensions to witch hunting. It had important repercussions for women, particularly those in possession of any piece of land. Under customary laws, Adivasi women could not own land. Only as single women – widows or unmarried daughters – they were entitled to some flexible and informal rights in land. Broadly speaking, they enjoyed two kinds of rights: first, a life interest in land – a right to manage the land and its produce and second, right to a share of produce of the land – the right to maintenance. Though the Permanent Settlement (1793) introduced the concept of private property in land, it was the survey and settlement operations carried out in Chotanagpur during late-19th and early 20th centuries which institutionalised the nature and titling of holdings. By reinforcing the patriarchal principle in inheritance whereby only males could become formal and legal owners of land, these operations contributed significantly to the destruction of residual rights of women and creation of exclusionary land systems. Women holding land rights could now become targets. In the event of the death of such women, land accrued to male agnates of the deceased. Incidents of women holding land being labelled as witches and hounded out, occasionally killed were connected to the politics of land ownership. In most cases, the killers were related to victims.

The relationship between Christian missionaries and witch hunts in the Adivasi

[50] Ibid.

[51] For details see Shashank S. Sinha, "Witch-hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chota Nagpur", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42.19 (May 12, 2007), 1672-76.

[52] Dalton, *Tribal History*, 199.

[53] Examination of Sopaee; Government of Bengal Judicial Proceedings, N. 59 (August 5, 1859), West Bengal State Archives.

[54] Keshari N. Sahay, *Under the Shadow of the Cross* (Calcutta: Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, 1976), 64.

[55] Ibid., 257.

[56] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, 338.

[57] Sachchidananda, "Cultural Change in Tribal Bihar: Mundas and Oraons", *Bulletin of the Bihar Tribal Research Institute* (July, 1960), 72-73.

[58] Sahay, *Under the Shadow of the Cross*.

[59] Ibid.

heartland was complicated and complex. Both Catholics and Protestants were united in their highly normative and intolerant attitude towards divided allegiance. Accepting Christian theology therefore meant complete rejection of the so-called *Sarna* religion and *bonga* worship. 'Freedom from witches' became one of the major incentives of joining Christianity.[54] The Oraon converts, says Dalton, believed that: "the Supreme Being who does not protect them from the spite of malevolent spirits, has ... Christians under His special care [and] in consequence of this guardianship, the witches and *bhuts* have no power over Christians, and it is, therefore, good for them to join that body".[55] Roy argues that Christianity not only satisfied their emotional need of communion with a personal deity but the Christian dualistic doctrine of the 'Spirit of Good' and 'Spirit of Evil' − God, and good Angels on the one hand, and the Devil and his evil hosts on the other − fitted in with the Oraon conception of *Dharmes*, the 'Spirit of Good' on one hand, and the malignant spirits, 'evil eye' and 'evil mouth' on the other.[56] The missionaries used various media, like talks, dramas, preaching or play, to ridicule witchcraft.[57] In addition, they established a network of schools and hospitals to counter the belief in witchcraft and *bongas*.

Though the missionaries, particularly the Protestants, wanted converts to sever all ties with *Sarna* religion and native customs, conversion to Christianity was never permanent or complete. The missions' proposal of a sudden and complete break with indigenous religion and customs was never entirely successful and the converts, more often than not, kept vacillating between Sarna religion and Christianity. The missions thus shared a fragile, often ambiguous, relationship with their converts on issues like *bonga* worship and belief in witchcraft. On the one hand, the missions strongly condemned such practices, on the other, the converts often were sympathetic to or sometimes participated in such practices or rituals. K.N Sahay points to some incidents which bring out the strains in this uneasy relationship. In 1954, all Lutherans of Lotakona were expelled from the congregation by the Church for believing in witchcraft and indulging in magical conjuring. In another very serious case in 1958, a Catholic woman reputed to be witch was burnt to death by eight or nine Catholics including a young catechist in Sikri Ambatoli village. All accused were arrested and charged with murder.[58] A survey of Shefali and Jaipur in 1950s revealed that around 83 per cent of the Catholics of Shefali and 93 per cent of the Lutherans (Oraon converts) of Jaipur believed in witchcraft and sorcery.[59] There are several cases of witch hunting among the Christianised Adivasis even today.

Unlike Christianity, Hinduism, did not have such an organised presence in the region at least during the colonial period. It had however made its impact over a long period of time. K. N. Sahay discusses several sources of Hindu influence among the Adivasis. This included chieftains claiming genealogical affinities with legendary Hindu kings; construction of Hindu shrines and celebration of Hindu festivals; influence of Vaishnavism; presence of Hinduised *rajas*, landlords and

Hindu officials and rent collectors; employment by *rajas* of Brahmin priests and Hindu retainers; reform movements like the Tana Bhagats; and to a lesser extent, some Hindu missionaries.[60] The opening of mines, extension of cultivation and new employment opportunities led to further and greater influx of Hindus in the region between the late 19th and early-20th centuries. Cultural interactions with Hindus and Hinduism over a long period of time had created particularly complex religions affiliations, a situation which created tremendous complications and confusions for the census officials. To Baines, the entire exercise of drawing a line between the tribal people who were Hinduised and those who followed the tribal form of religion was futile.[61]

The process of Hinduisation in the region went beyond the adoption of vegetarian food, sacred thread, and purity and pollution norms. Such a process also had a strong hegemonic content leading to a reorientation of Adivasi religious and social order and substantially influenced their dealings with the world of spirits and witches. It played a very important role in the ritualisation of witch trials. Accounts from around mid-19th century talk about various kinds of ordeals, oracles and divination associated with witch trials. While these continued to influence the detection and identification of witches in some cases, what distinguishes witch hunts in the late-19th/early-20th century was the emergence of professional/trained witch doctors (*ojhas*) along with their tutelary spirits (*saket bongas*); elaborate and ritualised exorcism processes underlined by a marked preponderance of sacrifices, accommodation of *mantars* (incantations), *jharnis* (magical formulae which could be sung) and invocations composed mostly in Hindi or sometimes in Bengali and Oriya; and, systematic inclusion of many gods and goddesses associated with Brahmanical Hinduism.[62] This reflected a subtle, nevertheless progressive Hinduisation of the Adivasis. Brahmanical Hinduism also reinforced the traditional gender and patriarchal tensions by reinforcing the figure of a female witch – a point underlined in almost all invocations and adjuration connected with the exorcism of spirits and witches.

This rise of the exorcism process and complex witch trials was also accompanied with the ascendancy of the witch doctors, known locally as *ojhas, matis, sokha, janguru* etc. Speaking in the case of Munda, Hoffman says that the witch doctors or *sokhas* neither belonged to the Mundari village, nor even to the Munda race and the language they used was mostly *Sadani* or Hindi hardly understood by the Mundas using the *mantars*. Further, they derived their powers not from *Singa bonga* (the Adivasi deity) but from Mahadeo, a Hindu deity.[63] This was true of the other sections of Adivasis as well. Spirits or *bhuts* were mostly driven out by Hindu *matis/ ojhas* or in few cases by Adivasi *matis/ojhas* trained by Hindu *gurus* through *mantars, jharnis*, and invocations composed mostly in Hindi (in some cases Bengali and Oriya), and dedicated to Hindu gods. Roy also stresses that Kharia's original conception of witch would appear to have been that of a woman endowed by nature with the evil eye. A *genuine witch was born and not made*. The

[60] K. N. Sahay, "The Transformation Scene in Chotanagpur: Hindu Impact on the Tribals", in P. Dash Sharma, ed., *The Passing Scene in Chotanagpur* (Ranchi: Maitrayee Publications, 1980), 25-71.

[61] J. A. Baines, *Census of India, 1891*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office), 1893.

[62] See S. C. Roy, *The Mundas*; S. C. Roy, *Oraon Religion*; Hoffman, *Encyclopedia Mundarica*; P. O. Bodding, *Studies in Santal Medicine*; D. N. Majumdar, *A Tribe in Transition: A Study in Cultural Pattern* (London: Longman's Green and Co. Ltd, 1937); Charulal Mukherjea, *The Santals* [1940] (Calcutta: A Mukherjee and Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1962).

[63] Bosu Mullick, "Gender Relations and Witches", 125-26.

developed art and training in that art appears to have been introduced generally by the low-class Hindu practitioners.[64]

[64] Ibid., 412.

Complex rituals, sacrifices and processes associated with the exorcism process and witch trials not only benefited the *ojhas* but also other related parties – the village headman, the deputy headman, as well as the villagers. This is shown in the distribution of spoils, both the fee and sacrificial meat, offered after the patient had recovered (*saket*). Bodding shows how the *ojha* shared the fee (*dadni*) offered to him with the village headman and how a large part of the sacrificial meat was shared between the *ojha*, village headman, the householder and the available villagers together with rice beer.[65] The communal feast was a much welcome break for the poverty stricken villagers. There were other claimants too. Hoffman records: "I have several times been told that they [witch persecutors] even bribe the local native police to take no notice of complaints made by the persecuted family. A native sub-inspector of police avowed to me that people were in habit of coming to ask his leave to go to the *sokha*".[66] The *ojha*-village headman nexus still plays an important role in the economies of witch hunts. Sometimes influential villagers and even close relatives bribe the *ojhas* and village headman to have a woman declared a witch and usurp her property. The lucky few sometimes escape with a reprimand and a fine. They are however forced to partly/fully bear the cost of the 'purificatory' sacrifice as also finance the communal feast that follows.[67]

[65] Bodding, *Studies in Santal Medicine*, 29.

[66] Hoffman, *Encyclopedia Mundarica,* Vol. 5, 2921.

[67] Mishra, *Casting the Evil Eye*, 43-44.

Another complex dimension in the politics surrounding witchcraft could be seen in the relationship between the Adivasi movements and witch hunting. Most movements denounced spirits and witches. It is however interesting to note how the leaders of the various movements used the language, imagery, and symbolism associated with that world. Their engagements with spirits and witches should not be just seen as simplistic reflections of a negative consciousness or a pristine desire for reform. They demonstrate how the politics of the supernatural could acquire complex meanings at times, sometimes anti-colonial, sometimes sectarian, and sometimes patriarchal, depending on the trajectory of the movement and leadership.

One sees visible manifestations of the politics surrounding witch killing during the Tana Bhagat movement. Many of the denunciations of women as witches occurred in the course of spirit-driving operations.[68] Those who did not comply with the regulations of the Tana faith were forbidden the use of public wells and their wives were declared witches and their fowls and pigs killed.[69] Sometimes violence would go beyond the death of the victim as could be observed in the following episode from the Tana Bhagat movement:

[68] Sangeeta Dasgupta, "Reordering a World: The Tana Bhagat Movement, 1914-1919", *Studies in History*, 15.1 (1999), 28, 34.

[69] Ibid., 34.

> A meeting of Uraons (Oraons) was in progress at which mantras were being recited and considerable excitement prevailed. The deceased who had been previously been charged with practicing witchcraft was beaten to death in her house in the presence of her husband. The culprits, when they joined the

assembly were seen to be carrying pieces of the women's brain which they licked from time to time.[70]

The Return of Witch Hunting

The mature period in the history of witch hunting in Chotanagpur (late-19th to early twentieth 20th) was followed by a period of slowdown and decline. Police records and ethnographic and village studies show that there was a conspicuous decline in witch killings between 1930s and 1970s though belief in witchcraft continued to remain strong. Fines, beating and occasional killing largely formed the usual ways of dealing with the accused during this period.[71] One may not have like-to-like comparative figures but sufficient qualitative evidence and somewhat less-organized quantitative data to indicate such a trend. An analysis of Santal murders in the Santal Parganas between 1931-40 shows that of a total of 78 murders those resulting from witchcraft (16), and property disputes (12), formed the second and third highest category of offences respectively, next only to alcoholism (19), and that there was an element of overlap in such categories.[72] The analysis also throws significant light on gender dimensions of witch-hunt. In a total of 78 cases of Santal murders, the murderers were exclusively males, but more than half the victims were found to be women.[73] A quantitative analysis of murders among the Mundas and Oraons of Ranchi between 1955-59 likewise shows that 8 out of 107 murders were caused due to a belief in witchcraft, accounting for 7 per cent of the total.[74]

Legislations, Christian missionaries, Adivasi reform movements (inspired by Hindu ideas of purity), the realisation by Adivasis that such practices were considered socially degrading by upper caste Hindus played a part alongside the emerging ethno-regionalism. The Adivasi Mahasabha (1938), and later the Jharkhand Party (1950) (with mainly Christianised Adivasis as followers), were trying to forge a pan-Adivasi collective which implied toning down internal tensions (including witch killings). The strains generated by the post-colonial developmental regime, however, led to a new wave of witch killings in 1970s-1980s onwards.

What went wrong in the following years? The mineral-rich Chotanagpur became one of the natural sites for the unfolding of a development regime in post-Independence India as the new nation-state embarked on a policy of industrialisation. Capitalism, state-sponsored and private, made a significant headway in the 'Ruhr of India'[75] as Chotanagpur played host to development of several mines, industries, and other multipurpose projects. Adivasi lands were also acquired for the construction of railway stations, schools, colleges, roads, dams, hydroelectric projects and thermal power stations.[76] This was done without a well thought-out rehabilitation or resettlement policy. The employment opportunities that came up at various projects were mostly cornered by the immigrants from

[70] Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department (Police), Special Section, File no P3-R/14 of 1916 (Patna: Bihar State Archives), 12.

[71] For example see Sachchidananda, "Cultural Change in Tribal Bihar: Mundas and Oraons", *Bulletin of the Bihar Tribal Research Institute* (July, 1960); Hari Mohan, *The Chero: A Study in Acculturation* (Ranchi: The Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute, 1973); Anirudha Behari Saran, *Murder and Suicide among the Munda and the Oraon* (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1974).

[72] Naqavi, "Santal Murders", 243.

[73] Ibid., 238.

[74] Saran, *Murder and Suicide*, 70, 79.

[75] The Chotanagpur region is known as called the 'Ruhr of India' on account of extreme concentration of various minerals like coal, iron ore, and mica as well limestone, clay, and manganese.

[76] L. P. Vidyarthi, *Socio-Economic Implications of Industrialisation in India: A Case Study of Tribal Bihar* (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1970), 209.

[77] Mathew Areeparampil, "Industries, Mines and Dispossession", in Walter Fernandes and Enakshi Ganguly Thukral, eds., *Development, Displacement and Rehabilitation* (Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1989), 19.

[78] Stuart Corbridge, "Ousting Singbonga: The Struggle for India's Jharkhand", in Peter Robb, ed., *Dalit Movement and the Meanings of Labour in India* (Delhi: Oxford U.P., 1999), 136.

[79] Maitreya Ghatak, ed., *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997), 168.

[80] *The Telegraph* (Calcutta, June 23, 2012).

[81] *Prabhat Khabar*, (Ranchi, December 26, 1998).

[82] Rama Lakshmi, *The Washington Post* (August 08, 2005).

neighbouring regions who frequented the region in search of employment opportunities. The phenomenon of dispossession took place both directly through deprivation of land and indirectly through denial of benefits of development.[77]

While some Adivasis benefitted from the expansion of mining and industrial sector as well as reservation of 'Scheduled Tribes' in central and state legislative assemblies and the public sector undertakings,[78] for most the new developments caused unprecedented displacement in a matter of a couple of decades. The region had long been struggling with problems of illiteracy, healthcare facilities and poverty. It also had a chronic history of witch hunts. In this context, a new spell of dispossession and deprivation contributed immensely to various kinds of uncertainties and tensions besides aggravating the existing ones. In this new climate, witch accusations and persecutions could acquire diverse meanings and serve various purposes. They could also legitimise and fuel a variety of motivations including superstition and belief; gender and social tensions; property disputes and land grabbing; power politics; sexual assaults etc. Land grabbing formed an important underlying motivation behind the new wave of witch killings and single and vulnerable women, particularly those with land rights, the natural and primary targets.

In 1982, Laru Jonko, an activist from Singhbhum, sent Mahasweta Devi a list of 37 persons killed on account of suspicion of witchcraft by the Hos in a short span of time. Most victims, she mentioned, were women and, in each case the design had been to grab the land of the lynched.[79] Sometimes land issues were intermeshed with other socio-economic issues, family disputes, squabbles, and other village tensions.

The violence related to witch hunts also became increasingly layered. After being branded a witch, Chutni Mahatani of Seraikela district was driven out of her home along with her three children. She was tortured by her relatives and neighbours and even forced to eat human excreta.[80] Over the years, this has emerged as a common mode of punishment. The layered character of violence becomes more visible in witch hunts reported in the recent times. In one such incident, Rukni (a widowed beggar), held responsible for the deterioration in the condition of Bandhan Mahto's daughter-in-law was dragged onto streets and thrashed; made to lick shoes, later made to drink human excreta and urine; and then taken to an *ojha*; and finally, locked up in a room for whole night and continuously beaten.[81] Sometimes larger power dynamics are at work. In one such incident, Pushnidevi Manjhi (living in Palani village near Ranchi) was accused of witchcraft by a powerful landlord of the village, Gahan Lal, when the latter's paddy caught fire. She was confined, beaten with bamboo sticks and metal rods, and her nails were pulled out. Later, police investigation revealed that there had been constant fights in the village over land and wages and Gahan Lal wanted to use this occasion to instill fear among the villagers and strengthen his control.[82] Also there in a perceptible increase in cases related to witchcraft accusations among the Dalits

and Muslims. Since the last couple of decades, sexual assaults have become common, the emphasis being on public humiliation. In September 2000, two Adivasi women from Pordha and Haripuri villages in Ranchi district were branded as witches and paraded naked with heads shaven. One of them, a childless widow, owned half an acre of land. The other charged her attackers with rape and accused her husband of plotting the attack. She had apparently tried to dissuade her husband from selling off the piece of land.[83]

Understanding Violence Surrounding Witch Hunts

One requires a careful understanding of violence associated with witch hunts. Witch hunts form one-of-the-least talked about acts of violence in India and have never been duly examined or studied. One of the first to present a serious historical assessment of the subject is Ajay Skaria. He argues that the violence of the witches was 'gratuitous' − anti-social and independent of social causality.[84] The profoundly gendered nature of this violence, he says, was related to the ambiguous position of women in 19th century Adivasi society.[85] Further, the mystical aggression of the *dakans* was seen as following trajectories determined by social relationships.[86]

Some scholars have used the expression 'ritualised'[87] or 'sanctioned'[88] in general to describe or refer to witch hunts, although they do adequately explain the use of such terms. Others have studied such violence under the loose rubric of 'violence of normal times' or 'lived realities'[89] Vinita Damodaran links the rise in witch-hunting since the latter half of the 19th century to the 'pressures of rapid ecological changes combined with the erosion of common property rights and deforestation.'[90] Nathan and Kelkar have argued that categorisation of women and men as witches and witch finders respectively was an essential part of the process of establishing the authority of men. Alongside, witch hunts also represented specific attack on women's land rights.[91] Samar Bosu Mullick investigates myths and legends connected to witchcraft to argue that the targeting of women only formed an external manifestation of a deep-rooted gender struggle as patriarchy in the dominant Hindu society influenced indigenous cultures.[92]

The emphasis in such attributions is on causality of violence and the gendered nature of victimhood. While they do somewhat highlight how such acts enjoyed some kind of a sanction from the community or religion, they do not say much about the structure of such violence and its dynamic nature. From killing around the mid-19 century to fines, dispossession, banishment or killing in the early 20 century, to fines, beating and occasional killing around mid-20th century − violence related to witch hunts have undergone changes over a period of time. They have acquired dramatic new forms in the last couple of decades under the influence of globalisation and caste societies.

In this article, I do not wish to theorise the violence arising or accruing from

[83] T. K. Rajalakshmi, "In the Name of a Witch", *Frontline*, 17.23 (November 11-24, 2000).

[84] Skaria, "Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence", 111.

[85] Ibid., 131-32.

[86] Ibid., 119.

[87] Damodaran, "Gender Forests and Famine", 133-63.

[88] Roy, "Sanctioned Violence", 136-47.

[89] Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar, "Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons: Changing Gender Relations in Adivasi Communities", in Kalpana Kannabiran, ed., *The Violence of Normal Times: Essays on Women's Lived Realities* (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2003), 67-82.

[90] Damodaran, "Gender, Forests and Famine", 147.

[91] Nathan and Kelkar, "Women as Witches", 73-76.

[92] Bosu Mullick, "Gender Relations and Witches", 333-58.

cases related to witch hunting. I do however wish to briefly indicate its attributes and complex nature. In general, witch hunts have a tendency to intensify, complicate and acquire a layered character. As we have seen in the preceding discussion, punishments for practicing witchcraft, either in the colonial past or today, mostly combined two or more elements − beating, expulsion, fine, killing, head tonsuring, dispossession, verbal abuse, social boycott etc. The violence accompanying such cases always followed the pattern of going from 'bad' to 'worse' – at least in the perception of the perpetrators – if the suspect was/is not killed immediately. In the first instance, the 'witch' was/is fined, asked to behave, and otherwise threatened. In case there was/is a reoccurrence of deaths, diseases or mishaps in the village, the accused would be thrashed, driven out, forced to swallow urine and human faeces, drink raw blood of a chicken or killed. All or some of these may happen in one stretch or in succession, though not necessarily in that order.

Meanings and nature of witch hunts have continuously changed in the past. However, they have changed radically in the last couple of decades. One could underline some profound changes. First, though women have been killed or harassed over the question of land, the connections between land grabbing and witchcraft accusations are more visible and apparent now than ever in the past. Second, the site and territoriality of witch hunts have changed − they are no longer a phenomenon internal to a tribe, but have become village affairs. Previously the accuser and accused formed a part of the same tribe or community. However, a number of those accused and punished on account of suspicion of witchcraft now include Dalits and Muslims. Third, there has been a perceptible increase in violence both against and within the Adivasi and marginalised communities. Finally, sexual assaults on the accused are fast emerging as new dynamics in witch hunts. There has been a conspicuous sexualisation of violence, which hitherto had been a practice mostly encountered in caste societies. The idea of publically humiliating/shaming the accused and denigrating their sexuality is increasingly taking the form of a spectacle. Such public trials are indicative of the trend towards formation of new collectivities of violence in the 'Adivasi heartland' − a collectivity which momentarily diffuses the ethnic and social boundaries existing in the village to give witch hunts an extended public character. The participation of the Adivasis alongside other castes and communities often makes such incidents a larger village affair. Any attempt to deal with the phenomenon of witch hunting should not only take into account the dynamic and layered nature of such violence but should adopt a more inclusive approach not necessarily limited to Adivasi communities.