

TEMPEST IN A TEA POT: ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY WITCH  
HUNTS IN THE TEA PLANTATIONS OF BENGAL

By

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To the two most amazing men in my life: my brother Sumit and my husband Arijit.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the meaning and explanations of contemporary witch hunts in the tea plantations of India, using in-depth interviews and archival methods, and drawing from the theories of routine activity and scapegoating in the study of deviant behavior, and gender theories of bargaining and doing gender. More specifically, the dissertation focuses on the circumstances under which belief in witches lead to perceptions of witches and witch hunts in contemporary India. Although the panic outbreak of executions of women as witches in Europe and the American colonies, commonly referred to as “the early modern witch craze,” ended in the 1700s, some women are still being labeled and accused as witches<sup>1</sup> in India and other developing nations. Over the past few decades, local newspapers in India have reported incidents of witch hunting at a fluctuating pace. Though the idea of witch hunts<sup>2</sup> seems shocking to most urban educated Indians, the phenomenon is common among the tribal population of India (Bhil, Ho, Munda, Oraon, Santhal).<sup>3</sup>

The study of contemporary witch hunts in the plantations have been largely ignored in sociology, and the research literature on the pursuit of women as witches in India is scarce and anecdotal (Barman 2002, Mishra 2003, Chaudhuri 1981). The most recent work to discuss witch hunts in India (Behringer 2004) includes no cases from

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<sup>1</sup> Though the concept “witch” refers to female practitioners of witchcraft, I use the concept to refer to both women and men accused of practicing witchcraft.

<sup>2</sup> I will be using the concept “witch hunt” to refer to both incidents where ‘witches’ are hunted, and in cases where accusations are made against individuals.

<sup>3</sup> There are various names of the “witch” in all the languages of India, and there have been reports of allegation of witch hunt type incidents in urban India. Apart from the tribals, there is belief in the phenomenon of the witch among the Hindus and Muslims. This is However, outside the scope of my dissertation.

contemporary tribal settings, despite the fact that there have been hundreds of documented murders (as well as unrecorded ones<sup>4</sup>). There is a huge and growing body of research on historical witch hunts in early modern Europe and the colonies and occasional “extensions” of the patterns found to more contemporary episodes, but those extensions are “metaphorical” rather than empirical; that is, they draw general parallels but do not gather any new data.

The study of witch hunts has not been a popular topic for sociologists, despite the need for a sociological analysis of the current phenomenon. One of the reasons for this neglect is because sociology is a highly specialized discipline, and the study of early modern witch hunts in Europe or in New England did not seem to fall under any one area of specialization. Thus, the topic of witch hunts has been left to historians and those anthropologists who worked on indigenous populations. One exception is *The Path of the Devil* (Jensen 2007), a sociological analysis of the colonial witch hunts, where Jensen argues that witches and witch hunts can be studied under the rubrics of deviance, social control and/or collective behavior in sociology. The selection of the area of specialization in sociology can be dependent on the scholar’s research focus: witchcraft as a form of deviant behavior; witch hunt as a form of social control; or panic reactions in the form of collective behavior.

Witch hunts in India have been largely ignored by researchers specializing on India as well. Indian witch hunts have been neglected in favor of research on caste and caste based conflicts among Indian sociologists. There are two reasons for its neglect.

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from documented cases of witch hunts, there are some cases of witch hunts that do not get reported in the police files or in the media. This is because some of these villages where the hunts take place are in isolated areas where there are no police stations or newspaper offices. These cases have no written documentation (in the form of reports or interviews) and remain “unrecorded”. Existence of such cases can be found through the “word of mouth”.

One, witch hunts involve tribal communities and are not recognized as a general social problem in India. Undergraduate textbooks and other research books on social problems in India do not have a section on the witch hunts despite the fact that they affect a large number of India's population. Second, the neglect of the topic is also due to the marginalization of tribes and tribal issues/problems from the rest of the mainstream population. Tribal scholars who work on the community tend to focus on education, fundamental rights and political issues among the community rather than the issue of witch hunts.

This dissertation adopts a deviant behavior approach to the study of contemporary Indian witch hunts. It addresses the factors contributing to witch hunts in the tea plantations of north Bengal (in the state of West Bengal), a region known for its migrant, tribal labor population. Specifically, this project seeks to explore what defines a deviant (in this case a "witch") in the tribal community and what social conditions lead to a "suitable" labeling of a deviant.

What is unique to cases in contemporary India is that, even as witches are seen as deviants from the perspective of fellow villagers, the victims of witchcraft or the "accusers" are also deviants from the perspective of modern legal codes in India. In the cases where there has been police intervention, the accusers have been prosecuted under sections of the Indian Penal Code that deal with murder. This situation requires a new term in the study of deviance-- "dual deviance."<sup>5</sup> Dual deviance occurs when both the "accusers of witch craft" and the individuals who are labeled as "witches" are "typed" as deviants.

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss the concept of dual deviance in detail in the later section of this chapter.

The time frame of this study is from 1980 to 2006. The project has integrated the sociological literature on deviance and the literature on witch-hunts to understand and explain the factors/conditions influencing witch hunts in India. On a theoretical level, the study will be useful in developing and broadening the scope of sociological theories from a non western perspective towards explaining who qualifies as a “credible deviant”. The data for the study are based on 1) qualitative methods of in-depth interview and field observation (for the contemporary cases 2000-2006); 2) archival data collection methods to get access to police records and newspaper reports (1980 to 1999, as well as supplementary data for the 2000-2005 cases) and 3) a month long ethnographic study of a village in West Bengal where witch hunts are a social problem among the tribal community. In addition to the academic contribution of this study, the study would be useful in formulating future policies related to the anti-witch hunt laws in India. The analysis of the circumstances that lead to beliefs in witches and witch hunts might provide clues towards preventing the occurrence of future witch hunts in India. The analysis of the circumstances along with observations on the anti-witch hunt campaign in the plantations will give clues to future policy makers on how to prevent witch hunts among the tribals.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter Five of this dissertation discusses activism and protests against witch hunts in the plantations. In addition to the previous chapters that discuss the what causes the witch hunts, the inclusion of Chapter five in the dissertation provides a complete picture to the reader through it’s discussion on the frames and strategies the campaign employs to prevent the different categories of hunts.

## Literature review on the study of witch hunts

### *The pre-modern European and the colonial American witch hunts*

The phenomena of witchcraft and witch hunts are well researched topics in anthropology where the topic falls under the study of religion and magic among folk societies (Bailey 1994, Douglas 1970, Mair 1969, Fortune 1932). However, anthropological works on witchcraft and witch hunts have often been criticized by sociologists for not being sociological as such works demonstrate lack of concern with sociological variables of gender, class and kinship (Kennedy 1967),<sup>7</sup> and thus sociologists have left the study of folk societies for anthropologists.<sup>8</sup>

Although the ideas of witchcraft and malicious witches are quite ancient, the notion of the “heretic witch” who makes a pact with the Devil has dominated research on witch hunts. The literature on these witch hunts is heavily centered upon why women constituted more than eighty percent of the victims historically. One type of explanation focuses on witch hunts as an expression of male hegemony with attacks directed at female cults, midwives and women healers.

The literature on the colonial hunts in America, especially on Salem, has concentrated on religious rebellion (especially with regard to ideal female behavior) and inheritance conflicts. In all of these explanations there is reference to the “scapegoat” (in

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<sup>7</sup> For detailed reference on the topic see G John Kennedy, 1967. Psychological and Social Explanations of Witchcraft. *Man*, New Series, Vol. 2, No.2. (Jun.): 216-225 and Max Gluckman 1968. psychological, Sociological and Anthropological Explanations of Witchcraft and Gossip: A Clarification. *Man*, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 1, 9Mar): 20-34.

<sup>8</sup> Due to the alteration in anthropological theory as a response to the above criticism, there was a call for analyses in anthropology to demonstrate how cultural systems communicate between themselves as well as internally (Hutton 2002). One of the notable criticisms of anthropology came from the field itself “which defined anthropology in terms of holistic fieldwork in a small scale society using participant observation, void of all comparative and diachronic interests and skeptical of generalizations across culture” (17).

this case the “female witch”) who was the victim of conflicts over property, religion, social status or social stress caused by epidemics or wars.

The literatures on the New England witch hunts in America (late 17<sup>th</sup> Century) and the pre modern witch craze in Europe attribute witch hunts to gender wars, decline or increase in individual or social economic conditions, and to the search for a suitable scapegoat (Barstow, 1995; Behringer, 2004; Briggs, 1996; Godbeer, 1994; Hill, 1997; Harley, 1990; Karlsen, 1998; Reis, 1997). For instance, Karlsen (1998) argues that economic considerations, especially New England’s system of inheritance, provides clues about the special positions of most accused witches’ vis-à-vis their society’s rules for transferring wealth from one generation to another. Most accused women had no legitimate male heirs in their immediate families and therefore stood to inherit or did inherit the property left by their father or husband. These women were aberrations in a society with an inheritance system designed to keep property in the hands of men. Continuing the gender frame of analysis to witch hunts, Barstow (1994) attributes witch hunts to competition between men and women during changing economic and political conditions in pre modern Europe. The witch hunts took place at the same time as colonization’s and the slave trade, and according to Barstow, all three were made possible by the same “ecclesiastical policies and legal changes.” Women, slaves and natives were objects of exploitation. The witchcraze in Europe helped in reinforcing the traditions of misogyny and patriarchal control, and demonized the image of the woman. (13). For instance, Barstow in discussing why women were attacked in the sixteenth century, explains in most European cases the accused were very poor compared to their accusers. The witch was typically the poorest of the poor who depended on their

neighbors to eat. "...the poor were becoming poorer; more peasants were forced to beg or steal in order to survive. Old, single women, especially vulnerable to this economic crunch, came to be seen as nuisances. When they turned them down, people felt guilty... Then when misfortune occurred, people turned on the beggars, a classic example of blaming the victim." (26)

In some instances, Barstow explains, wealthy women were attacked. This was typical in the later years of the witch hunt, at a time when poor women victims were depleted or when the poor women sort revenge by naming well-to-do women (1994:26-27).

In addition to gender and economy, Karlsen (1998) brings in a third factor tied to the previous two in her analysis: religion. In other words, Karlsen ties gender in the way of sexual terrorism, religion towards explaining witch hunts. Some theoretical explanations refer to witch hunts as a form of sexual terrorism, as a system by which males frighten, dominate and control females. According to Karlsen, the New England settlers also carried with them a dual conception of witchcraft and the menace it posed: witches were not only threats to their neighbors' physical and economic well-being, but were heretics. Witchcraft was viewed as rebellion against God. The constant fear was about the Devil's success in recruiting people to help destroy Puritan churches.

She argues that the New England witch trials revealed that women who resisted the "new truths" of Puritan beliefs on gender roles<sup>9</sup>, either symbolically or in fact were accused of witchcraft. In doing so they were visible reminders of the potential resistance

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<sup>9</sup> Equality of the sexes was seen as a threat to the foundations of New England's social hierarchy. Puritans argued that men and women were spiritually equal, but they did not mean to extend this equality to earthly relations, even that of women to the church. Women were to identify with the needs, goals and interest of the men in their families. Any impulse of the women to speak and act on their own behalf had to be stifled.



in all women. The witch in New England was a human with superhuman powers. Foremost among these was her ability to perform “maleficium”, that is, to cause harm to others by supernatural means. The motive most commonly ascribed was malice, stimulated by pride, discontent, greed or envy. Although the witch’s power could bring harm to anyone, her victims tend to be her close neighbors or other people who knew her well enough to anger her.

Women healers, who aided during illnesses and child birth procedures, were common targets during witch hunts. Barstow (1994) writes that a typical witch in Europe, was a woman who possessed the power of healing a power that everyone believed was also the power to kill. In other words, a witch was a woman who had some kind of a ‘power’ perceived to be a threat to the male dominated society. The power could be in the form of some medical skills or just the ‘power of being out-spoken’, a shrew.

In providing for an explanation of what structured the social action of individuals who motivate witch hunt, Reed (2007) argues that the Salem witch hunts involved a proto-modern state which sponsored legitimate violence during a period of economic transition making it an “excellent case study in social power” (210). He explains the witch trails to be an articulation of the crisis representing gender and social order.

Witchcraft, as a meaning-system, spoke to the nature of the feminine, the battle between good and evil in the bodies and souls of men and women, and the causal connection between the invisible and visible worlds. It sat at the crux of the increasing tension between religion and magic, and between the practical operation of the world and the state of an individual’s soul. And more than anything, it brought out the gendered nature of a precarious Puritan world view. At stake was the nature and legitimacy of male authority (229)

The Salem hunts were a reaction of the Puritan culture towards “meddlesome” women who dared to interfere in the affairs of the world. Witch hunts were a necessary reaction

in a society where not only the self-conscious collective identity of the Puritans as God's chosen people were at stake, but the nature and place of men and women and their relationship to God and the Devil were also at stake (211). Reed thus analyses witch hunts to be functional in a society where social actions are structured by necessity. Witch hunts are perhaps, as Kai Erickson said in his 1962 piece in *Social Problems* "Notes on the Sociology of Deviance", a "normal" response to "abnormal" social conditions. The economic disruption, the religious chaos made the Puritans believe that the Devil has "given up his familiar disguises" and instead was to be found at the very heart of the Puritan colony (Erikson 1966: 158). The witches thus provided a perfect scapegoat to avert blame for problems beyond the control of the isolated Massachusetts community that was "alone in the world, bewildered by the loss of their old destiny but are not yet aware of their new one, and during this fateful interval they tried to discover some images of themselves by listening to a chorus of voices that whispered to them from the depths of an invisible wilderness" (159).

Thus sociologists studying witch hunts in pre modern Europe and Colonial America focus on gender and related variables of economic disruptions, social and moral upheavals as the main motivations behind witch hunts. Witch hunts serve the purpose of maintaining social order in periods of conflicts, and witches are the perfect scapegoats to divert blame for upheavals leading to disruptions.

*Why is there a need to study witch hunts across ethnic and cultural boundaries?*

In the 1960s there rose a need to advocate a global perspective in the study of witchcraft and witch hunt, especially by European historians who acknowledged the

importance of research on witch hunts in the developing world. In the last three decades of the twentieth century most of the research on witch hunts was carried out in the African nations by white western historians who were driven by a need to understand the newly independent modern states (Hutton 2002:16).

Hutton argues that towards the end of the twentieth century, the focus on African communities in witch hunt research was reversed. There arose an abundance of scholarly work on the European and the colonial American witch hunts by historians. Although much of this research on colonial and European hunts consists of a close study of a single case or community, Hutton criticizes this research as it rarely studies data outside the western world. He considers the colonial witch persecutions as “trivial affairs” when the duration and number of victims is considered, compared to the hunts in the non-western world (16-17).

### *Witch hunts in India*

In spite of the focus on witch hunts in some parts of the world, historians and sociologists have ignored the study of witch hunts on India. Anthropologists have conducted (as mentioned before) a number of scholarly studies of witch hunts in other parts of the world, especially among the various tribes in Africa and South America. However, there are only a few studies on witchcraft and witch hunts in India. None of them focus on the incidents in north Bengal (Bailey, 1992; Barman, 2002; Behringer, 2004; Chakraverti, 2000; Chaudhuri, 1981; Kelkar and Nathan, 1991; Mishra, 2003; Nathan et al, 1998).

The literature on India identifies economic conditions, particularly the struggle for property between families, disease and illness, village level conflicts and gender

conflicts as the leading causes of witch hunts (Barman, 2002; Chaudhuri, 1981; Kelkar and Nathan, 1991; Mishra, 2003; Nathan et al, 1998). Though the literature suggests both micro (family disputes) and macro factors (gender issues and diseases) as responsible for prompting attacks, it is difficult to apply these analysis to the witch hunts in the tea plantations. For one, the tribal communities in the tea plantations are migrant laborers, unlike other studies where the people involved are the original inhabitants of the land. For instance, research on witch hunts in the Jharkhand and Bihar states of India, focus on the agricultural land struggles between the tribal widows and their kin as the leading cause of witch hunts.<sup>10</sup> This analysis does not apply to the plantation workers as the tribal workers do not own any land in the area.

Second, the geographical location of the plantations, the economic conditions of the tea plantation community<sup>11</sup> and the place of the tribal communities within it, make it a distinctive case, different from other the communities. The migrant labor community in the plantations is a unique community, with social, political, economical and historical conditions that differ from different from the tribals in the rest of India.<sup>12</sup> While, one is hesitant to suggest that previous studies on witch hunts in India are of no use, one may argue that, given the unique positions of the tribal communities in the tea plantations, it is difficult to generalize from these studies on India to the plantation community. A study focusing on the phenomenon in the tea plantations promises to contribute towards a deeper understanding of witch hunts in that region.

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<sup>10</sup> The bulk of witch hunt research in India is concentrated in these two states.

<sup>11</sup> By tea plantation community, I refer to the owners of the tea plantation, the administrators (i.e. the managers and other executive), workers in the tea plants, and the tea leaf pickers.

<sup>12</sup> I will discuss the socio-historical characteristics of the migrant tribal workers in detail in chapter 2.

### *Women and property*

Scholars studying witch hunts in contemporary India identify gender issues, property rights, diseases and village level politics as the leading causes of witch hunts among the tribal communities. For example, Barman (2002), one of the few anthropologists studying witch hunts in contemporary Bengal, claims that witch hunts are a form of “persecution” towards women, especially widows, who face ‘a condition of marginality culminating in total exclusion from society’. Her analysis, based on the case study of Malda district in West Bengal, India, confirms the findings of previous works on the subject: witch hunts in India are mainly caused due to the struggle for property involving widows and husbands’ kin (Chaudhuri 1981; Kelkar et. al 1991; Nathan et al. 1998). The women who are accused are mostly childless widows, who have a life interest in lands that will pass on to their nearest male relative after their death. By accusing them of practicing witchcraft, those men inherit the land immediately. This persecution is part of a wide assault on women’s traditional rights and part of a successful attempt to establish a patriarchal order, an attempt to force women into a particular gender role that is considered appropriate. It is also a way to discredit the women who have an inside track with the household spirits.

Kelkar et al (1991) also links witch-hunts in tribal Bihar and West Bengal to the land rights of the widow. The right of a widow to the property of her husband is denied, according to the tribals laws, if her husband’s kin are able to prove that she is a witch. According to Kelkar et al. (1991), women in the tribal societies had limited rights over land. The rights of a tribal woman under tribal laws can be of two types: life interest in land (right to manage land and its produce) and right to a share of the produce of the land.

The second right is viewed as some sort of maintenance right for an unmarried daughter of the family, who is given a portion of the land as she has helped to reap it. Kelkar et al. (1991) observes that the 'right to a share of the produce of the land' is very crucial, as it belongs to the woman and can be transferred to her husband's home. Over the years, this right changed from 'rights to a land' to a mere 'right to be maintained' for widows and thus reduced to the barest minimum possible. There are reports in the studies by Mishra (2003), Barman (2002) and Kelkar et al (1991) of pressure from the male heirs of the husband's family, on the widows, to give up the land in exchange for maintenance.

In addition to widows, women with absentee husbands were vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. The threat of such a label increases, especially if she suddenly has an increase in economic status. The threat of such a label comes from neighbors or kin. Mishra (2003) views family and village "politics" as playing a role in depriving the "witch" of her economic assets. Typically, fines are imposed on the woman, accused of practicing witchcraft often in the form of goods (holding a banquet for the village) or money. Sometimes punishments may take the form of banishment from the village.

#### *Diseases and witches*

Major diseases such as cholera, pox, death of family members, livestock, could all be attributed to the handiwork of a witch. A major part of Mishra's (2003) study deals health and law in the tribal areas. The tribal belts of India have some of the worst health facilities in the country. There are very few modern medical practitioners, and as a result the people take help from the witch doctors and midwives (dhais) during illness. Superstition, illiteracy, lack of proper health facilities all contribute towards the faith of

the people in witch doctors (janguru). Though there are a few women witch doctors<sup>13</sup>, the field is dominated by men. These witch doctors serve as ‘medicine men’ and also as a mediator in the daily troubles of the people. They are also viewed as religious ministers or religious priests, the ones next to God, who play an active role in saving the people from epidemics with the help of special knowledge or skills that they possess. The witch doctors also play a crucial role in identifying a witch and instigating a witch hunt.

*Village level politics, gender clashes and witches*

Kelkar et al (1991) lists two major functions of witch hunts. First, witch hunts provides a convenient opportunity for the men of dominant lineage to get rid of any women who oppose the men politically, and second, it is helpful in avoiding social scandals—i.e. to get rid of ‘unwanted females’ (widows; women who have become pregnant outside of marriage). It is through the “janguru” that witches are identified. Village level politics contributes towards the support in the hunt for witches. Typically women from a rival feuding family are labeled as witches, who are responsible for accidents or deaths (Mishra 2003).

The focal point of the study on India by Nathan et al. (1998) is on the notion of witchcraft as cults that are peripheral, marginal and non-structured. These cults were central at one time but are now peripheral, underground and marginal because of defeat and persecution according to Nathan et al. The authors advocate the idea that there might have been a period in the history of man when there was female domination and conflicts related to witchcraft can be viewed from this perspective. While witchcraft can be viewed

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<sup>13</sup> It is not common for women to be witch doctors. But some of the literature on witch hunts has reported the presence of female witch doctors (See Mishra, 2003).

as a rebellion (by women) against the established authority and social order, it can also be viewed as a rebellion by men against women to establish the order of men in society. The perspective on witchcraft as cults, has not been mentioned any other study on India.

Nathan et al.'s study does not provide much evidence on this perspective.

### *Problems with the relevance of the literature to the contemporary cases of witch hunts in the tea plantations*

The literature on witch hunts, both on witch hunts inside and outside of India, identify a number of factors prompting an attack. Yet, on a closer analysis, many of the factors do not seem to be directly relevant to the analysis of the cases in the plantations. Loose use of concepts and weak analysis are some of the problems one finds with the literature on India, particularly because of the tendency of Indian Scholars to “model” their analysis in the mould of the European and American hunts. The following few paragraphs will be devoted towards discussing the problems in some detail as to why contemporary Indian witch hunts, particularly the witch hunts among the tea plantations of India does not follow the western model, and are an unique case in itself.

The first issue addressed is the use of the term ‘persecution’ in the explanation of Indian witch hunts. While some theorists have used the term ‘persecution’ for European witch hunts (Larner 1984) and for characterizing Indian hunts (Barman 2002), the term ‘scapegoat’ is perhaps more applicable to the Indian setting generally. "Persecution" related to religious groups is understood to mean harassing to afflict or injure because of a group's beliefs or characteristics. Acts committed against a religious group may be deemed persecution by observers or by believers, while people committing those acts may see them as being necessary to preserve social order and safety. However, witch



hunts in contemporary India do not seem to be a structured group activity.<sup>14</sup> Most of the cases reported are individual instances of witch hunts occurring in some districts in West Bengal, India. Witch hunts in early modern Europe or colonial New England occurred in panic waves. Cases of witch hunts in India rarely lead to an escalating hunt for more witches. Sometimes the accused are given a fine or are asked to leave the community, similar to cases in early modern witch hunts which resulted in banishment. Such cases might involve a 'hunt for the witch' leading to a trial. In other instances the 'witches' either flee from the village, or are lynched. In some cases the accused is murdered by the accuser with no hunt or trial. The Indian cases involve fines, murder, lynching and banishment.

Karlsen (1998) refers to midwives who were targeted as witches in the colonial New England in her study. In contrast to her study and other accounts of midwives being accused of witches, Harley (1990) argues that the practice of midwifery required the women to be "respectable and trustworthy". Women, who were involved in healing, were occasionally accused, but midwives were generally immune from witchcraft prosecution unless they fell foul of a zealous magistrate or there was some special local belief. He argues that a few cases involving midwife witches have been mistaken for a general pattern. The situation in India seems similar to Harley's theory. Both Mishra (2003) and Barman (2002) acknowledge the importance of 'dhai' (midwife) in their study in the

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<sup>14</sup> One can argue that there is some structure in the Indian hunts. But there are two characteristics in the Indian hunts that can work against its categorization under persecution. One, the Indian hunts are "individual" motivated. That is, these acts are not to preserve social order, but to achieve personal interests of the accuser. In the process the accuser gathers support from the group. Second, and related to the first, because these hunts are individual motivated, and not structured group activity towards other groups, they do not result in panic waves. Thus a single case of witch hunt does not lead to a series of hunts, in the Indian cases.

areas where witch hunts occur. Lack of modern health facilities make the tribals rely on the midwife for pregnancies and child birth, but they are seldom accused of witchcraft.

The issue of gender and witch hunts is also problematic. There is a tendency among scholars to view the victims of witch hunts to be women, even in contexts where some witches are men. In many of the cases studied, such as in New England and pre-modern Europe, the vast majority of the witches were women. But, as in Salem and European witch hunts, there were cases where men were accused and found guilty of witchcraft. Although one might argue that these cases were too few in number or the men accused were related to the women accused, one should not ignore the men<sup>15</sup>. Scholars working on the India phenomenon have placed the topic under violence against women, with no in-depth study. While the primary targets in the Indian witch hunts might be women with possibility of gender power relations at play, particularly in these cases, it will be interesting to understand the motivations behind accusing men of witchcraft.

Another important issue related to the literature on witch hunts is the definition of the concept “witch”. The term seems to refer always to women and there is no equivalent term for men. There are terms like “wizard” or “medicine man,” but such terms do not command the taboo of the term “witch”. For instance, even in cases where men have been hunted (Salem, Europe etc), it has been called witch hunts, instead of “wizard hunts”. Thus the literature on witch hunts does not seem to have a unified definition of the concept of the witch. Given that the meaning of the term across different cultures and tribes in India, it is important that scholars do not just assume a definition. An operationalized understanding of the concept is needed to make the concept measurable.

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<sup>15</sup> There are frequent reports in local newspapers, that report men, sometimes families including children and their parents are accused of practicing witchcraft. (See “Six Land in Net for Killing Family: The Telegraph, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

Thus, a study on the contemporary incidents of witch hunts in the tea plantations will provide the opportunity to make observations on the characteristics and the meanings of the term witch.

Research on witch hunts in the tea plantations of India is virtually non-existent and scholars on India in general either resort to archaic data or questionable samples. For instance, in his most recent book on the topic, Behringer (2004), a leading scholar on global witch hunts, makes no reference to witch hunts in contemporary tribal areas in India, especially after the 1990s, even though he refers to cases after the 1990s in other countries. This may be an oversight, or he may mean to imply that there were no incidents of witch hunts in India after the 1990s. In addition, issues such as inheritance laws and conflicts over land do not seem to fit the tribal community where members of the community do not own any land in the plantations. This study will consider the factors introduced in prior research, and will also consider the factors that may be unique to the tea plantation witch hunts. Thus, a project on contemporary Indian witch hunts will make an important contribution both to sociology and to the study of witch hunts in the developing world in general.

## **Concepts**

This project involves the use and understanding of the following concepts throughout the dissertation: witch, witch hunt, witch doctor, deviant behavior, social control and persecution. The following paragraphs discuss each concept in some detail.

### *Witch*

The term witch is an English term given to the widespread belief in the figure, found in every part of the world, despite all differences of culture languages and mentalities (Hutton 2002:19). The “figure” that the witch represents is a stigmatic label used when “demonizing women as enemies or countering female challenges to male authorities” (Jensen 2007:3). The fear of the witch is inherent in humanity and is part of human’s long-term inheritance (Briggs 1994:394). Hutton identifies five major characteristics of the witch. One, the witch is a person who uses apparently supernatural means to injure others or to cause misfortune. Second, a witch harms members of a community such as neighbors or kin rather than strangers. Third, the witch is inherently evil and conducts actions in malice or envy. Fourth, the witch works in a tradition, meaning that the witch is not an isolated individual but is someone who has training for her skills. Fifth witches can be defeated or removed through the use of counter magic by other individuals (Hutton 2002:19).

### *Witch hunt*

A witch hunt involves the search and pursuit of enemies (witches) based on fantasy and hidden motives (Jensen 2007:3). The key terms used here is “fantasy or hidden motives” signifying that the accused witches are either believed to be guilty by the accusers or are innocent. Jensen argues that witch hunts are a type of social control. They are “organized attempts to control people or groups by lodging accusations of deviance through institutional control mechanisms. Such hunts are earmarked by accusations that are difficult to prove or disprove and by motives other than those publicly professed (32).

In other words witch hunts serve the purpose of social control, a calculated attack,<sup>16</sup> where the accusers have hidden motives and accused witches are innocent. In the “surprise category” of witch hunts,<sup>17</sup> witch hunts serve the purpose of controlling the witch and her evil powers. In this category there are genuine beliefs in witches.

### *Witch doctor*

In every tribal society there are witch doctors. Witch doctors are individuals who specialize in detecting and removing the harmful effects of witchcraft. Though their purpose is to serve the tribal community and protect it from the evil influences of the witches, they usually work for a payment. Hutton explains: “...these specialists would be the first resort of people who suspected that they, or their dependants, relatives or neighbors, had been injured by witchcraft. Direct action against the suspected witch would usually only follow a consultation with such an expert, often acting on information provided by the latter” (2002:19).

### *Deviant behavior*

The concept of deviant behavior refers to human behavior that is outside the normal social norm or outside the acceptable norms of behavior. There are two categories of defining deviant behavior: normative and reactivist (Jensen 2007:10). While the normative definition of deviant behavior focus on the social norms, the reactivist definition turns its attention to how individuals and their behavior come to be defined and labeled in certain ways (11). The focus is on who are making the claims and why and

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<sup>16</sup> The categories of witch hunts in the plantations are discussed under two categories: calculated and surprise. For a detailed discussion on the categories see chapter 4: The Surge of the Evil Eye.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion on surprise category.

how does society react to them. That is, there is the concept of social control and labeling embedded in this definition (Becker 1963, Black 1976, Goode 1994, Jensen 2007).

### *Social control*

Perhaps the most appropriate explanation of social control in the context of witch hunts is given by Gibbs's (1981) three party conception of social control. Social control is the attempt by one party to manipulate the behavior of the second party by means through a third party. This explanation of social control (referential) is different from direct control (proximate) efforts between two parties (Jensen 2007:19). Thus, not all reactions to deviance can be grouped under social control as it requires the intention to manipulate the behavior of the second party through the third party (19). For instance, Jensen refers to the curses as an example of referential social control: "A curse by the rebuked (the first party) is an attempt to affect the charitable behavior of the person solicited (the second party) by invoking the threat of intervention by a third party (e.g., God or Satan)" (19-20).

### *Persecution*

It is important for the purpose of this study to explain the concept of persecution to differentiate the Indian hunts from the western hunts. The concept of persecution refers to strategic attempts encouraged by the dominant powerful groups in a society directed at groups that threaten them (Jensen 2007: 36-37; 44-52). The targets of ritual violence in persecution are symbolic of real targets, that is, the targets are symbolic of a group or category that constitutes real threat to the prosecutors. In others words, where witch hunts are categorized under persecution, the accused witches are symbolic of the female threat

to patriarchy (2007:53). The planned and calculated attack on the threat group, is also another defining characteristic of persecution that does not end with a single attack. Rather, in persecution the strategic attacks culminate in a mass wave of attack towards the threat group.

### **Theoretical model and research questions**

#### *The concept of “dual deviance” and Stinchcombe’s analysis of the logic of functional explanation*

The concept of dual deviance involves deviance at two levels. In level one, there is the deviant group, and the moral entrepreneur group or the labeling group. The deviant group is the group whose actions are considered to be a threat to the moral order of the society or community that the deviant group and the labeling group belongs to. The labeling or the moral entrepreneur group is the group that seeks to maintain the moral boundaries of the community, and is also assigned the task of labeling the deviant group as deviant. The term "moral entrepreneur" was coined by Becker in *Outsiders* (1963). According to Becker, moral entrepreneurs fall into roughly two categories: rule creators, and rule enforcers. Rule creators can be seen as moral crusaders, who are concerned chiefly with the successful persuasion of others, but are not concerned with the means by which this persuasion is achieved. Successful moral crusades are generally dominated by those in the upper social strata of society. There is political competition in which these moral crusaders originate crusades aimed at generating reform, based on what they think is moral, therefore defining deviance. Moral crusaders must have power, public support,

generate public awareness of the issue, and be able to propose a clear and acceptable solution to the problem (Becker, 1963).

In the second level of dual deviance, the moral entrepreneurs are seen as deviants by a third group of people, typically outside the community of the deviant group and the labeling group in the first level. Even though this third group is outside the community, they are a part of the larger community that the groups in the first level belong to. This third group then acts as the moral entrepreneurs in the second level, while the labeling group in level one gets transformed as the deviant group while the original deviant group gets transformed as victims. A good illustration of this concept of can be the recent controversy over the custody battle between the children of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (FLDS) and the State of Texas. On one level are the beliefs and the practices of the members of the FLDS regarding women and children. In this level the leaders of the FLDS act as the moral entrepreneurs, and the members of the FLDS who either choose to leave the FLDS church or are critical of their practices as being abusive towards women and children are the deviant group in this community. At the second level the state acts as the moral entrepreneur with polygamy as a crime and labels the FLDS and its members as deviant. The victims in this case are the women and the children.

Applying this logic to the contemporary Indian witch hunts, at level one the accused witches are the deviants in the community that cause harm and misfortune to the tribal villagers. The accusers, who are typically other villagers, Janguru, village headman, act as the moral entrepreneurs who see the witches as a threat to the stability of the community. The victims in level one are the victims of the witch's evil spell. At level two



the moral entrepreneurs are the police, state and outside the tribal community members who view the accusers as the deviants. At this level witch hunts are seen as a phenomenon that is harmful towards the tribal community, and the victims are the accused witches who are innocent (See figure 1 and 2).

One of the persistent questions for any project on witch hunts is why witch hunts happen? In other words, what function does the witch hunt serve in a community? One of the best explanations of the functional model of witch hunts is given by Jensen (2007:39-44), who applies Stinchcombe's logic of functional explanations (1968) to theories on witch hunts.<sup>18</sup> Jensen explains:

Some type of threat either to society or to some members of a society or to some members of a society (e.g., plague), leads to a decline in security. The minus sign between the threat and the homeostatic variable means as the threat increases, security decreases. People do not like such a state and begin to search for a response (e.g., scapegoating). The minus sign between security and the response means that as security declines, the search for response increases. Finally for the response to function as expected, it has to reestablish security (the homeostatic condition)—hence, the positive sign between the response and the homeostatic variable. In the example, scapegoating increases and security increases (i.e., a positive relationship). A variety of different threats, homeostatic variables, and responses can be found in the witch hunt literature (40)

Applying Stinchcombe's model and Jensen's adaptation to contemporary Indian witch hunts, one can explain why the hunts continue to occur in the tribal communities. In tribal societies threat to society or some of its members can occur in the form of diseases or illnesses. This undermines security in the society and elicits a response in the

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<sup>18</sup> Functionalism came under harsh criticism from the 1970s. Stinchcombe's model seems to answer most of the criticisms leveled at functionalism. "Nothing is assumed about the nature of homeostatic variables—except, of course, that they must be of certain practical value to a group of people...Change, while provoked by extraneous factors, is inherent to the system...Moreover the model is not alien to a notion of revolution. And since the environment of a system can never be controlled, there is also no need to assume an end-state involving total equilibrium." (Arditi, 1988) Arditi extends Stinchcombe's model to show how equilibrium structures, structural conditions and social conflicts are variations of the extended functional model.

form of the hunt for a scapegoat that would take the blame for undermining the stability in the community. The scapegoat takes the form of witches, and the fear displacing response takes the form of witch hunts (See figure 3 and 4).

### *Scapegoat and Routine Activity theory*

Sociologists studying the phenomenon of witch hunts have used a variety of theories from deviance literature to study witch hunts (Erickson 1962; Jensen 2007; Ben Yehuda 1980). The most popular among them are functional theory and scapegoat theory. While the functional standpoint (Erickson 1962) refers to deviance as the “normal” response to “abnormal” social conditions, scapegoating refers to the punitive or negative treatment of people or groups who are held accountable for crisis or problems they did not cause (Jensen 2007: 53). Although the concept is widely used to explain the early modern witchcraze and the persecution of various populations at different times in history, scapegoating as a concept is rarely discussed from a sociological standpoint. Jensen (2007:53) argues that researchers have paid little attention to theory of scapegoat and how it differs from the term persecution. In scapegoating, the target takes the blame for the crisis that is threatening the group as either “as an intentional diversionary tactic or as a cathartic displacement of anger and frustration” (53).

Scapegoating is used as an excuse for persecution in history (for example: Jews, witches, lepers) by elites who displace anxiety towards a minority group to “avert blame for problems they could not solve...” (Jensen 2007). Throughout history various groups were targeted as threats by the elites to divert blame. At various points in time witches and Jews were identified as threat groups. In reference to contemporary witch hunts in

India a central question is what (social) conditions make it necessary to search for a scapegoat? Is any evidence of famines, drought, and epidemics-problems that elites cannot solve in places where hunts are prevalent? Second, what characteristics contribute towards a credible scapegoat? Is it related to gender, lower economic strata or other forms of social vulnerability?

While the general questions asked by scapegoat theories might be useful in analyzing the macro factors associated with the Indian witch hunts, a good supplement would be bringing in a theory which is capable of providing leads to the micro factors leading to witch hunts. Bringing in routine activity theory in deviance would perhaps fulfill that requirement. In addition, a sociological study on contemporary Indian hunts will be a significant contribution towards scapegoat theories and routine activity theory in the literature on deviance by trying to fill up some of the gaps associated with the theories.

The central logic of routine activity theory (Akers and Sellers, 2004) is that the rate of criminal victimization increases when there is a convergence in time and space of three variables: motivated offenders, suitable targets of criminal victimization and a lack of capable guardians of persons or property. The theory addresses the importance of social control in its reference to “capable guardians of property or persons”. It will be particularly interesting to analyze whether witch hunts in the tea plantations are a function of social control in the community. Witches are viewed as “deviants” and the informal control system acts to punish the witches to bring order in the community. It will also be interesting to analyze the importance of guardians (formal and informal) in “crime prevention and deterrence”. One of the criticisms of routine activity theory is that

it downplays the significance of formal guardians in crime prevention and deterrence.

Felson (1994) emphasizes the crime prevention and deterrence that occur in the informal control system. In reference to witch hunts in certain parts of India, research suggests the presence of formal and informal control systems that in some cases act as a deterrent or in some cases as a protector of the offenders.<sup>19</sup> Another major criticism of the routine activity theory is that at least one of the major categories of variables of the theory is omitted in empirical research, and usually it is the “presence of motivated offenders”. The theory is also criticized due to lack of adequate measures of ‘suitable targets’ and ‘absence of capable guardians’ (Akers and Sellers, 2004).

The measure of “suitable target” is tied to the concept of what makes a target both credible and vulnerable. To be a “credible” target, the target has to have some “power” and few resources to resist. The victim of the scapegoat cannot have more power than the “motivated offenders”, or else the target will not be vulnerable enough for a “suitable target”. In reference to the Indian witch hunts, literature suggests that women with property without male relatives (widow or single woman) may be the ideal targets for witchcraft hunts (Barman, 2002; Mishra, 2003).

Based on the above arguments, one can outline the following research questions:

RQ1. *Does the presence of formal control system (either directly or indirectly) act as a deterrent to witch hunts in India?* Indirect presence refers to the intervention of the police only when a hunt for the ‘witch’ is reported. Often after a witch hunt or a murder of a suspected witch, the offenders flee the village to escape police arrest. Do formal laws

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<sup>19</sup> For instance recent cases reported in newspapers suggest that police often arrive later at the scene of crime or prefer not to help when a complaint has been lodged. On the other hand, some reports suggest that informal control systems within the tribal community such as the village headman or the witch doctor often instigate the attack on the accused witch.

thus act as a deterrent to witch hunts? Can the presences of strong formal social control agents cause a decrease in witch hunt rates?

RQ2. *Are witch hunts/hunts more likely to occur when there are the presence of the three variables outlined by routine activity theory: motivated offenders, suitable targets of criminal victimization and lack of capable guardians of persons or property?* Motivated offenders refers to individuals or groups who think that they stand to gain by the hunt on the individual, either in terms of economy (land, money in the form of fines, settlement of disputes) or psychology (ailment of a relative cured by the hunt). Suitable targets refer to individuals who had some prior conflict with the instigators and have low retaliatory power. Capable guardians refer to both formal (police) and informal (village headmen, elders) social controls, which either help in instigating or deterring the instigators. Added to this is the belief in the prejudice of witchcraft that links the three variables and the reaction to the offenders.) The time and space dimension is also relevant in this case as, according to this theory, there has to be a convergence of the three variables for witch hunts to occur.

RQ3. *Are witch hunts higher in communities where the community is isolated from the mainstream population and is homogenous in its social structure?* In other words, as structured enemies in these states are absent, people look for hidden enemies in their neighbors for causes of death, misfortune or other accidents. The lack of structured conflict and the homogenous nature of the community might lead to higher rates of witch hunts. In the Indian context, the tea plantations, where the hunts occur, are isolated both

geographically and in relation to community life. The tea leaf pickers or the laborers live on the plantation permanently and have a homogeneous social structure. They live in areas called the “labor lines” that are situated in the outskirts of the plantations, far removed from the houses of the management of the tea estate. The labor lines have poor basic amenities, such as electricity, water, school and health and are an isolated unit within the plantation. Currently the tea industry in India is undergoing problems in tea production. Conflict over labor payment and strikes are common between the workers union and the management. In other words, the workers live an isolated community life and have a homogeneous social structure. However, there is conflict between the management and the workers. So what prompts the attacks on the witches in the first place in these plantations? Does having a structured conflict with the management of the tea plantations prevent the witch hunts to break out into a mass panic attack instead of isolated incidents?

RQ4. *Is there a connection between disease rates and rates of witch hunts in the community?*

RQ5. *Is there a connection between the low social status of individuals and individuals being a suitable target for witch hunts. Do women with property, skills at midwifery and male guardians face less of a threat of attacks as witches?*

RQ6. *Are “suitable targets” and “motivated offenders” always known to each other in a witch hunt leading to a hunt? Geographical proximity of the witch accuser and*

the accused is important. Rarely do the hunts involve strangers. The targets and the offenders can be related either through blood, marital, occupation or through physical proximity (neighbor).

### *“Doing Gender” and “Bargaining Theory”*

The concept of “gender” refers to social expectations in the form of rules and behavior for the individual in everyday life. Gender is a social product rather than merely a result of biological sex differences. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), “doing gender” involves socially guided behavior and interactions that are constantly created expressions of an individual’s masculinity or femininity. Thus, in “doing gender” (at least in traditional societies), men are expected to behave in ways that construct them as powerful, dominant and in control of socio-economic and political order. Women are expected to behave in ways that (re)create a subservient, weak and subordinate in status. Doing gender is situational, However, and individuals may do gender differently under different circumstances (e.g. at work and at leisure). Also there may be multiple ways of doing gender correctly. However, if individuals fail to “do” gender in an appropriate enough manners, there are responses in the form of social sanctions.

RQ7. *It is difficult to prove the existence of witches or find real evidence of witches. Witch hunts are not directed at real witches (Jensen 2007:12, 18). Instead they are individuals who are “victimized” for particular characteristics. Thus, are witch hunts a response by society towards individuals who do not adequately do gender in conventional ways? For instance, the literature on witch hunts has often mentioned that*

women who have healing powers, midwives, or women who have some economic control are viewed as a threat to the patriarchal order. What about the men who are accused? Witch hunts effects men and women differently, and the way they impact men and women could give some clues into gendered relations.

According to the bargaining model of relationships, the bargaining position of each partner is affected by gender specific economic and other opportunities and by changes over time in the value of women's sexual and domestic resources, depending on the specific cultural and social setting (Nathanson and Schoen, 1993). In patriarchal societies, family and community honor are maintained through social and sexual control of women (Yount, 2002). Especially in communities where they have limited economic opportunities, in the typical tea plantation villages, women are "vulnerable" to accusations of witchcraft. They are perhaps under constant pressure to prove that they do gender in conventional ways. In other words, both the accused and the accusers are under pressure to maintain conventional ways of doing gender. The accusers, particularly the women accusers, could "bargain" adherence to patriarchal norms (such as subordinate status, dependency on men) for male protection. In some societies this may take the form of women supporting female circumcision or even supporting the burning of "witches".

RQ8. *Why do women support attacks on women as witches?* In the instances where witch hunts/hunts occur and women are targeted, often other women in the community participate in the attack on the witch. Typically the accusations come from older women in the household or from a neighbor's wife. In societies where there are



limited opportunities for women, do women support the hunts as a part of their bargain to get security from them?

*“The midwife myth”*

Midwifery has been one of the popular explanations for the selection of some women as popular targets of witch hunts. Even though the midwife explanation has been much discredited by scholars, the issue is still raised in nearly all published research.

RQ9. *Why midwives in the tribal communities in India cannot be suitable targets for witch hunts?*

Margaret Murray in her 1921 book, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* presents a fascinating study of the witchcraft cult in Great Britain. Using sources such as legal records of trials, accounts of witches, Murray provides a detailed insight into the rites and ceremonies performed by the members of the cult. Her work is often cited for its much debated analysis: a witch will always be condemned, even if she used her skill to heal rather than cause illness, if it was proved that she had obtained her knowledge through the devil. Using examples from fertility cults of witchcraft practitioners and the midwife-witch, she sums up her argument on page 170: “...in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the better the midwife the better the witch”. Murray’s arguments have been one of the most influential researches for Wiccans and feminist scholars, who view the sixteenth and seventeenth century witch trails as the “burning times” when female power was challenged by the church in an attempt to restore patriarchy. In her book, Murray

refers to five cases of the midwife-witch<sup>20</sup> out of a sample of more than four hundred witches who have faced trials. Yet, out of these four hundred cases, characteristics of these five witches has been claimed to be the general pattern of most accused women.

Almost all discussions of witch hunts at various time periods and geographical locations bring up the connection of midwives and witches. Research on witch hunts is currently classified under two camps: those who support the midwife explanation, namely the tradition started by Ehrenreich and Deirdre's (1973) conflict theory perspective that stated witch hunts to be a strategic persecution started by the males in the medical profession (Jensen 2007: 158); and those who oppose it (Estes 1983; Scarre 1987; Harley 1990; Willis 1995). Scholars devote anything from a few lines to an entire section addressing the issue. Most of their arguments are concentrated upon whether or not the midwife argument fits analysis of witch hunts. What is missing in most of these debates is the issue of why midwives may not be suitable victims of scapegoating in the first place.

References to midwife-witches can be found as early as in the writings of fifteenth century demonologists such as Johannes Nider (*The Formicarius*, 1473) and Sprenger and Kramer (*Malleus Maleficarum*, 1487). The obsession of the *Malleus* with children, impotence and infanticide arose from a "deep seated fear of the power of women" (Harley 1990). Though the publication of the *Malleus* and similar demonological works did not immediately trigger off massive witch hunts, which occurred nearly a century later, it did become a "potent" authority for later demonologists in the sixteenth century when it began to be republished. As Harley notes, this view

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<sup>20</sup> See Murray (1921) for : Jonet Clark and Bessie Roy, Edinburg, 1590 (pp 170); Montvoisin, Paris (she was not charged, pp 171); Anges Sampson, 1590 (pp 206); Margaret Clarke, Aberdeen, 1597 (pp 207).

passed from the demonologists to other forms of writing with little verifiable evidence. The myth of the midwife-witch traveled across centuries to become an indispensable part of the campaign for women's access to health care (3).

Midwives and witches resurfaced as a popular explanation of witch hunts due largely to Ehrenreich and English's 1973 work *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*. Their theory was the foundation for a feminist interpretation of how the profession of women healers came to be undermined by the (male) medical profession through what they termed as an "active takeover" (3). Ehrenreich and English framed the conflict as a part of a political class struggle where the knowledge of the women healers were a part of the subculture. They traced the chronology of the male takeover of health care from the witch craze in the fourteenth century that was an organized campaign, financed by the Church and State.

Witches were viewed to have the power both to heal and harm. Ehrenreich and English provide an interesting argument in their research where the witch hunts were a class struggle between the age old wisdom of the wise women versus the modern medical profession. As a result of this struggle, women healers and midwives came to be viewed as superstitious and malevolent, and the male medical profession (mainly doctors) gained in prestige.

Midwives, women healers, wise women had special status in a society where medical knowledge was limited. They played an important role in childbirth, reproductive knowledge and their special position in the society made them seem to be vulnerable. Their vulnerability was in a period of "increasing fear of woman--woman viewed as an evil sexual creature" (Quaife 1987: 93). The midwife was a "nurturing

neighbor” who offered aid and advice to other women about child care, ailment and domestic management that often included magic. Midwifery for example included a range of magical techniques that ensured the safety of mother and child during child birth. But midwives could also use their knowledge in causing injury and harm. The midwife-witch “was in a sense gossip gone bad, a woman who brought envy, anger, and hatred into a community’s informal networks of female neighbors. She used her mothering powers to betray other women.” (Willis 1995:35).

Another common argument tracing the midwife-witch is the link with syphilis, misogyny and women as targets for witch hunts. Witches were linked to sexual diseases and the spread of the syphilitic epidemic across Europe is often said to coincide with the witch craze in Europe. Andreski (1989) proposes that the timing of witch hunts in Europe fits perfectly with the timing (1500-1700) of the epidemic. He gives a rather detailed argument on how the syphilis argument explains the targets (midwife-witch) and sexual depravity attributed to witches (Jensen 2007). However, a number of research have discarded the syphilis explanation of witch craze mainly because of lack of temporal synchronization of these two events: “...the most virulent phases of witch hunting occurred more than a century after the epidemic phase of syphilis” (2007:65).

In spite of much debate, the midwife-witch argument is rather appealing due to its attractiveness in fitting in a “patriarchal reaction to women in power” argument. Witch hunts fall under the topic of gender violence along with honor killings, date rape, dowry deaths and the common issue in all these topics is why women and certain women are victims to such violence.

### *Anti-witch hunt protests*

There are some movements or protests against the witch hunts organized by non governmental bodies (NGOs). The purpose of this dissertation is to explain and understand contemporary witch hunts in India so that future incidents can be prevented. The role of NGOs in creating awareness against future witch hunts is enormous, and it is interesting to analyze the methods that the NGOs use in conducting campaigns.

RQ10. *What are the “frames” that NGOs use in conducting anti-witch hunt campaigns? At whom are the frames directed at?*<sup>21</sup>

The above questions will provide a framework for addressing several broad research questions: What social factors contribute to witch hunts? Are these factors based on gender, economics or social characteristics as outlined by scapegoat theory, or are they based on the three variables outlined by routine activity theory: motivated offenders, suitable targets of criminal victimization and (in) capable guardians of persons or property or a combination of both? Second, what purpose does a witch hunt serve in a community? Are witch hunts viewed as “functional” by community members for the establishment of social control in a community? Who makes a suitable target in a witch hunt?

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<sup>21</sup> The Goffmanian definition of frames as “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large is widely accepted today by most frame scholars in social movements. A detailed explanation on frames is discussed in Chapter 5.

## Summary comments

Witch hunts in contemporary India occur primarily among the tribal populations of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Jharkhand. While there are a few studies on the witch hunts in these states (Barman, 2002; Chaudhuri, 1981; Mishra, 2003; Nathan et al, 1998), witch hunts, particularly among the tea plantation workers of Bengal, are neglected issues among both policy makers and academic scholars. The districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Cooch-Bihar in Bengal are known for both their tea plantations and incidents of witch hunts that occur within it. Tribal populations exist along with the mainstream non-tribal population in these districts, but are marginalized. In these three districts the Ho, Munda and Oraon are the dominant tribes. These tribes were brought from neighboring states when the British set up the tea plantations 150 years ago. They work mainly as tea leaf pickers and their socio-economic situation (such as level of literacy, social structure and religious beliefs) has changed very little since then. What makes it an interesting study is the fact that tribals have a distinct religious affiliation from the rest of India. For centuries, tribals have practiced their own religion, and belief in the witch and witchcraft is an important component of it. Witch hunts are common among them, and it is particularly interesting to study the factors responsible. While there are no anti-witch hunt laws in India, the accused are punished on grounds of physical assault or murder by the legal system, if they get caught. On the other hand witches are viewed as “deviant” in the tribal social structure as they cause harm to the community. It is particularly interesting to study a phenomenon where both the accusers and the accused are viewed as deviant under two separate set of “laws”, unlike the

European or Salem hunts, where the witches were the only deviants and only one set of “laws” applies. This dissertation aims to answer two key questions:

How to understand and explain contemporary Indian hunts, especially the witch hunts among the tribal workers in the tea plantations of India?

- What structures the social action of individuals involved in instigating the hunts?
- What social factors leads to the hunts in the plantations

Second, what makes a witch credible?

- Who qualifies?
- Are witch hunts functional for the community?
- Are witch hunts a response by the community towards individuals who do not follow gendered roles and norms?
- How can we interpret the meaning of punishments given to the accused witches?
- Why do women support the attack on women as witches?

In Chapter 2, the socio-historical setting of the study is discussed, and the chapter argues how the unique historical position and social isolation of the tribal migrant laborers qualifies the research as “sensitive research”. The chapter discusses the methodological section of the project and examines how the methods used are tied to the original research questions.

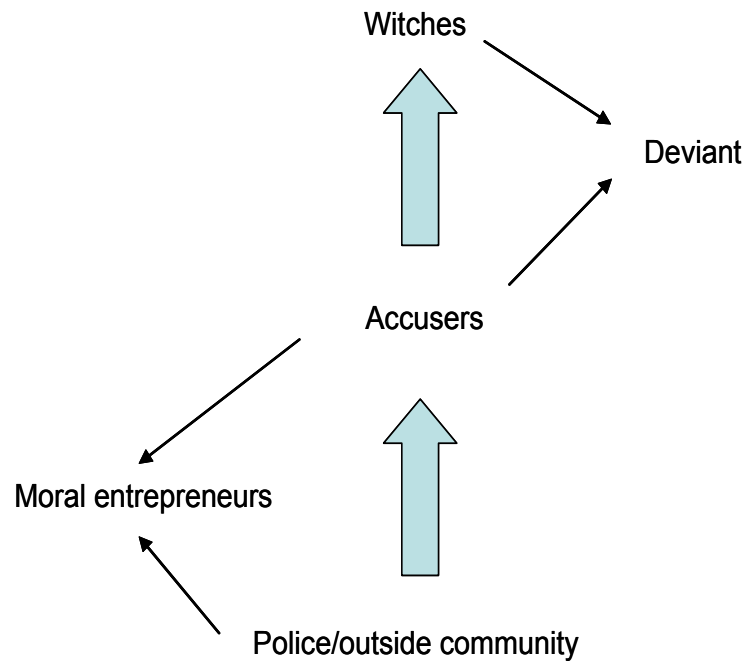
Chapter 3 discusses narratives from four selected case studies, each case representing a category in the classification of witch hunts. The second part of this chapter deals with the descriptive statistics and discussion of the data over twenty six years.

Chapter 4 discusses the social factors that lead to the hunt in the plantation and the relation of illness and disease. The chapter relies on interviews with accused witches, the accusers and victims of witchcraft, as well as data from the archives to explore how the fear of the scourge of the evil eye leads the entire village to participate in the hunt.

Chapter 5 follows the anti-witch hunt campaign of a non profit organization in the plantations. Using the concept of “frames,” the chapter aims to analyze how frames are used to attract the audience of campaign. The chapter also describes the struggle of the plantation management workers in their day to day lives in relation to wages, development, health, alcoholism and empowerment of women. It aims to provide a link between the daily stresses and witch hunts. In other words, it explains how the witch hunts are a manifestation of deeper conflicts between the workers and their daily stresses, where the workers use this ‘extreme deviance’ to attract attention to their cause.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion and discussion section of the dissertation, and it summarizes the main findings and the implications of the study. It ends with the directions towards future research.





**Figure 1. MODEL OF DUAL DEVIANCE**

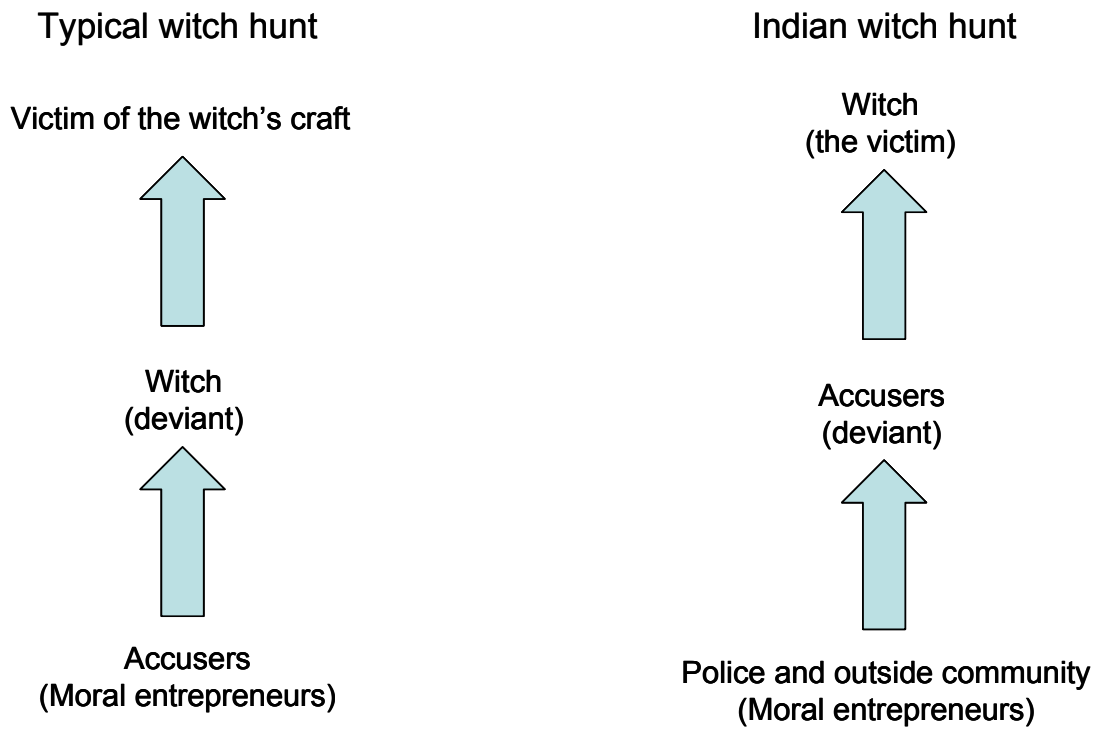
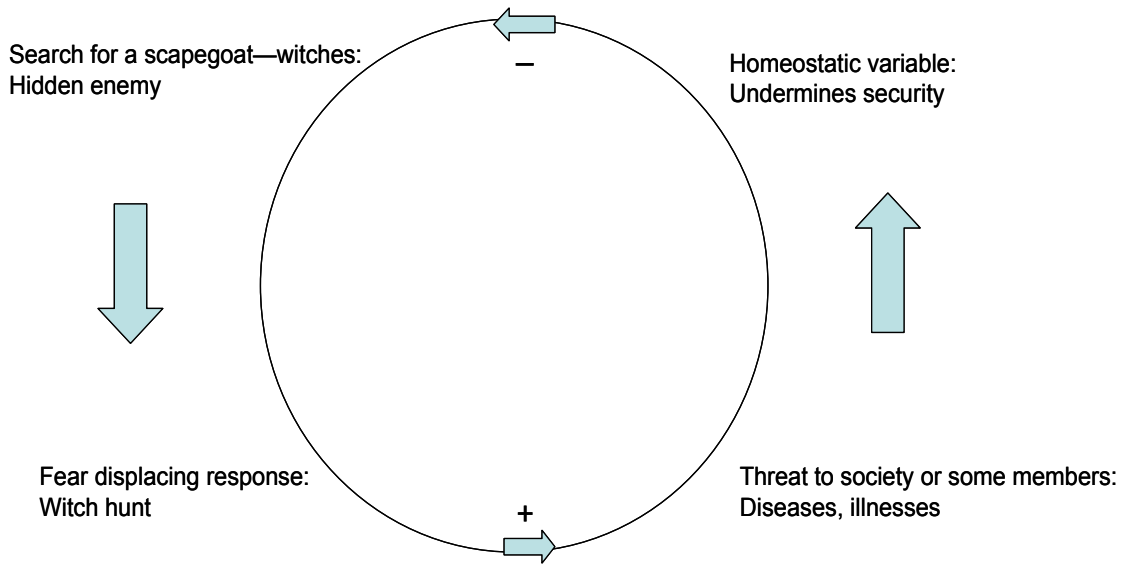
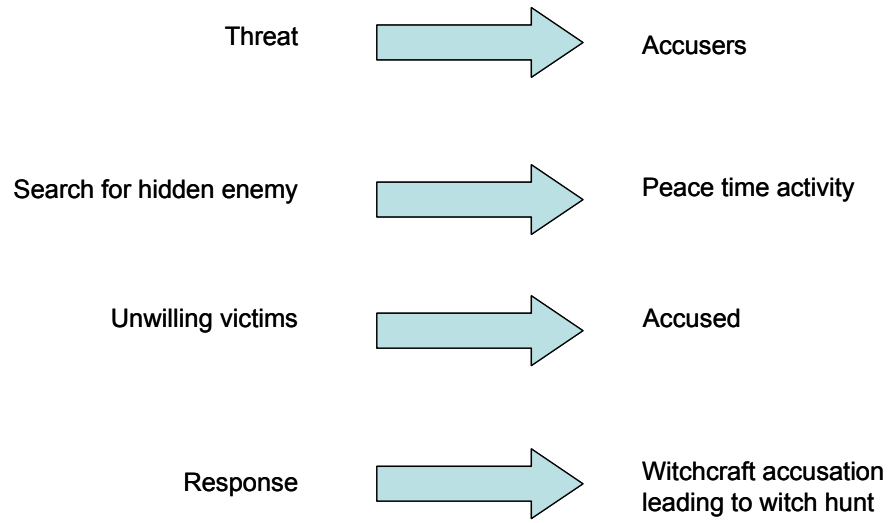


Figure 2. MODEL OF DUAL DEVIANCE (CONT'D)



**Figure 3. SCAPEGOAT THEORY AND WITCH HUNTS: THE LOGIC OF FUNCTIONAL EXPLANATIONS**  
 (Adapted from Jensen 2007, Stinchcombe 1968)



**Figure 4. SCAPEGOAT THEORY (CONT'D)**

## CHAPTER II

### **A HISTORY OF THE TEA PLANTATION, MIGRANT TRIBAL WORKERS AND METHODS: THE CASE FOR SENSITIVE RESEARCH**

“How can an avid tea drinker today sympathize with the predicament of pahalwan Ramsuk Tewari, an inhabitant of Bundi...As was the tradition, he migrated to Bengal, seeking his fortune. But, alas within two monsoons Ramsuk turned into a tea addict. It so happened that he began to suffer from dyspepsia and to lose weight daily. In a humorous poem...Kumudranjan Mallick, a well know Bengali poet of the 1930s, described his subsequent fate:

At last hearing the news of his illness, a man from his native village came rushing and gave Ramsuk an earful of the choicest in his local dialect and at the very first instance stopped him from drinking tea.

Following his country-cousin’s diktat, Ramsuk Tewari regained his health and life returned to its familiar ways: Tulsi’s Ramayana, a regular diet of dal-roti and, of course, no tea” (Bhadra 2005:1).

#### **History of the establishment of the tea plantations in the dooars region**

##### *Dooars and the district of Jalpaiguri*

The geographical location of this study covers the district of Jalpaiguri in the state of West Bengal, India<sup>22</sup>. The district of Jalpaiguri is known primarily for her tea plantations. According to the Tea Board Statistics of India, the total area of land for the production of tea in India is 89025.19 hectares and the district of Jalpaiguri covers approximately two thirds of this area for tea produce (Bhowmik 1981). The tea growing area in Jalpaiguri is a part of the Dooars region<sup>23</sup>. Geographically the Dooars consist of

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<sup>22</sup> See figures 4 and 5 for maps of India and West Bengal.

<sup>23</sup> The term “Dooars” comes from the English word “door”. Dooars mean “door to Bhutan”. Jalpaiguri was a strategic location for the British to get access to trade in Bhutan and it was not until 1864 that the district was annexed by the British from Bhutan.

the area that runs along the foothills of Bhutan, with the river Teesta on the west and the river Sankos in the east. The Dooars region or the tea growing area of Jalpaiguri is a flat strip of land about twenty two miles broad, and nearly two hundred miles long, surrounded by Bhutan and Darjeeling district in the north and the Cooch Behar district and Baikantapur forest in the south (ibid). The area is perfect for growing tea because of its high density of rainfall and red loamy clay soil that is very permeable.

### *History of tea plantation in India*

The history of tea plantations in India started in the late nineteenth century when the first tea bush was brought to this region by a colonial planter. The first tea plantation was established by a British planter named Dr. Brougham at Gazelduba in the Dooars in 1874 (Chaudhury and Varma 2002). In establishing the tea plantations, the British planters faced two hurdles: one, the area for plantation had to be cleared of forests and two, there was an inadequate supply of laborers. The indigenous population of the region (the Bhumiputras: Rajbansis, Mechs, Totos) were reluctant to join the plantation as laborers as they (a cultivating community) were traditionally resistant to join as industrial wage laborer. At the same time, the tribal regions in the neighboring states of Bengal, especially in the Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas region, were experiencing both political and economic crisis due to the British land policies such as the Permanent Settlement Act<sup>24</sup>. It was this population that provided the much needed labor force for the

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<sup>24</sup> The Permanent Settlement Act passed in 1793, was an agreement between The East India Company and the native-non tribal landlords (Zamindars) to have fixed revenue for the land that the Zamindars controlled. The Act prevented small landholders to sell their land. In addition, the Company officials and Indian landlords forced their tenants to grow cash crops such as indigo and cotton rather than rice and wheat. The Permanent Settlement Act was one of the primary causes of the worst famines of the nineteenth century. In addition, tribal society was going through a state of unrest and Hinduism was slowly making its

tea plantations in the Dooars (Bhowmik 1981; Bhowmik, Xaxa and Kalam 1996; Chaudhury and Varma 2002). Traditionally, and continuing to this day, the bulk of the workforce in the plantations are composed of a number of tribal groups such as Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Kharowar, Mahli, Santhal and Gond. Oraon consist of the largest population of tribals in the tea plantations. The migrant tribal population is known as the Madesia and constitutes about ninety percent of the total workforce in the Dooars tea region (Dasgupta and Khan 1983).

The history of plantations all over the world is the history of a colonial production house, where the products were produced primarily for western consumption. The development of plantations anywhere required large areas of land and a large labor force. The tea plantation industry in India was set up on the basis of coercion, low wages and an immigrant labor force. Added to this was political support which given by the British government in India to the planters regarding their rather coercive methods of procuring labor (Bhowmik 1981; Bhowmik, Xaxa and Kalam 1996). For the British capitalists it was profitable but for the main actors in the tea plantation-the laborers-“it was a tragedy of great dimension” (Jha 1996:16).

### *Migration of the laborers*

The migration of the tribals, from Chotanagpur to the Dooars for employment in the plantations is not documented. Folklore and oral traditions of the tribals mention the tremendous hardship and torture that the migrants had to undergo under the “garden

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presence felt in the community. The community was growing through a process of Sanskritization, which was creating divisions within the tribal social structure. This, along with the changes brought about by the Permanent settlement act of 1793, the infiltration of non-tribals (Dikhus) and the British in the tribal lands, resulted in the displacement of the lands for the tribals, leading to their migration towards the Dooars.

sardars<sup>25</sup>” or the middlemen that were employed by the colonial planters to recruit the laborers. As Chaudhary and Varma write, "Though the indenture system was not used, the method of recruitment through a garden sardar could hardly have been free of unscrupulous methods, deception and even outright violence against men, women and children. The recruits were kept in prison like transit depots, and sent to the tea gardens under heavy guard" (2002: 22).

The recruitment of these migrant workers in the initial stages was family based. The tribals were encouraged to migrate to the plantations with their families. This strategy served two purposes: first, the planters wanted cheap labor who would be permanently settled in the plantations and this could only be achieved by encouraging families to migrate rather than individuals. The entire family then (males, females, children) worked on the plantations at wages determined by the planters. Second, family migration ensured that labor could be reproduced which would ease the problem of further recruitment in the future (Bhowmik, Xaxa and Kalam 1996).

### *Labor lines*

The laborers were kept in area known as the “labor lines” in the plantations. These areas initially were not much dissimilar from the slave quarters in nineteenth century America. Lack of modern drainage system, poor hygiene conditions, control over drinking water by the planters, badly constructed huts for the laborers and over crowding in the labor lines made living conditions very hard for the tribal workers. The poor state of living and work conditions made the tribal laborers susceptible to a number of diseases

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<sup>25</sup> Tea plantations are referred as ‘tea gardens’ in the plantation terminology. Thus the term “garden sardar” is used. The term ‘sardar’ means ‘headman’.



such as cholera epidemics, high infant mortality rates, malaria, black fever and dysentery (Chaudhury and Varma 2002).

Little has changed for these laborers in these last 150 years. The labor lines even today have no electricity or running water and the health conditions are very poor. The labor communities have very high rates of infant mortality, anemia, cholera epidemics along with endemic fever, black fever, diarrhea and malaria. Lack of "modern" health facilities and government health aid, make these communities dependent on local "alternative" medicine, that are mostly administered by people in the community with little or no formal training (Bhadra 1997; Chaudhury and Varma 2002 ).

### *Class hierarchy*

The plantation system has a very strict class hierarchy that maintains structure between the management and the workers: Management, Staff, Sub-staff and workers. The management consists of the manager, assistant managers and the factory manager. The staff is mainly white collar personnel, and the sub staff comprises the lower level supervisors. The tribal workers consist of the bulk of the population in the plantation. The hierarchy in the work organization is fairly elaborate. There are several intermediaries between the manager and the tribal workers, and in fact many of these strata exist only to relay orders from the top and widen the social distance between the management and the tribal workers. The management of plantations, as it existed more than a century ago, is based on fear and maintenance of social distance (Bhowmik, Xaxa and Kalam 1996).

## **Tea industry, workers and tea bushes**

India is ranked first amongst the tea producing nations of the world with an annual production of 750 million kilograms of tea and is both the largest consumer and exporter of tea. Tea production is confined among the four states of Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. West Bengal has two tea producing districts: Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. Tea plantations with a total employment of 1.5 million workers are the largest employer of workers in the organized sector (Bhowmik, Xaxa and Kalam 1996).

In the years prior to the Indian independence (1947) there was no formal regulation of work in the plantation. There were no laws that regulated the work hours, conditions of work, living conditions of plantation laborers and though the tea plantations were recognized as an industry, relations between the planter and the worker was that of master and servant rather than of employer and employee. (Bhowmik 1981) Prior to Independence, though the British owned a bulk of the plantations in the Dooars, there were Indian owners as well, although the condition for the tribal workers were appalling in both set ups. Even though the Plantation Labor Act of 1951, a landmark act in the history of labor, laid down rules for the welfare of labor and conditions of work, tea plantations function to this day under extreme neglect of labor laws.

As mentioned earlier, these plantations practice “the family system of employment” which means that adult males, adult females, adolescents and children are employed but are paid wages on scales different from the one prescribed under the Plantation Labor Act. Since the workforce consists of tribal migrants who are largely illiterate and ignorant about labor policies with little or no unionization, conditions in the tea plantations have resulted in a high degree of exploitation through low wages, long

hours of work, strenuous working environment, prevalence of child labor and poor or almost non-existent medical facilities. The problems of the tribal workers are rarely focused in the newspapers or journals or discussed at workers forum (Bhowmik, Xaxa and Kalam 1996).

The sizes of the three hundred tea gardens in the Dooars vary from two hundred to thousand hectares. Almost the entire labor force in the Dooars tea gardens consists of tribal immigrants and their descendants. Eighty percent of the tea labor force are tribals from the Chotanagpur region (Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Mahali) while twenty percent are of Nepali origin (Bhowmik 1981).

Most workers in the tea plantation reside within the plantation area. They are housed in rows of huts which are called “labor lines”. Almost all tea gardens in the Dooars area have tea processing factories. The labor force in the tea gardens is therefore of two types: a) workers in the fields and b) workers in the factories. Most factory workers are males while women work in the fields.

It is generally believed that women are better pluckers than men. Thus, women are primarily employed in the plantation as “tea-leaf pickers”. Men are employed to hoe, clean bases of tea bushes, spraying of pesticides and occasionally plucking of tea leaves. The plucking season in the Dooars begins with the early rains in March and ends in late November or early December. It reaches its peak during the monsoons (July and August). The first crop of leaves (known as the first flush) in the early monsoon showers is supposed to produce the best quality of tea.

The average life span of a tea bush is six years, and it can grow up to a height of eighteen feet. However, the bushes in the plantation are trimmed to maintain a height of

three feet for mainly two reasons. First, the bush spreads out best at that height and thus this gives maximum number of plucking points. Second, since plucking is done by hand, it is convenient to pluck at that height.

The tea bush is covered with dark and light green leaves. The leaves that are plucked consist of a bud and two light green leaves on either side. It takes about five kilograms of plucked tea leaves to make a kilogram of processed tea leaves in the factory (Bhowmik 1981).

Today these plantations in Dooars are owned by both multinational and Indian companies such as Lipton, Duncan and Tata. The industry in Dooars went through a crisis during the period 2002 to 2004. A number of plantations were closed at that time. Reports of death due to starvation were common among the workers. In these closed plantations, housing for workers were in dilapidated condition and house repair and compensation for house collapse was practically unavailable along with medical facilities. Latrines and urinals were non existent and drinking water, electricity and transport for children to go to high and secondary school (15 to 20 km away) was not provided (Talwar, Chakraborty and Biswas 2005). Some of these plantations have reopened after 2004 but the tea industry in the Dooars continues to be in a crisis. Starvation deaths, suicides among the workers due to rising debts, non payment of the workers by the management continues to be a problem even today.

## **Scheduled tribes of India: social structure and the status of women**

Research on tribes<sup>26</sup> represents a major area of focus among sociologists and anthropologists in India. "The study of groups that subsequently came to be described as tribal studies, began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1874" (Xaxa 2004). There was a lot of ambiguity among researchers on the description of tribes. Phrases such as "groups that practiced animism or tribal religion" were used for a long time to describe this category of people. Later, in addition to the religious criteria, categories such as "geographical isolation" and "pre modern conditions of living" were added to the list of description (ibid, p 346) It was not until 1950 when the constitution of the new Republic of India was constituted that tribals were recognized as a special category by the government of India eligible for affirmative action policies.

Tribal research has gone through three stages in India, according to anthropologist L P Vidyarthi: 1874-19191 (the formative period); 1920-1949 (the constructive period); 1950-onwards (the analytical period). In the first two stages, the focus was on anthropological methods to study the social structure of the different tribes in India and its analysis. In the post independence period (after the 1950) academic research on the tribes began to be focused with a view to formulate and implement developmental

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<sup>26</sup> The "Scheduled Tribes", also referred to as "adivasis" (original inhabitants), are spread across the central, northeast, and southern regions of India. The various tribes resided in India long before the Aryans who arrived around 1500 BC. The tribals were socially and geographically isolated following the entry of the Aryans and then subsequently the Muslims and the British. The more than 50 tribes that constitute the Scheduled Tribes speak a multitude of languages. They are also religiously diverse, with some following animism, while others have adopted Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity in the recent years. The social customs of most tribals distinguish them from the country's majority Hindu population. The category of Scheduled Tribes was established in 1950, three years after India's independence. It sought to encompass the country's diverse tribal groups under a common banner in an effort to help address the disadvantages the tribes encountered and to integrate them into the mainstream of Indian society. Along with being geographically and socially isolated, the tribals have historically been politically underrepresented and their regions of residence economically underdeveloped.

policies in the community (ibid, p 346). In spite of much research on the various tribal groups all over India, research on the tribal migrant labor community of the Dooars has been much neglected. The focus of researchers on this geographical area often shifts to the industry and the laborers as an employee of the organized sector. Although there are some attempts made by scholars to study this community and its problems, such attempts have been half hearted and often lack an in-depth analysis. The study of incidents of witch hunts among the tribal plantation workers demand a careful study of their social structure, status of women and myths. Although there have been attempts both in the past and in recent years to study the problem of witch hunts among the migrant tribals of the Dooars (For example see Barman 2002; Baruya 2005), the studies operate under the assumption that as the tribals are “primitive” and “backward”, practices such as witch hunts are justified and thus does not seem out of place in these communities. However, what is intriguing for the researcher is the study of why witch hunts or attacks on witches take place in the first place. Why is it that the witch is blamed for all misfortunes on individual or livestock? Why are there no alternate explanations for the misfortunes in this community, and if there is, then why are these alternate explanations overlooked in favor of the “witch explanation”?

It is also important to understand the trends of incidents of witch hunts in this region over the years, whether the cases of witch hunts are increasing or decreasing. Such statistics would be useful in the development of policy against witch hunts. Another focus while studying witch hunts in the Dooars is whether these incidents occurred in the community prior to their migration in West Bengal. In other words, what was the situation like in these communities a century ago? How has the recent down slide in the

tea industry affected the lives of the laborers, and what are the patterns of witch hunt incident in recent years? Are witch hunts an attempt by a marginalized community to attract attention from the state to improve their status?

Tribal community and society is changing in India. However, there is some confusion as to which directions the society is changing. The effect of the outside world has resulted in changes in all directions in the society, in their economic, social and cultural life. The effects of these changes have been felt in the private lives of the tribals. For instance, factors such as introduction of private property in land, growth of trade and the market, immigration of non-tribes in search of land and employment, spread of modern education, and the opening up of new occupations have given rise to economic and social structural changes among tribals. Tribals have lost their land and have been compelled to take up employment as laborers in nearby quarries, coal-fields, and the emerging towns as unskilled/semi-skilled workers or move permanently elsewhere for work as in the plantations that were opened up in Bengal and Assam. Only a small section among the tribals have been able to take advantage of the market forces leading to differentiations among and within the tribes on criteria such as education, occupation, income, wealth etc. Xaxa (2004) writes that the tribes today have categories such as rich, middle and poor (besides the landless), giving rise to a new type of class relations. Despite heterogeneity among and within tribals, they seem to share one point in common, that they are different from the dominant community of the region. The non tribals are seen as aliens and outsiders and there have often been situations of intense intercommunity conflict between the tribals and the non tribals.

Apart from economic impacts, mainstream religions such as Hinduism and Christianity have had an effect on tribal structure. Though there is some debate on the impact of Sanskritization<sup>27</sup> on tribals, conversion to Christianity did result in some changes for the tribal woman. For instance, as Xaxa (2004) argues, Christianity did open the space for tribal women to participate in religious rituals alongside men, a practice that was denied to them in the earlier tribal traditions. At the same time, conversion to Christianity also introduced some restrictions in the name of religious ethics and morals.

The main tribal communities where incidents of witch hunts are common in the plantations belong to Oraon and Munda groups. These two tribal groups have distinct socio-cultural structure along with different legends of origin.

Oraon are a Dravidian tribe and were mainly cultivators back in Chotanagpur. They practice totemism and follow exogamy in marriage. They are divided into a number of sub groups such as Berga, Dhanka, Kharia and Khendo.

Traditional social structure for the Oraons consists of a system of village dormitories for unmarried boys and girls. The dormitories are separate for boys and girls and there are strict rules of conduct for its members. Premarital sexual relations are common and child marriages are not common. The Supreme Being according to the Oraons is “Dharmi” or “Dharmesh” who is the creator and the preserver. There is no concept of sins, and misfortunes are attributed to demons. The spiritual lives of the

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<sup>27</sup> According to MN Srinivas, who coined the term “Sanskritisation”, Sanskritisation is a process by which “a ‘low’ Hindu caste, a tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently ‘twice-born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community...” (For more, see Srinivas, MN. *Caste in Modern India: And Other Essays*. 1962. Bombay. Asia Publishing House). The term Sanskritisation was developed in opposition to “Westernisation”.



Oraons consist of constant reference to malevolent spirits, nature spirits and ancestor spirits. The medicine man or the Ojha is consulted when misfortune occurs.

Oraon women have a greater sexual freedom compared to the mainstream Hindu society. Sex before marriage and widow remarriage are permitted in the village. The midwife plays an important role in the village especially in women and child health.

The main occupation of the Mundas, another Dravidian tribe, is agriculture and their villages are governed by the headman. Mundas are nature worshipers and have multiple deities representing the sun, the rain and rivers. Diseases, such as skin diseases, mental illness, stomach or digestive are caused by the spirit Nasan Bonga. Though there is little in depth research into the social structural life of these tribes, especially in regard to women, most scholars agree that tribal women enjoy greater sexual and economic freedom compared to other communities. However, contemporary scholars on tribal women consider this to be a “myth”. Studies by sociologists and social anthropologists at some of India’s leading universities argue that tribal women are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men in their respective societies property, marriage and inheritance laws. As Xaxa (2004) argues “the very practices that are indicative of high status in one society can turn out to be in-built depressors in other settings.” (p355). An excellent case point would be the study on the practice of bride price<sup>28</sup> in several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh by Tiplut Nongbri (1998). Nongbri argues that the practice of bride price was originally intended to be compensation to the bride’s family for the loss of an economic asset (the woman). However, with the passage of time bride price became a practice where men could

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<sup>28</sup> Bride price also known as bride wealth is an amount of money or property or wealth paid to the parents of a woman for the right to marry their daughter. In the anthropological literature bride price has often been explained in market terms, as payment made in exchange for the bride's family's loss of her labor and fertility within her kin group.

purchase women as mere commodities. The system of bride price thus became a cause for proliferation of polygamy in the tribes as wealthy men could take in a number of wives by paying the bride price (Nongbri 1998).

### **Witchcraft, diseases and tribals**

Belief in “dains” (witches) or “bongas” (spirits) occupies a central place in tribal spiritual and moral life even today. P Bodding (1986), an anthropologist, wrote that “there is no genuine Santhal who does not believe in witches.” As a tree is full of leaves, the world is full of disembodied spirits according to the tribals (Sinha 2007). The central idea of the tribal religious belief is to seek the help of the good spirits and through magic and exorcism control the bad/harmful spirits. In other words, there is a distinction between white magic (beneficial) and black magic (evil). The ojha or the Janguru is the diviner or the medicine man in tribal communities, who used his powers to counteract the powers of the dain or the witch.

The witches are mysterious creatures with supernatural powers, that can cause harm to humans (through illnesses such as small pox, cholera), crops and livestock. In other words, dains are “human embodiments of the evil eye” who can cause harm to human by casting the evil or charms (Sinha 2007).

The tribal “construction of diseases” is very much related to their belief structure, particularly to that of witchcraft. All diseases in humans or animals are attributed to either one of the two causes: the wrath of some evil spirit who has to be appeased, or the spell of some witch who has driven out. Though the appeasement of angry spirits could be done by animal sacrifices (mainly of fowls or goats), the evil spells of the witch could

only be countered by the physical elimination of the witch. Belief in witchcraft is so strong among the tribals that no amount of reasoning can dissuade the tribals of the belief and the necessity of the murder of witches (Bodding 1986; Dalton 1960; Man 1983; Sinha 2007).

The tribals have a fairly developed knowledge of medicinal herbs and roots and the ojha or the janguru prescribed these medicines as supplements to chants, divinations and amulets. The medicines thus virtually take a secondary role in illness or diseases that were uncommon or preventing to heal as there is always suspicion on witches when people fall and do not recover (ibid).

### **Tribal research in India: the case for sensitive research**

Though there have been references to what constitutes as sensitive research by scholars such as Farberow (1963) and the much cited Sieber and Stanley (1988), their definitions of sensitive research have been criticized on grounds of being either unclear on the nature of consequences or have been narrow (Lee 1993). Lee (1993) in what is considered to be one of the classics on sensitive research, proposed a “simple” definition of sensitive research: “...research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it.” (p4).

Lee’s definition thus covers all the components that previous researchers have excluded in their attempt to define “sensitive research”: a broader definition with a clear set of direction of potential consequences towards the researcher, the respondents or anyone involved in the subject area. Lee argues that the kind of threat posed by a particular research depends on the relationship between the subject matter of the research

and the social context within which the research operates. In other words, the focus is on “...the conditions under which sensitivity arises within the research process.” (p5). The sensitivity might impact apart from the researcher, research participants, social groups, community, families of the researcher and participants, social policies and society at large.

The study of tribal communities in India is a popular topic among anthropologists, social anthropologists and sociologists. Much has been written and researched on their social structure, customs, social stratification and gender relations. There has also been some research on practices of witchcraft and witch hunts among the tribals. Although the focus has been mostly on the practice and belief in witchcraft, virtually very few studies have concentrated on incidents of witch hunts. Even the few studies that have focused exclusively on witch hunts in these communities, the phenomenon is looked as an exclusive component of tribal societies, that is, not linked to the broader social world surrounding these communities. Witchcraft and its practices are an integral part of tribal communities and thus witch hunts are somewhat expected consequence of a community that believes in witchcraft. In other words such explanations of witch hunts “suit” tribal psychology as the group is viewed as “savage, primitive and backward”. However, incidents of witch hunts are not a common everyday occurrence of tribal communities. On an average a particular tribal community might experience two to three cases of witch hunt or witchcraft accusation every year, and the social impact of each incident takes a long time to heal.

Migrant tribal workers in the tea plantations of Bengal provide a perfect social location to study incidents of witch hunts. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it is the

very social isolation of this community that makes it an interesting case study for witch hunts. The problems with the tea industry, the social isolation of the tribal workers, conditions of life and work of these tribals along with a strong belief in witchcraft might provide useful clues to an in depth understanding of the phenomena. However, the topic of witch hunts is very sensitive from the point of view of the researcher, participants of the research, tribal community, for the people in the tea industry and also for the people outside the tribal community.

The very issue of “sensitivity” of this particular research is tied to communal beliefs in the power of the witch. The belief in the power of the witch is so strong that often individuals have willingly given themselves up to the police after murdering the “witch”. There have also been cases where the community has prevented outside forces (mainly the police) from stopping a witch hunt. Apart from the very nature of the research topic, the project is “sensitive” as it can cause potential threat to the researcher’s emotional and physical safety, the participant’s emotional and physical security, especially the security of living victims of witch hunts. The risks involved in such projects are thus high. Potential costs also include spending time with the researcher and possibly experiencing unpleasant/uncomfortable thoughts and memories. This discomfort might be especially relevant during interviews with villagers who were present during the hunts or were a part of the conflict.

While a detailed discussion of the potential threats and its effect on the social life of the community will be discussed later, every stage of data collection (methods of data collection, sampling techniques, questionnaires etc) for this project was approached with

caution. The need for caution from the part of the researcher is due to the fact that tribal research in India has often operated under a lot of assumptions that contribute towards its neglect and biasness in analyzing phenomena such as witch hunts that are most common among them (the tribals). Research on incidents of witch hunts should call for a deeper understanding of tribal life in relation to the background of the tea industry, the role of laborers in the industry, gender relations and their spiritual life.

## METHODS

This project examines the pattern of incidents of witch hunts in the last twenty five years and seeks to understand and explain contemporary witch hunts through in depth analysis of the incidents. The goals of this study will be beneficial in answering several questions: 1) How to understand and explain contemporary Indian witch hunts; 2) Have there been any changes in the number of attacks in these communities over the years; 3) Have there been some years whether there has been a rise in the witch hunts? And, 4) is there a link between an observable pattern of outbreak of diseases and a rise in witch hunts. The in depth analysis of cases will be useful in getting a closer look at some cases and thus helpful in analysis of social indicators that lead to social reactions in the form of witch hunts. This project uses a combination of methods: archival methods (police and newspaper archives), qualitative methods of interviewing (sample size forty five), selected case studies and ethnography. While the archival method helped in getting an estimate of the number of cases especially in the earlier years (1980-2003), the ethnographic nature of the study allowed the participants to relate their experiences on witch hunts in the later years (2004-2006). The data collection of this project spanned a total of 7 months from 2005 to 2007.

### *Archives*

Research from the newspaper and police case archives helped generate the data set spanning twenty-six years. For the cases recorded in the newspaper, the project made use of both online archives of the newspapers and visits to the newspaper archives

located in Calcutta. Three news papers were selected based on circulation in North Bengal and coverage of incidents in the tea industry. Out of the three newspapers, two were widely circulated in the state of West Bengal, and the third was the local Bengali newspaper for North Bengal region.

Access to the police case archives required travel to the District Police Headquarters Record Room located in the district capital of Jalpaiguri. Several trips to the record room in the summer months of 2005 were made to gain access to the police records. The cases recorded at the newspaper and police archives have been recorded in a dataset. The dataset has three hundred and forty five individual cases of witch hunts from 1980 to 2006. As mentioned each case is an individual case of witch hunt incident and there are twenty one variables for each case. The variables are, year of the witch hunt incident, gender, age, religion/tribe, marital status, occupation of the victim/accused; whether the accused was a midwife; whether there was any previous family or village conflict between the accused and the individual who accused him/her of practicing witchcraft; whether there was any presence of illness or disease in the “victim” of the witch; the characteristic of the “victim” of the witch; the characteristic/gender of the accuser; the relationship between the accused and the accuser; whether there was any involvement of the ojha or Janguru during the witch hunt; whether there was a witch trial prior to the hunt; the method of the hunt; characteristics of the “witch”; characteristics of the village; whether there was any legal action; and if so, what kind of legal action was taken.

Each case was entered in a spreadsheet systematically (See table 1, pages 32, 33). While there was no problem with access to the newspaper archives, there were some



problems associated with the police record room. The police record archives were not available to the public and special permission was required to get access to witch hunt records. Even with permission, the record room could not be entered. A clerk went through the records and typed out the entries on the spreadsheet. There are obvious problems with the way the police archival data was obtained. One, there was little control over the data that was provided from the record room. The data provided may not provide a complete list of cases over the years. Second, there was no way to crosscheck the data and check for errors made during the entering of the cases in the spreadsheet.

To verify the data from the police archives, cases were crosschecked with the data from the newspaper archives. Duplicate cases from the two sources were counted only once. In addition, non governmental and governmental bodies provided information that allowed verification of some of the cases from the police archives.

### *Sampling methods, case studies and qualitative methods*

Getting access to the site was extremely difficult for the project. The difficulty of getting access to research site and participants was partly related to the reluctance of the district administration, police and tea plantation owners to highlight cases of witch hunts to the outside world. Apart from the geographical isolation of these sites, the social isolation of the tribes, made it difficult for the researcher initially to get an easy access to the research area. Because this is a sensitive research project, certain strategic steps were taken to get access to the sites and get a sample frame.

One of the first steps to gain entry into the site was to get familiarity and access to a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) working in that area. It was

important to get access to the field without the help of any governmental organization, because governmental organizations have been largely ineffective in providing social care and services in this region. In contrast NGOs have gained the confidence and trust of the tribals in this area through various economic and social programs like child care services, health camps, micro credit banking schemes for women; education, and educational programs. Hence, an organization that works on anti-witch hunt campaigns was selected. Only one such NGO that is actively involved in anti-witch hunt campaigns was found in that region. Getting access to the local NGO was useful for getting admission to the tribal villages and district administration. It also helped in getting entry to the list of cases that do not make it to the police records.

For the qualitative interviews and selective case studies, a “sample frame” of the list of cases from 2003 was created using the dataset and the list of cases that the NGO was working for the past two years (2003 to present). Out of a pool of eleven cases (five recorded in police/newspaper archives and six unrecorded cases), four were chosen for intensive case study. These four cases were selected on the basis of uniqueness in terms of number of individuals accused in each case, reaction of the police, methods of the hunt and so on. A detailed discussion on the selected cases will be done on the chapter on the case studies.

Snowball or network sampling methods were used to select the sample for the in depth interviews. In spite of much criticism initially, especially from survey methods scholars, network sampling found much favor later on in the study of deviant groups (See Baker 1994; Becker 1998; Lee 1993; Lofland et al 2006) as it represents the only way of gathering data. As the name suggests, network sampling relies on social ties to get access

to a group of participants, who then refer to another group and so on. Contacts are thus crucial for sampling in this method. One of the limitations of this method is biasness as the researcher might have a sample that is homogenous in its characteristics. One of the ways to avoid this biasness, is to sample “from different directions” meaning having access to socially diverse contacts that will help the researcher to get access to different networks.

Contacts in the police and district administration along with contacts in the NGO allowed access to an initial pool of participants in the research. Once access to the initial pool of participants for the interview was established, access to other interviewees and entry into the tribal villages in the tea plantation were possible. . In addition, all members of the NGO, researchers, lawyers and police personnel who have been involved in the witch hunt incidents in anyway (providing support, legal aid and protection to the victims) was considered for the study. In the villages, the sample was selected from the villagers who were present at the time of the incident, villagers who were involved in the incident, headmen and relatives of the accused or accuser. There were some associated problems because of the researcher’s dependence on the NGO to get access into the site. The following quotation taken from the field notes, highlights some of the frustrations that the researcher felt during the project:

Through out the trip (including the ones that I took later on) I felt that I had no control over the time spent at a location. I do not know the terrain and it is not possible for me to go these places without a local guide. I could have taken the help of the police in getting access to names of victims and areas where I could visit, but I am not sure about how the local people would have accepted me. This way the NGO was helpful. But there were problems: In almost all the trips that I took, I had the feeling of being used. The fact that I had a grant that paid me in dollars, gave them the idea that I have a lot of money and that I would not “care”

if I was charged a “bit more than the usual rate”. I also felt that every time I took a trip with the NGO members (not the local guides or translators), my work was given the last priority

(Field notes May 2005)

In other words, the researcher did not feel in control of the project and the directions because of the dependence on the NGO for initial access to the field. Despite these problems, the access to the field through the NGO was the only feasible way to collect the data.

## *Interviews*

### *Value of in depth interviews*

A substantial part of the data for this dissertation comes from face to face interviews with accusers, accused, villagers, and activists involved in the witch hunt interviews. As the main purpose is to understand and explain contemporary Indian witch hunts, the use of face to face in depth interviews is an appropriate method, as this method helps the researcher to learn what participants perceive, and how they interpret their perceptions, that is the interior experiences of participants (Weiss 1994:1). The face to face interview method is an advantage over survey questionnaires that provide answer categories that are fixed or limited. This is because in the depth interview method, there is the likelihood for self generated response. This along with the basic nature of in depth interviews that requires trust and rapport to be established between the participants and the researcher, are particularly useful for exploring a sensitive topic like witch hunts (Shuy 2003).

A total of forty five in-depth interviews with victims of witch hunts, accusers, villagers, local police, activists and legal aid providers were conducted (See consent form in Appendix A). These interviews required travel to villages in the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal where witch hunts are common. These villages are selected on the basis of whether there were any incidents of witch hunt in the last three years. All interviews were semi structured and were one-on-one, conducted to elicit maximum information from the participants. All interviews lasted anywhere between one two hours each. Two semi-structured interview guides were used: one for legal aid providers, NGO workers and police and second for villagers, accusers, accused, family members and village governing body (See Appendix B for interview guides).

#### *Problems with the interview methods*

Interviews with the participants, especially the villagers, were very difficult to conduct. Added to this limitation was dependence on the NGOs for access to the participants. The NGO never really understood what the IRB regulations were, and groups of people often gathered around the interview making it difficult to follow the rules of privacy. In addition, the NGO often wanted to know the contents of the interview as they felt that they have a right to know as they work with these people..

It was very difficult to get a private interview with Behani. The village Panchayat did not want her to meet with me privately. They told me that they would \*help\* me meet her. The local contact that the NGO organized for me also did not want me to meet with her alone. Since I was dependent on the NGO for getting access to the villages, I did not want to meet Behani on my own. She agreed to give me an interview at the courtyard of the village headman's house. Behani arrived with her husband on a Sunday at the headman's house. There were other men from the village (the village school teacher, members of the Panchayat, her husband, friends of her husband and friends of the headman) who were present at the headman's house. There were no women friends of Behani or other women from

the village who were present at the setting. The only other women who were present were the headman's family members, who were busy serving tea to everyone. I decided to use my driver (Mitra) to help me create a private zone for the purpose of the interview. I created two zones: the men zone, where Mitra was engaged in a deep conversation on the senselessness of witch hunts and witchcraft accusations with the men. In the interview zone, there was me, Balwant, Behani and the headman. I was unable to conduct the interview without the headman. I was also unable to find a lady translator-or local contact.

(Field notes July 2005)

Although persistent in efforts to insist on a "private" setting for the interviews, the initial interviews were difficult to conduct in privacy. Later meetings could be carried out in a private setting. Privacy was possible only after establishing a reputation as a sincere researcher who was genuinely interested in the lives of the tribals. In addition taking part in the daily campaigns in the villages helped establish trust with the villagers.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Interviews were conducted in a private location of the participant's choosing (mostly offices, homes or work places of the villagers). The interviews were confidential and the names of the participants were changed to protect their identities. Since maintaining confidentiality of participants, especially the participants who were directly involved during the witch hunt incidents, is the core criteria of any sensitive research, real names did not appear at any stage of the interview. No records of real names were kept and participants were referred to by their pseudonyms in field notes, tapes and transcription of the tapes. Location of the villages was kept confidential as well. The forty five interviews were collected over a period of seven months from 2005 to 2007. Field notes were maintained as well during these travels to the research sites for the interviews as well.

### *Ethnographic study of a village*

In the fall of 2007 the investigator conducted a month long ethnographic study in a tea plantation labor village in West Bengal<sup>29</sup>. The village was selected where there are both tribal and Hindu population and where witch hunts are a regular occurrence. Both tribals and Hindus in Bengal share similar terminology on witchcraft: *daini vidya*, *kala jaadu*, *tuktak*. The term for witch is similar for both Hindus and tribals: *daini*. Although in Hindu mythology there are no references to the witch, in the daily life of Hindu villagers, belief in the power of the witch is common. Also, the characteristics of individuals who are most likely to be suspected of practicing witchcraft in both communities are analogous: barren women, widows and individuals with physical deformities. What is intriguing is that even though both communities have some sort of belief in witches and witchcraft, witch hunts only occur among the tribals. Living in the village provided a closer look at the daily life in a tea labor plantation village, their social structure, culture, beliefs and practices, status of women, the importance of rituals and at individuals who hold power (social, religious or economic) in the community. In addition, it did provide some clues on what “causes” witch hunts, such as the strong beliefs in witches as the cause for all unexplained illness in the community.

In addition to compiling field notes, the ethnography involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the villagers, the village head, victims of witch hunts and accusers of witchcraft in the village, and local Hindu women and their beliefs in witches. The ethnographic study along with the interviews are crucial to get a deeper

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<sup>29</sup> The village for the ethnographic study was selected by the researcher during her previous trips to the region in 2005 and 2006.

understanding about what social conditions lead to witch hunts in some communities rather than all communities where belief in witchcraft is deep rooted.

### **Analysis of the data**

The analysis of the dataset, interviews and field notes proceeded inductively through the identification of recurring themes and patterns in transcripts, filed notes and analytic memos (See Charmaz 1983; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The goal of this analysis was to understand and explain contemporary Indian witch hunts and relate it to the major theories of deviance and social control. An inductive approach to coding was optimal because with an exploratory study such as this, it is not possible to know in advance all relevant issues and to identify or code. Grounded theory was the foundation for the analysis. Grounded theory methods are inductive strategies for analyzing data in which the researcher uses the data to “develop progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain and to understand the data and to identify patterned relationships within it (Charmaz 2001). Thus, concepts and theoretical generalizations are “grounded” in the data. According to grounded theory, analytic codes and categories are developed from the data itself, not preconceived hypotheses (Charmaz 2001). However, researchers often possess a set of “sensitizing concepts” that spark the development of concepts in the initial phases of coding (Charmaz 2003, Thompson 2007). In the case of this dissertation, for example, previous literature helped guide initial coding. After initial coding, the codes could be narrowed to focus on specific issues.

After every interview was conducted, interviews were translated and transcribed in full. However, the coding and analysis of data was done after each phase of data



collection was completed. This procedure was in contrast to the usual grounded theory method where data collection and analysis takes place simultaneously. Because of the intensive traveling involved each day and time constraints data were not immediately coded during data collection<sup>30</sup>. Instead, after the initial phase of data collection if new topics emerged they were added to future interviews. Once an interview and any supportive field notes were transcribed, data were entered into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis package that facilitates the coding and retrieval of qualitative data.

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<sup>30</sup> This research was funded by three research grants that consisted of two summer research grant for three months and one dissertation enhancement grant that was used to spend a month in the field. Thus the data collection stretched over seven months at various time periods from 2005 to 2007.



Figure 5. POLITICAL MAP OF INDIA



Figure 6. POLITICAL MAP OF WEST BENGAL

**Table 1. SAMPLE OF DATASET<sup>31</sup>**

Variable	Record 1	Record 2	Record 3
Location		Gayerkata, JP	Rajabhatkhawa, JP
Year		2001	2001
Gender of the accused witch	F	F	F
Age of the accused witch	15-20	30-40	30-40
Religion/Tribe of the accused witch	Santhal	Rava	Oraon
Presence of Family Conflict		No apparent family conflict before the illness. Husband and son of accused witch fell ill.	
Presence of Village Conflict		The accused witch and her neighbors were often involved in petty quarrels.	
Presence of Epidemics/Diseases	Sick infant	Neighbor's infant died out of undiagnosed illness; the family members of the accused witch (namely her husband and son) fell ill frequently.	The son of the accused witch's lover died of unknown illness.
Marital Status of the Accused "witch"	Single	Married	
Characteristics of the Accused witch		Tea garden worker, who lived with her husband, son and other family members. Had the reputation of having an evil eye.	Tea garden worker. Had a relationship with a married man.
Was the accused witch a "Midwife"?	0	0	0
Characteristics of the accuser		The villagers were always suspicious of her behavior and suspected her to be a witch; The entire village accused her of witchcraft and were involved in her murder; 4 men confessed to her murder.	Had a relationship with the accused witch. Was a family man.

<sup>31</sup> This is an extract from my spreadsheet with 3 cases of witch hunt shown. The blank boxes are missing data. The spread sheet continues to the next page.

Variable	Record 1	Record 2	Record 3
Gender of the accuser	M	M (mostly males from the village were involved)	M
Relationship of the "accused witch" and accuser	The girl was charged with making the child of a fellow neighbor sick	Family members, neighbors and villagers	Had an intimate relationship. When his son fell ill, the accuser suspected his lover of being jealous of his son and thus performing witchcraft on him.
Presence of the witch finder		Janguru identified her as a witch after he failed to provide a cure for the ill people.	When the accused went to find a cure for his son, the Janguru did not identify a witch, but located the presence of spirits.
Witch trial	Panchayat of 30 men found the girl guilty	No trial, entire village ostracized her prior to the hunt	No trial.
Method of the hunt	5 men took the girl from the family and beat her to death	Entire village dragged her out of her house at late night and beat her to death	Accuser murdered the victim with his chopper.
Victim of the "witch"/supposed witchcraft	Sick infant; the accused witch was charged with using witchcraft to make the neighbors infant ill.	The infant child of the neighbor died.	Illness and finally death of her lover's son with witchcraft.
Characteristics of the Witch		Magical powers of witchcraft made people sick. The witch's powers made the powers of the Janguru ineffective in curing the ill.	Witches can cause illness
Characteristics of the village where the witch hunt/accusations took place		Tea garden village	Tea garden village
Legal action involved after the attack or accusation		4 men who confessed to her murder and the janguru were arrested.	Accused went to the police station after the murder and gave himself up.

## CHAPTER III

### WITCHES IN THE LABOR LINES: SELECTED CASE STUDIES AND DATA DESCRIPTION

#### Introduction

Case studies are the preferred strategy of collecting data when “the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.” (Yin 2003, p1)<sup>32</sup>. The study of contemporary witch hunts in India is problematic as the phenomenon is “highly” sensitive. It is difficult to get participants to talk about events to the researcher due to fear of retaliation or ostracism and there is an extreme level of secrecy involved during actual incidents of witch hunts. In other words, the researcher has to rely on all available methods to have access to data, including interviews, observation and case study methods. The case study method is particularly suited to studying phenomena where the researcher has little control over events, and in-depth study of a particular case can provide crucial explanatory results (Babbie 2001:285). Specifically, the in-depth study of particular cases will be useful in providing answers to my original research questions: what defines a deviant (in this case a “witch”) in the tribal community and what social conditions lead to a “suitable” labeling of a deviant (in this case branding or labeling an individual as a witch). The study of particular cases of witch hunts will be useful in analyzing how the concept of “dual deviance” works. (For details on the concept, see Chapter 1).

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<sup>32</sup> Chapters three, four and five are written in person as it all involved detailed personal involvement on the part of researcher through case studies and interviews.

During the seven months that I had spent in the field, I was able to study four selected cases of witch hunts in the plantations in depth. The four cases were located in the district of Jalpaiguri at three different tea gardens. These four cases were selected on the basis of the characteristics of victims of witch hunts, nature of witchcraft accusations and methods of witch hunt. The four cases were selected because they reveal features of witch hunts in the plantations that are useful in answering the original research question of what causes the witch hunts in the tea plantations.

I have collected a total of three hundred and forty five cases of witch hunts from 1980 onwards. The four selected cases occurred between 2002 and 2006 and each case represents a single incident of witch hunt. The first two cases (Five witches and a jackfruit tree: Killkote Tea Estate, 2002; and Old women and witchcraft: Central Dooars, 2005) represent incidents where more than one woman was labeled as a witch in the village simultaneously, by the accuser and his/her family. In both of these cases, the accused women were murdered. While in the first case (Killkote Tea Estate, 2002) the identification of the witches, the attack and the torture against witches were controlled by the janguru, in the second case (Central Dooars, 2005), the presence of janguru was not clear. In the second case the accuser and his family took the primary role in attacking the women “witches”. Both of the attacks were instigated by illness and misfortune among the accuser and his/her family.

The third (Basanti’s story) and fourth (Dulari’s story) cases are instances where the women accused have survived attacks against them as witches. Both of these attacks have a history of personal conflict against the “witches” with their family members and

villagers, and the instigation for a witch hunt against them was prompted by illness or disease in the neighborhood.

In the second part of the chapter, I will present descriptive statistics from the dataset that deals with cases mainly from the year 1980 to 2006. The dataset has three hundred and forty five cases, and each case represents an individual incident of witch hunt. The dataset has twenty two variables including characteristics of the accused (gender, age, marital status, occupation, whether the accused had conflict with neighbors or villagers prior to the hunt), characteristics of the accuser (gender, marital status, occupation, whether the accuser had prior conflict with the accused, relationship with the accused), involvement of the Janguru, presence of illness, whether a witch trial was held, method of punishment for the witch, how the police and legal system reacted to the hunt.

### **Five witches and a jackfruit tree: Killkote tea estate, 2002**

Killkote tea garden is located barely fifty miles from the local police station and about two hundred miles from the district capital. The plantation is located in the belt of two national parks and is composed of workers from the Munda and Oraon tribes. In the April of 2002, the labor lines were under attacks by malaria and diarrhea epidemics, the two diseases that are not uncommon in these areas. Killkote plantation has one Janguru who was both the local priest and medicine man for the labor lines. The plantation has a non functioning government health center and the nearest functioning health center is hundred miles away.

Towards the end of July, Anil (male, mid 30's, driver) complained of stomach illness. When the pains became severe and the janguru (male, mid 50's, plantation



worker) was unable to cure him, Anil was sent to the hospital. Anil died the next day of an undiagnosed illness. After this death, his family members, headed by his brother, went to the local governing body in the village and expressed concern that Anil could have died from witchcraft. At the village meeting it was decided that the local janguru would use his powers to uncover what was behind the death of Anil. After a day of rituals that involved animal sacrifice (fowl) and feasting, the janguru declared that five women (all between the ages of 40 to 75 years) were behind the unusual death of Anil and behind the rise in the malaria and diarrhea epidemics in the village. They were: Atashi, Binshu, Dhanni, Sanchari and Manshi. These five women, identified by the janguru as “witches”, were either married or widowed with families consisting of husbands, sons, daughter in laws and grand children. These women were employed in the tea garden as workers or were former employees of the plantation and all lived in the village. They were neighbors, acquaintance and friends of Anil and his family.

The witch hunt of the five women took place on a Friday, after the tea garden was closed for the weekend and the managers and supervisors had left for the city. At around 10 pm in the evening a group of thirty people, mostly men went to the houses of these five women and dragged the women out. The group was supported by the rest of the village, who prevented the families of the accused women from resisting the attackers. The women were dragged and taken to a small “play ground” which had a jackfruit tree. The play ground was surrounded by huts on all sides and the women were tied to the tree one at a time. Their ordeal had just started.

The janguru and the family members of Anil supervised the witch hunt. The women were first beaten and hit with stones. The first to die was Dhanni (mid 70’s,

survived by husband, children and grand children). For the other four, the torture continued till Sunday late evening. The women had nails stuck to their forehead to drive the spirits out. They were stripped, and were beaten with “lathis” and iron rods at regular intervals. The janguru who was at the center of the “witch hunt ritual” held “pujas” in front of the jackfruit tree at through Saturday and Sunday. At one point one of the women had a “crucifixion” ceremony to “please” the Christians among the villagers. Through out the weekend the villagers kept vigil over the families of the accused women.

On Sunday evening the murders started taking place. The surviving women had their limbs severed before finally succumbing to the injuries. The bodies of five women were then hacked into several pieces before being thrown in the nearby river Murti. On Monday the villagers returned to their work at the plantation as if nothing had happened. By Wednesday people from the neighboring villages began to find pieces of human limbs and torso in the river. The police were informed and by the end of Thursday over forty people were arrested on charges of murder and physical assault on the five women. The management of the tea garden at Killkote was unaware of the witch hunt until the police informed them.

Three years after the incident at Killkote, the playground with the jackfruit tree looks like any other village play field. Children play football with gourds and women dry pickles and pulses in the sun.<sup>33</sup> The scars of the witch hunt of April 2002 remain. Almost all villagers refuse to talk about the incident. The only people willing to talk are relatives of the victims who are still waiting for justice after three years. Most of the arrested

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<sup>33</sup> Pulses are seeds of plants that belong to the leguminosae plant family, that gets its name from the characteristic pod or legume that protects the seed while it forms and ripens. Some common pulses are peas, beans and lentils.

people were left off on minor bails including the Janguru, who still continues to command much power in the village.

### *Comments on the incident*

In the Killkote incident, there was extensive involvement of the janguru from the very first. The janguru was involved in the identification of the witches through rituals and presided over the “trials”. The rituals were based on what the janguru claimed to be “on the ancient texts” of hunting witches in the tribal community. The Killkote incident is very similar to the European and Colonial American witch hunts where the accused women were searched for physical evidence regarding their pact with the devil. Though the concept of Satan is part of Christianity, some of the tribals in the village are Christians, and it is they who suggested during the trials to look for evidence of the “pact”. There women were searched for horns on their head and the hammering of their forehead with nails was done to drive the devil away. Also, the concept of having a text that gives instructions on how to search for witches is similar to the Hammer of the Witches document. Extreme violence that involved torture and murder were used to get rid of the accused witches.

The Killkote incident would fall under the “surprise attack” category of witch hunts (See chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on the category). This categorization is used because the accused women had no prior knowledge of their accusations before the attack, and they had no prior conflict with the accuser or his family members. What was interesting was that in the Killkote incident there was an extensive trial: a characteristic that is not common in surprise attacks. The incident also followed the schedule of the

witch hunts in the plantations; that is, they took place over the weekend and ended as the workday started (See Chapters 4 and 5).

The Killkote incident represents a perfect example of the concept of dual deviance. At the tribal level the moral entrepreneur is the janguru who labeled the accused women as witches, and Anil was the victim of the witch's evil spell. The moral entrepreneur and his followers (other villagers) saw nothing wrong in punishing the witches through torture and murder as they felt that it was necessary to bring back peace in the village from the epidemics. To them the witch hunt was necessary.

Another level involved the police personnel and the non tribal community members, who viewed the witch hunt as murder while the janguru and his followers were viewed as co-conspirators in the murder (deviants). The police who are the moral entrepreneurs at this level, made arrests to restore balance and order in the society at large where witch hunts are cases of homicide that calls for the guilty to be punished.

### **Old women and witchcraft: Central Dooars, march 2005**

The Beech Tea Estate in Hashimara, Central Dooars is located at the foothills of Bhutan. Bhutan is barely six kilometers away and there is an unmanned border between the two nations. The area is under the Border Security Force (BSF) of India and the nearest BSF post is twenty miles away. To go to Hashimara, one has to cross three dry riverbeds, the width of each being five miles. Roads both leading to the tea garden and inside the plantation are broken, resulting in a very bumpy ride. The dry riverbeds are a potential source of danger for both motorists and locals in the monsoons due to flash floods from the Bhutan Hills. The tea plantation's labor lines are very much isolated and

in the three months of the monsoon, school attendance becomes a problem. There is no health center in the villages and there is no electricity or running water. Electric poles run right through the villages to the management areas and the colonial planters' bungalow of the garden.

In early February towards the end of winter, Nepul Munda's family started experiencing bad luck. Nepul's daughter-in-law's feet started swelling and her infant son had constant stomach problems and fever. Their only livestock, a pig, also fell ill. Weeks passed by without any improvement in the condition of the Munda household.

One late evening, the family members of Savitri (mid 70's, widow, survived by son, daughter in law and grand child) were getting ready for dinner. Savitri's daughter in law had just served her dinner and the old woman was digging in her bowl of rice, when they heard a commotion outside their house. A friend of the family rushed inside the house and shouted at Savitri to run cover from the "witch hunters". Savitri, who was hunched back, tried to escape from the backdoor of the house. But there were people waiting at the backyard. The mob grabbed her grandson, who was barely a year old from the mother, and pointed a "kukri" (small knife) at him and threatened to kill him if the family resisted. The mob led by Nepul Munda and his family dragged Savitri to their courtyard where another woman was waiting.

The other woman was Padma (around 80, widow, survived by two sons, two daughter in laws and grand children), another accused witch. Padma lived with her oldest son's family. That evening a mob led by Nepul Munda went to Padma's house and dragged her out, hurling abuses and hitting her constantly with sticks. The mob inebriated

with “haria”, the local brew, kept on chanting, “kill the witch”. A group of villagers surrounded the family members of Padma so that they could run to ask for help.

The entire village was in a frenzy to kill the witches and there were a lot of commotion at the courtyard of Nepul Munda. In the commotion, Padma’s youngest son Viral escaped. Viral ran to the nearest BSF picket (barely four miles away) and requested the patrol for help. The BSF men scoffed at Viral of being drunk on haria and thus imaging the attack. The tribals have a reputation of being drunk every evening on haria. Frustrated, Viral went back to the village where the witch hunt had already started.

A huge crowd had gathered outside Nepul’s house consisting of men, women and children. There was the strong smell of haria, the rice wine. Nepul and his family members took the two women who were barely able to walk inside his house and locked the door. The villagers heard cries of help from the two women as Nepul and his family thrashed the women with sticks till they nearly passed out. The women were then brought outside the house and handed over to the waiting crowd. The crowd dragged the women to a spot five hundred meters away from Nepul’s house and pushed the women into the high drain. The crowd then started hurling huge boulders at the women and stoned them to death.

The next day the police arrived at the village, and Nepul along with his son and other male members of the village were arrested. They were all let off on bail after a few months. When I went to the village in the month of June that year, I asked Nepul’s daughter about the witches. The daughter, Duli, told me that because the witches were killed, her sister in law and her nephew recovered. However, the pig died. At the time of the interview, Nepul and his son were still in prison. His family was going through

economic hardships as the two primary earning members were behind bars. His house had a deserted look.

*Comments on the incident at Central Dooars*

The witch hunt at Central Dooars is a perfect example of the surprise attack category of witch hunt. There was no involvement of the janguru or there was no trial. The accused women and their family members were unaware of the accusations and there was no presence of prior conflict between the accused and the accusers. Once again this incident illustrated the concept of dual deviance. At level one, the moral entrepreneurs wanted to restore health and stability in the family and its members (child, daughter in law and pig), and the only way they could achieve this was through killing the witches. In other words there was a genuine belief in the power of the witches, as opposed to the other category (calculated attacks) where the accuser knows that there are no real witches. The improvement in the health of the child and the ill woman after the witches were killed further reinforces their beliefs. At the second level, there were the police personnel who saw the accusers as the deviants and the accused women as the victims. It is interesting to note in this context the general attitude of the police towards tribals and their problems. When Viral went to the BSF to ask for help they dismissed him as they thought that he was talking under the influence of alcohol. The police and the plantation administration prefer to stay away from the matters of the tribals and operate under a lot of prejudices against the tribals.

## **Basanti's story: A continuing struggle**

I first met Basanti in the summer of 2005. Basanti (27 years) was living with her two children (daughter 7 years and infant son) and husband at her mother's house in Falakata (another tea estate village), about thirty miles from Jalpaiguri city. When I reached Falakata it was nearly noon. It was not hard to locate Basanti's house, as the villagers were familiar with "the house of the dain".

My first impression of Basanti was that of a woman with beautiful sad eyes whose smile spoke a lot about her sufferings and sorrow. I was seated in a one room unfinished brick structure whose walls exposed the naked bricks and the cement that held it. The room's only furniture was a "chowki," a wooden plank raised on a few bricks and wood, to form "legs" of the bed. On the chowki was a child of about nine months who kept on wetting the bed and had an eye infection. My visit raised a lot of curiosity among the family's other children (Basanti's older daughter and her cousins) who kept on peeking at the entrance to the room.

Basanti's husband Alfred and her mother Shanti joined us and she (Basanti) started to narrate her story. Basanti's troubles started three years ago when she first met Alfred (who was known as Joga at that time). At that time Basanti was a widow (her first husband died of undiagnosed illness) and had a child (her daughter) by her first husband. Joga and Basanti fell in love and decided to get married much to the opposition of his mother and sister. Joga was a worker at a tea plantation and the couple moved to his home, that he shared with his mother and sister, after the wedding.

From the very beginning Joga's widowed mother and sister disliked Basanti. The women in the household often argued over small matters and called each other names.



Basanti's in-laws called her a "daini" over and over again and accused her of "eating her first husband". The three women disliked each other, and very soon Basanti was left with no friends among the neighbors in the village. In an attempt to bring in some peace in the household, Joga decided to move his wife and stepdaughter to another house. With the help of his friend Lekha, another worker, he built a house on a plot that he owned. Lekha, along with his family, also built a small hut in the same plot, and the two families became neighbors. The families lived amiable for some time till Lekha started making claims over the plot of land that belonged to Joga.

The two former friends were now in constant conflict and very soon the wives became engaged in daily brawl over water and vegetables from the garden. Lekha had a three year old daughter who fell ill. Lekha's wife started complaining to the villagers that Basanti was the cause of her daughter's illness, as she knew "witchcraft". Very soon Basanti's mother in law joined in the accusations and Basanti's reputation in the village grew as a "witch". Everyday, wherever she went she had to bear insults and taunts against her as a witch. Her husband faced harassment at work from the fellow tribal workers and a village meeting was held. At the village meeting Basanti was asked by the Panchayat to "give up her witch's spell on the child" and was threatened with punishment if she refused. Though Basanti tried to reason at the meeting about the "absurdity" of the claim as the child was born with Jaundice and thus has always been very sick, no one supported her. The strongest accusation came from her mother in law who told the Panchayat how Basanti killed her first husband and was planning to kill her second husband too. She gave testimonies of how at night Basanti used to change shapes into horned animals and go on her prowl for her victim. As the evening drew on, the villagers

became more convinced about Basanti's guilt in witchcraft and threatened her into a full confession of her crimes. Fearing for her life and the life of her unborn child, five month pregnant Basanti gave a confession of her guilt and told the villagers that she would take her spell off her neighbor's child.

However, Lekha's daughter did not get well, and after a few days she died of jaundice that she contracted at birth. At around five that evening, Basanti was at home with her daughter when she saw a group of men, accompanied by Lekha, with sticks and crudely made "kukri" coming towards her house. She quickly went inside her house and locked the door. Very soon the men started banging at the door with chants of "kill the dain". The weak door gave away and the men entered the room and grabbed her. Basanti could feel the smell of haria very strong in the room. The men had red eyes, the kind of eyes that sees no reason. Basanti felt very afraid for her life as she saw a kukri pressed at her neck. Suddenly, Joga entered the room with a few of his friends and managed to drive the men away.

That night Basanti with her family fled twenty miles to her mother's home in Falakata. Basanti's mother Shanti lived with her youngest daughter, son and his family. Shanti provided shelter to eldest daughter in her house much to the reluctance of her son who did not want to take the responsibility of his sister. After spending a few days in the shelter of his mother in law, Joga had to return to his village or else he would lose his job at the plantation. After Joga returned, Lekha and his friends found out about Basanti's hideout. The men hunted down her mother's house and threatened to kill her. However, in Falakata, there was a growing anti-witch hunt campaign organized by a local non

governmental organization. The Panchayat and its members came to Basanti's aid and managed to temporarily drive the men away.

Joga, who continued to live in his village, converted to Christianity, to escape the taunts he and his wife faced. Christian tribals have the reputation of being "progressive" minded and Joga became Alfred, much to the chagrin of Shanti. When I met Basanti for the first time in 2005, Basanti had already given birth to her son. Her husband visited her every weekend. The threats from his village continued, thus making it impossible for Basanti to go back. Lekha continued to fight over the plot with Alfred.

A year later, in the summer of 2006, I went back to visit Basanti in Falakata. Basanti's husband, Alfred had committed suicide a few months ago by consuming pesticide, as he could not take the insults anymore against his wife. The finances were very tight in the household, as Shanti's son did not support his sisters and mother. The youngest sister had taken a job in another plantation to support her sister and mother. Basanti's mother in law was trying to persuade Basanti to give up her claim to Alfred's job at the plantation<sup>34</sup> so that her daughter could get the job. In return Alfred's mother told Basanti that she would "drop" witchcraft accusations against her.

Falakata had one of the highest incidents of witch hunt and witch accusations in the district of Jalpaiguri and local activists were working hard to promote anti-witch hunt campaigns in the villages. I helped Basanti relocate to a shelter along with her children. But, Basanti returned to Falakata after a week later as she missed home.

By the end of summer of 2006, when I left the field, Basanti's troubles were far from over. Her mother was looking for a job as a "dai" (midwife) as it would give her

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<sup>34</sup> Since Alfred was a permanent worker in the plantation, his nearest kin, meaning his wife, would get his job on grounds of compensation.

and her family some respect and credibility. The witchcraft accusations against Basanti had not stopped making it difficult to return to her husband's village.

### *Comments on the case of Basanti*

Basanti's case is a perfect example of the second category of witch hunts: "calculated attacks"<sup>35</sup>. In calculated attacks the accuser and the accused have prior conflicts and the accusers used the prior conflicts to manipulate accusations against Basanti. The accusers knew that Basanti was innocent of witchcraft and this is a crucial feature in "calculated attacks" that separates this category from surprise attacks. In Basanti's case the accusers followed a pattern of calculated events in the witch hunt. The events started with conflict with Joga and Lekha and Lekha and his friends took advantage Basanti's conflict with her mother in law to spread accusations of witchcraft against her. There was a trail against Basanti and the death of the child justified the witch hunt. In the end, Basanti's accusers got what they wanted: the control over the plot. The accusations against Basanti were used to serve the concealed motive of the accusers and the allegations of witchcraft helped them in fulfilling their intentions.

### **Dulari: The melancholy witch**

Falakata is often referred as the "daini boshobash" or the "land where the witches live" by locals. At the time when I was doing fieldwork, there were already twelve cases of witch hunts for that year according to the local activists. I was referred by my local contact to meet Dulari (late 20s or early 30s, married), an accused witch. Dulari came

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<sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion on "calculated attack of witch hunts" see chapter 4.

with her husband to meet me after attending church on a Sunday. Their family had converted to Christianity recently.

Dulari's story started in 1999 when her neighbor Shankar accused her of murdering his pregnant wife through witchcraft. Shankar's wife was suffering a lot during her pregnancy, and the local Janguru was unable to cure her. The Janguru advised Shankar to conduct a ritual to detect the "cause". After an entire day's ritual with offerings of rice, hibiscus flower and animal sacrifice, the Janguru told Shankar that a "dark woman" near his house was causing the trouble. Shankar came back home and discovered that his wife was already dead.

After a few days, the distraught man, who had been drinking a lot, came over to the house of Dulari at nine in the evening and threatened to kill her with his kukri. Shankar was later arrested and made a full confession in front of the village Panchayat. He promised never to attack Dulari again.

Six months later Dulari was again accused of practicing witchcraft against Otno Oraon, another villager. Otno had an infected wound in his hand that refused to heal. He threatened to kill Dulari and chop her into pieces if his wound did not heal. From that time onwards, all the illness in the village was blamed on Dulari the witch. The third accusation against Dulari happened a few days later when another villager had fever for over a week. Dulari growing tired of the accusation offered to "swear/take an oath before the goddess Kali" of her innocence, but the villagers refused to give her the chance as according to them, the Goddess Kali is the source of power for the dark forces and witches. When the villager got well after a few days, the accusations died out and Dulari began to get back into her normal life as a worker in the plantation.

For a few years, after the third accusation against her, Dulari did lead a normal life. She made a few friends in the village and among those was the family of Jaggu Oraon. Jaggu Oraon and his family became so close to Dulari, that Dulari was beginning to think of moving closer to their family. Dulari's husband had purchased a tiny piece of land very near Jaggu's house and Dulari wanted to build a house on that plot. However, when they decided to go ahead with the plans, Dulari and her husband discovered that Jaggu had taken over the land illegally. Since both Dulari and her husband were not able to read, Jaggu convinced them to put their thumb print on papers they thought were for some other cause. In this way Jaggu transferred the ownership of the land under his name.

Soon after Dulari found out that two of her banana trees were cut into pieces. When she confronted Jaggu and his wife, they did not deny it and threatened to cut her into small pieces. The families, that had once been friends, now turned into enemies. The families would pick up a fight at any pretext and relations became very bitter.

One evening Jaggu had organized a feast at his house where there were plenty of goat meat to eat and haria to drink for everyone. Dulari was returning to her home after fetching water, and she met Jaggu's wife at the village well. A heated argument between the women followed, and Jaggu's wife hit Dulari and fled home. After some time a group of five men, including Jaggu, attacked Dulari and raped her continuously for the next one hour.

Dulari and her husband filed a complaint with the Panchayat and a meeting was held. The Panchayat asked Dulari to forget the incident and to continue living peacefully. After a few days, Dulari was again gang raped by the same group of men, as revenge

against her complains to the Panchayat. Dulari went through a lot of trauma and this time activists came to her aid. With their help, Dulari filed a case in the local police station and court. However, no legal action has been taken against her rapists till date as her rapists are “friendly” with the local labor union. The entire village ostracized Dulari and her family. Women refused to talk to her and Dulari’s children were called “dainir baccha”, meaning children of the witch, everywhere they went.

After two months after her second rape, a fifth accusation of witchcraft was made against Dulari. A woman, who had been ill for some time died in the village. A few days after her death Dulari, who was coming back home for lunch, was stopped by the woman’s husband Ramdar. When Dulari came nearer to Ramdar, he threw chillie power in her eyes and tried to slit her throat. Dulari managed to cry out for help and a few people came to her rescue. Ramdar fled the village, and later the police arrested his father. He was let off a few days later after a bail of three hundred rupees (five dollars)

Today, Dulari continues to live in the same village with fear everyday. Her rapists have joined hands with her accusers and have managed to give her a reputation of a witch. Not a week passes when Dulari is not accused of witchcraft.

#### *Comments on Dulari’s case*

As was the case with Basanti, Dulari’s case falls under the category of calculated attacks. There were clear motives on the part of the accusers in both Basanti’s and Dulari’s case. In Dulari’s case the accusations were motivated by control over the plot of land. In both the cases, illnesses did provide the initial “excuse” to start the accusations against the women. As was in Basanti’s case, Dulari’s case too provided a definite pattern in the hunts: There was some preceding conflict between the accused and the accuser.

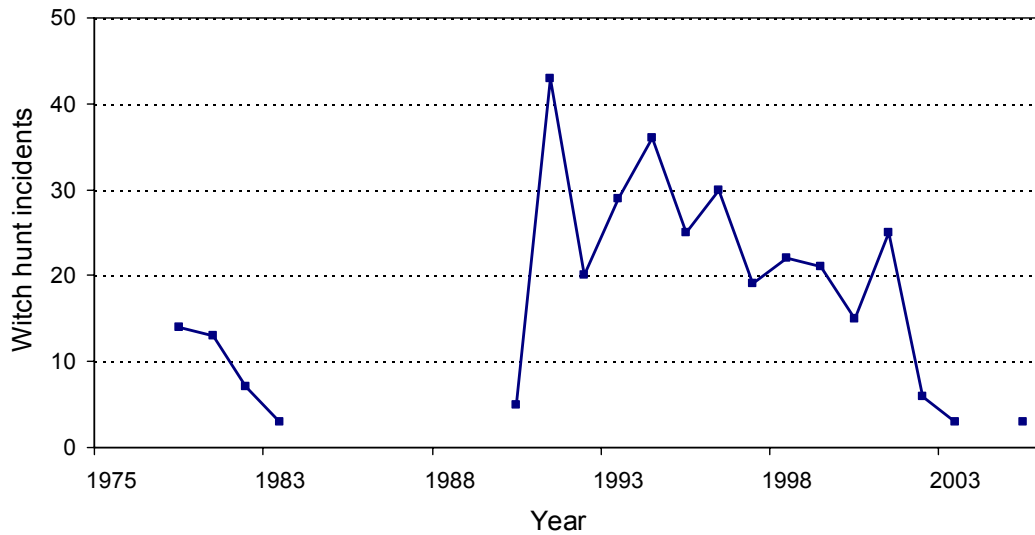
There was the presence of the symptom of witchcraft: the witch's victim. Next there was a "whisper" campaign against the witch followed by the trial and the hunt.

There were key differences between the first two cases of Killkote and Central Dooars and the cases of Basanti and Dulari: in the first two cases, the time gap between the accusations and the hunt took place in few hours, while in the third and fourth cases the time gap lasted for few months. Also, the methods of punishment for the two categories of hunts were different. In the first category of witch hunts (surprise attacks) the witches were lynched, tortured and murdered. In the calculated attack category the accused women were raped in addition to other forms of torture (See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion on the punishment for the accused women).

### **Descriptive statistics**

Of the three hundred and forty five cases in the dataset, I have complete data for seventy eight cases. As the dataset was created from multiple sources, it was difficult and almost impossible for me to get the same quality of data for each case. For instance, the data from the police archives consisted of the police case number, the year of the incident and the number of people against whom there are cases in the police station. As I was not allowed entry inside the Record Room of the Police Department for security reasons, I had to rely on whatever little data that was provided. Though this data was limited in many ways, it was helpful in providing the number of witch hunt cases that occurred in the district of Jalpaiguri per year. The most detailed cases in the data set are the cases where the NGO was directly involved. It was these cases that they assisted in helping me make trips to the site and develop personal contacts.





**Figure 7. NUMBER OF WITCH HUNT INCIDENTS**

Figure 7 consists of a graph that plots the three hundred and forty five cases of witch hunts plotted by year. The incidents of witch hunts seem to be on a downward slope from the late 1970s to the middle of the 1980s. But, there is a section of data missing between 1984 and 1989. As I was unable to get police records or newspaper counts between these years, it is difficult to make an assumption whether the downward trend continued till the end of the 1980s. There is a huge increase in witch hunts in this region in the year 1990 (the highest number recorded in the last fifteen years was in the year 1991, forty three cases). There seems to be decline in the incidents of witch hunts in the twenty first century (average of seven incidents per year compared to an average of twenty seven incidents per year between 1990 and 2000). The tea plantations are going through a period of decline since the 1990s.

One of the interesting questions to ask in this context is whether witch hunts are an expression of displaced anger of the migrant labor community against the management? Did the recent depression in the Indian tea industry, partly due to the

increase in global competition for “cheap” from China and Indonesia, have an impact on the economic and social lives of these laborers? In a community that has a history of being oppressed and neglected, first by the Colonial planters and then by the big corporate houses in independent India, witch hunts are perhaps, as Kai Erickson said in his 1962 piece in *Social Problems “Notes on the Sociology of Deviance”*, a “normal” response to “abnormal” social conditions. The witches provide a perfect scapegoat to avert blame for problems beyond the control of the oppressed community. In other words, the witch hunts function to maintain social control and order in communities that have limited ways of protest against the oppressive work conditions.

Using the in depth interview methods I tried to trace answers to the above questions. While following the anti-witch hunts campaign, even though I found clues to the connections between the struggles of the workers with the management and the incidents of witch hunts, there was not sufficient detail to make generalizations based on the data. (See Chapter 5 and 6 on a more detailed discussion).

## The accused

**Table 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUALS ACCUSED OF PRACTICING WITCHCRAFT**

Gender (N = 325)		
Male		15.60%
Female		84.30%
Age (N=60)		
20 and below		1.60%
21 – 40		20.00%
41 – 60		46.60%
61 – 80		31.60%
Religion (N= 146)		
Tribe		
	Munda	27.39%
	Oraon	23.90%
	Santhal	17.10%
	Other	24.60%
Muslim		2.05%
Christian		4.70%
Marital Status (N= 62)		
Single		6.40%
Married		62.90%
Widow		29.30%
Widower		1.60%
Occupation (N= 56)		
Tea Garden worker		32.10%
Retired TG worker		10.70%
Owned land/property		16.70%
Village Headman		1.70%
Alternate medicine man/Janguru		8.90%
Midwife		0.00%
Did not work		30.30%

Table 2 lists the characteristics of the accused individual. Eighty-four percent of the accused are women, while fifteen percent are men. This statistic is similar to the one given by Karlsen (1998) on the New England witchcraft, where seventy eight percent of the accused were female. The men who were accused were “suspect by association: they

were husbands, sons, other kin, or public supporters of female witches” (1998:47). In the plantation cases, the men who were accused fell largely into the category of family members of the accused women. Sometimes the entire family of the accused were attacked as retaliation against the witch (see newspaper clipping 2 in Chapter 4). The men in the accused group could also come from independent accusations, typically from men accusers. They could be *jangurus* who are accused by their fellow men for conducting misfortune on others or men accusing other men.

I was unable to get direct access to cases where men were victims of hunts. The cases that made it to the dataset, came from police records and newspaper archives. It was difficult to trace the men victims for most of the police cases, as the locations and addresses were missing in the dataset. For those cases, that were easier to locate the village, my informants from the NGO were reluctant to help me. Their reluctance could be explained by the fact that the NGO prided itself to be a “women’s organization” that focused on women’s issues. Focusing on the men victims of witch hunts would draw attention to the fact that witch hunts do not always target women.

But, overall the idea was that women were more likely suspects than men in cases of witchcraft suspicion, and the repercussions of an accusation were likely to be far graver and longer lasting for a woman than for a man, even when the personal circumstances and evidence were strikingly similar between the two genders (Karlsen 1998:52). Thus, for similar cases of witchcraft suspicions that involved both men and women, the punishments for the women accused would be more serious in nature than the punishments, if at all, for the men accused.

Nearly seventy eight percent of the accused individuals fall above the age category of 40 years and above, while the bulk falls between 40 to 60 years. This is an interesting statistic that corresponds with the findings in New England where women under forty were unlikely witches in the puritan society (Karlsen 1998:65). Women under forty were perhaps a group analogous to the male relatives of the accused women.

Regarding religion of the accused, ninety-three percent of the accused belong to a tribal category. Among the tribal accused category, the Munda and Oraon tribes, the two most common tribes in the plantation areas, consist of fifty percent of the cases. Christians consist of nearly five percent of the data on accused individuals. Most of the Christians are under the “converted Christian” category and are under the “tribal Christian” group.

Among the accused category, sixty two percent of the accused are married, while nearly thirty percent are widows. About one percent of the accused are widowers while nearly six percent are single men or women. The predominance of the married women in the accused witches’ category probably had a lot to do with their relationship with older female family members (Karlsen 1998: 71). As seen in the previous cases of witch accusations in New England, the relationship of the accused women with their families, particularly with their female in-laws, was instrumental in providing support for accusations against the accused women. Similarly, in tea plantations the large percentage of the married accused woman category is probably due to conflicting relationships with their female in-laws.

More than forty percent of the individuals accused of practicing witchcraft belong to the tea plantation labor force (either currently employed or retired). About seventeen

percent of the accused owned property of some sort and there were some incidents of conflict over it prior to the accusations. Nearly nine percent of the accused were alternate medicine men (Janguru) while there were no midwives (dai) among the accused women. About thirty percent of the accused individuals did not work or were currently unemployed at the time of the accusations.

The following two tables, in the next sub section, deal with the accusers of witch hunts. The accusers are typically the individuals who make the accusations of witchcraft against the accused.

## The accusers

**Table 3. COMPOSITION OF THE ACCUSERS (N = 74)**

Relation to the Accused	
Family members or relatives of the accused	28.30%
Neighbors	39.10%
Friends	5.50%
Villagers	27.02%

All of the accusers were individuals who were related to the accused in some way: through family, work place or through the village. In other words, the accusations against the accused did not come from strangers. Nearly twenty eight percent of them came from family members of the accused related either through blood or marriage, thirty nine percent of them came from neighbors, while twenty seven percent of the accusations came from other people in the villages.

The above statistics are similar to Karlsen's (1998:46) argument that most witchcraft accusations in colonial New England originated in conflicts among people who knew one another. "No one could be certain that an angry encounter with a neighbor would not elicit an accusation" (1998:48). However, as Karlsen argues and as I found in my data, in contemporary Indian witch hunts, not everyone was equally vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft, even though every one in the village was under the threat. The accusations of witchcraft were directed at particular individuals based on some widely shared assumptions on what the shared image of the witch was like. Through my in-depth interviews I was able to construct an image of the witch that consisted of physical

characteristics (dark skin tone) and behavioral features (ill temper, curses). (For a detailed discussion on the characteristics see Chapter 4)



**Table 4. GENDER OF THE ACCUSERS (N = 63)**

Gender	
Male	92.06%
Female	7.90%

About ninety two percent of the accusers were male while eight percent of the accusations directly came from women. It is interesting to note that though ninety two percent of the direct accusations of witchcraft came from men, women could have been involved in the accusation too. As men are generally the head of the family, and they negotiate with the Janguru or the village headman, it could be that the men were involved in formally making the accusations.

## Incentives for witchcraft accusations

**Table 5. CAUSES BEHIND WITCH ACCUSATION (N = 105)**

Causes behind accusation		
Disease	Death	7.60%
	Unspecified illness	15.20%
	Tuberculosis	8.50%
	Stomach Ailment	4.70%
	Death of an infant	0.95%
	Epidemic	8.50%
	Malaria	4.70%
	Hysteria	0.95%
	Sick Child	10.40%
	Sick livestock	2.80%
Other	Infertility	0.95%
	Conflict over property	9.50%
	Denied Sexual Favor	0.95%
	General dispute with neighbors	10.40%
	General dispute with family members	10.40%
	Bad luck/misfortune	4.70%

Table 5 lists the immediate causes of witchcraft accusations. About sixty four percent of the immediate causes of witch hunts were related to illness or diseases of some kind either related to serious ones like malaria (4.7%) or tuberculosis (8.5%) or unspecified fever (15%) or stomach ailments (4.7%). Illness or death related to infants provided more than 11% of the immediate causes of witch hunts.

About thirty six percent of the immediate causes of witch hunts came from the “other” category such as family conflict (10.4%), conflict with neighbor (10.4%), conflict over property (9.4%), sexual rejection (0.95%) or infertility (0.95%). General bad luck or misfortune provided nearly five percent of the immediate causes of witch hunts.

**Table 6. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON WITCH HUNTS (N= 158)**

Descriptive Statistics	
Direct Involvement of Janguru	25.31%
Witch trial or Village meeting held prior to the hunt	31.64%
No trial held prior to the hunt	33.54%
No involvement of the Janguru	9.40%

In the events leading to a witch hunts, nearly twenty five percent of the cases had the direct involvement (and thus instigation and direction) of the Janguru. Nearly thirty percent of the witch hunts had a village meeting or a trial prior to the hunt. About thirty four percent of the cases of witch hunts were “spontaneous” where the hunt was conducted without any prior planning or consultation. The “spontaneous” nature of the hunts reveals an interesting category of witch hunts in the plantations. This category of hunts is different from the category of hunts that are more “structured”, and involve a trial.

### **Conclusion**

The above chapter and discussion provides an introduction to the demographics of the contemporary hunts in the plantations. While the case studies were useful in providing case histories of the two main categories of hunts, the descriptive statistics gives an outline of the characteristics of the accused and the accusers involved in the witch hunt. A complete history of witch hunt incidents under the two categories is useful as it gives a complete picture of the typical witch hunts in the plantations along the reactions of other villagers and the police.

The case studies of Killkote and Central Dooars fall under the surprise category of witch hunts in the plantations. In both these cases, the accused women had no knowledge of the accusations and attacks prior to the witch hunts. However, while the Central Dooars incident had all the characteristics of the “surprise attack” category of witch hunts, the incident at Killkote had an extensive trial, a trait that is unusual in the category. The question one might ask is then, why is the Killkote incident placed under the surprise category? The answer to this question can be answered if one looks at two defining characteristics of surprise attacks found in the Killkote incident. First, the accused women were unaware of the accusations against them. Second, the accusers were convinced of the accused women’s guilt. These two traits are typically not present in calculated attacks, as seen in the cases of Basanti and Dulari. In both these cases (of Basanti and Dulari), the accused women had prior conflicts with the accusers and the witchcraft accusations were a “step” in the final goal of achieving a motive outside witchcraft accusations. In both Dulari’s and Basanti’s case the motive was property. Another defining feature of the calculated category of witch hunts present in both these cases is, there were no real threats of witchcraft from the accused witches. The accusers were aware of the innocence of the accused, and the witch hunts were used as an excuse to legitimate the claims of the accusers over property. In some cases the hunts were used as acts of revenge.

The descriptive statistics section of this chapter outlines the features of the accused and the accusers in witch hunts. Typically, tribal married females, above forty years of age are more prone to witchcraft accusations in the plantations, than non tribal single women or tribal single females below twenty years of age. Men are not typically

accused for witchcraft accusations. Regarding the features of the accusers, most accusers are males who are related or acquainted with the accused. The bulk of the accusations are instigated by some form of illness and disease in the village. Chapter three, thus provides an outline of the major characteristics of the main actors of witch hunts, and the causes leading to the hunts.

Chapter four discusses in detail the characteristics of the two categories of witch hunts in the plantations. It also discusses in details the characteristic of the witch, and explains what traits make an individual more prone to witchcraft accusations. In the course of the discussion, the chapter also examines the various forms of punishment for the witch.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE SCOURGE OF THE EVIL EYE**

#### **Introduction**

In chapter 4, I discuss how to comprehend and explain contemporary witch hunts in the tea plantations of India. I aim towards an explanation of what structured the social action of individuals involved in instigating witch hunts. In the course of this explanation, I discuss what social factors lead to the hunts in the plantation and what relation do illness and disease have in instigating witch hunts. The chapter relies on in-depth interviews with accused witches, the accusers and victims of witchcraft and data from the police and newspaper archives, to explore how the fear of the scourge of the evil eye leads the entire village to participate in the hunt. In the course of the explanation, the chapter provides a detailed discussion on the two categories of witch hunts, characteristics of a witch, and forms of punishment for witches.

#### **The instigation for witch hunts: The two categories**

I began my interview with accused witches, relatives of witches and social workers by asking the question, “So tell me why the incident of witch hunt occurred in this village? In other words, what instigated the accusation of witchcraft against the accused?” The answers to this question could be placed in two categories: One, calculated attack and two, surprise attack.

### *Calculated attacks of witch hunts*

In a calculated attack, the incidents of witch hunts are preceded by “clear” motives on the part of the accusers or what the accusers claim to be “instigations” from the accused. The motive on the part of the accusers can be anything from maligning the reputation of the accused individual to serve personal motive, revenge to settle disputes over property or, to explain why illnesses or diseases happen.

In cases where witch hunts serve the purpose of revenge over personal conflicts, disease or ailments play a major role in instigating the hunt. Behani, early 30s, female tea garden worker, explains how the first accusation against her started. “Shankar’s wife died. After her death my husband was physically assaulted by Shankar and his friends. Later they came to my house with a kukri. I ran away.” I asked her whether she and her family had any conflict with Shankar and his family. Behani said, “...no fight... This was the first fight,” (meaning the physical assault and threat). I asked, “How did he come to the conclusion that you were the “witch” who had caused the mischief?” She replied, “From his head (mathar thekey)...Everyone said that I was a dain...he too started believing it.” I asked, “But why you? Was there a janguru involved who made a “diagnosis”? Did you have any animosity with anyone?” Behani said, “Well you can say that there were some bad feelings between me and his wife. I came to this place after my wedding (meaning the village). She (the neighbor’s wife) did not like me and we often quarreled over pigs and water. And then, when she died, I was the witch. This was natural according to everyone”. Behani’s accusation was an instance where personal conflicts become manifested in witchcraft accusations, when one of the individuals involved in the conflict undergoes some unnatural development such as illness leading to death.

To Balwant, male, mid 40s<sup>36</sup>, tribal social activist, most witch accusations stem from fights between women in what he calls “gharelu jogra” (household quarrels or conflicts). To him, these petty conflicts, usually between women, get transpired into a conspiracy of calculated attacks of witch hunt against the accused witch.

Whenever such conflicts start, there are always some people (men) in the village who look to get something out of this. They are the ones that start the “chakranto” (conspiracy). If you look carefully you will see that women play a very small role in the conspiracy. Their (the women) numbers in the conspiracy is very small. It is the men who call the shots. Once the men start the conspiracy then their women folk begin to play a more active part in the conspiracy. They believe their men blindly and without understanding the events support the men.

Balwant’s argument that most witch accusations stem from household quarrels between women is similar to the arguments by some feminist scholars on witch hunts. In the book *Malevolent Nurture*, Deborah Willis argues that the English and the Colonial witch hunts were results of quarrels between women. She explains that village level quarrels that led to witchcraft accusations grew out of struggles to control household boundaries, feeding, child care and other matters in the domestic sphere (1995:13). While Willis argues that the gender implications of the accused women’s actions seldom appear to have been her accusers’ major concerns, the accused woman was “as likely to be the one urging conformity to a patriarchal stand”, while the accuser in turn, “defamed the witch as a perverse and destructive mother. Engaged in a complex struggle for survival and empowerment within a patriarchal culture, both women stood in an uneasy relations to definitions of female identity which privileged nurturing behavior and well-governed speech.” (13-14). The witch, Willis argues, is a mother “gone bad”.

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<sup>36</sup> Most of the people I interviewed in the villages did not give me a definite age in years. They gave me their age in approximation. “*challish tallish hobbeh*” meaning, 40-ish.



What is interesting in the calculated attack cases in the plantation is the gender relations that play between accusers. Sukhni, 40, female plantation worker, whose husband is in prison serving a murder sentence against an accused witch, echoes the sentiment of women conspirators. She says, “Today if my husband says that this is right, why will I not support it? She is a witch and my husband is speaking the truth.” When I asked Sukhni how she knew that the woman is a witch, her replies were “...because he told me so...” It is interesting how women join the conspiracy as a form of ‘bargain’ with the men. According to the Hindu philosophy, a woman is virtuous if she listens and believes her husband “pati parameshwar” (the husband is equal to god). Tribal society has adopted some of these Hindu norms as expected behavior for the women.

In the tribal community, as is the case with most patriarchal societies, a woman’s economic security and social position is controlled by men. Even though tribal women are employed in the plantation, they are paid lower wages than men and their income are controlled by their male family members. Referring to the resistance to abortion and condom use in some African societies by women, Nathanson and Schoen (1993) argues that “...to the degree that women are economically dependent on men...women’s power in the heterosexual market place will be a function of the value attached to their sexual and reproductive resources, and they will have a strong vested interest in seeing that the value is maintained” (287). In the context of supporting their accuser husbands, the tribal women in a traditional setting bargain their domestic service that includes listening and supporting her husband without question in return for economic and social support from him.

According to Balwant, the psychological torture starts almost immediately after the conspirators target their victim. "...as you saw (referring to the interview I had conducted days before) in the previous case, first they cut off her banana tree... next they threw garbage in her yard..." Alcohol or haria (local brew) is used a bait to attract more people to support the accusation against the witch. He continues:

Using haria wine-tine , they (the conspirators) attract people in their group. From two to four people now ten people are a part of the group. Then the entire para (community), next the village...everyone is now against the accused woman. They start phish-phish (whispering) against her. The witch now only has her husband as her support...everyone else is against her. Now she is really "beshahara" (vulnerable and without support). There is no help for her and no one will listen to her. She might to go the panchayat for help, but it is best for her to accept the claims and accept whatever fines they may impose on her. But if she does not listen to the panchayat and jid dhorey thakkey (becomes stubborn) then she may face physical threats and even life threats from the villagers. So ultimately the conspirators win: money, property...whatever they had in mind.

Balwant's comments, on how the witch accusation develops into a full fledged attack, are interesting as he outlines a pattern. It starts with some conflict typically between women in the neighborhood. Usually these conflicts are petty to begin with but they get complicated when there are illness in the families. With the illness comes the suspicion of witchcraft and it is at this phase that the conspirators, the crucial components in a calculated attack, step in. Taking advantage of the situation, the conspirators who have some ulterior motive behind witch hunt start gathering support against the accused witch. They accomplish this through a whisper campaign accompanied by the isolation of the accused woman from the entire village. The psychological torture often pressurizes the accused woman to a forced confession by the villagers and the members of the panchayat of her guilt.

Bhagawan, 60 is a male retired plantation worker, whose neighbor was murdered in a witch hunt incident a year ago. “This is how it works over here. I have a wife and my neighbor has a wife. This is suspicion...all in the mind, that my neighbor’s wife is evil.” Bhagawan agrees that some witch hunt incidents are planned months in advance with motives (calculated attacks), but says that even in these cases often ailments other than ulterior motives (like property or revenge) have a bigger role to play in instigating attacks.

Vishnu’s wife was pregnant. There were a lot of complications during delivery. Her ailments remained undiagnosed...in Sadri we call it “pichla-rog”. You know during child birth women become weak. And if they do not eat properly the weakness becomes acute. So because of these reasons, after the delivery Vishnu’s wife died. After she died, it meant (to Vishnu and family) that there must be some “meye- cheley” (rural expression of woman) around me that had done mischief with the help of “dain-vidhya” (witchcraft). Because of this my “shustho” (healthy) wife, “amar bhalo bou” (my good wife) died while giving birth to our child. Then what happened was Vishnu went to the janguru with rice, dal, flowers and haria. The janguru had his own motives behind this. He saw that this was a good way to get some profit out of this consultation. The janguru chanted some mantras, conducted some rituals and “planted” suspicion in Vishnu’s mind about his neighbor’s wife. If the janguru did not do this, then how will he make ends meet? He got five hundred rupees (approximately ten dollars), black hens, two goats out of this. He brainwashed Vishnu and told him that there is some dark skinned woman who lives near your house who has done jadu mantra (witchcraft) against your wife. Vishnu came back home and sees his neighbor’s wife who is dark skinned.

Thus it began...two three matabor (headmen) got involved...they feasted together...drank a lot of haria. Then they all started saying, “Yes you (Vishnu) are right. This is the work of that shaalir beti (curse word).” Then the torture against the accused woman began. The entire village started avoiding her. They held a trial against her and in the trial, where the janguru was present, it was decided that they would “drive” the witch out of the accused woman. They started hitting the poor woman with sticks and stripped her. The beating continued for 5 hours. Daini o morlo, meyetao morlo (The witch and the woman were killed in the end).

Thus, in cases of calculated attacks of witch hunts, one can identify the following patterns leading to a witch hunt. The first step involves either some preceding conflict between the accuser and the accused, or some “vested” interest on the part of the accuser, who would stand to gain something out of the hunt. Step two involves the manifestation of witchcraft that usually takes the form of illness within the family of the accuser. Step three consists of the identification of the witch and whispering campaign against her. Step four involves a trial, either formal or informal. The final step involves the witch hunt where the entire village attacks the accused witch. Underlying this pattern, there is a strong belief in witches among the tribals. The suspicions, as we saw from the quotes from Behani (mathar thekey) and Bhagawan (meyeh-cheley), play a major role in providing the “push” for the witch hunt. These suspicions and the belief in the powers of the witches is a crucial factor in instigating the hunt. These beliefs are present in the initial phase of the hunt, where there is a conflict between parties. It is only when the conspirators with their ulterior motives decides to take advantage of the situation for their own need, that the character of the hunt changes into a “calculated attack”, where the punishment of the witch is necessary to satisfy needs other than illness or misfortune.

### *Surprise attacks of witch hunts*

In cases of surprise attacks, the victims or their families were unaware or claimed to be unaware of the accusations against them prior to the attack. The attack happened without any apparent instigation in the form of prior conflict or any history of witchcraft accusation against the accused witch.

Almost all the relatives of victims of witch hunts (where the victims, i.e. the accused witches were alive or dead), I had interviewed told me in response to my question on what instigated that particular hunt, “ki jani?!”(meaning “who knows”). Lali Oraon, a 40 year old female tea garden worker, whose mother in law was dragged in the middle of the night by an village mob led by her neighbor said, “ There was no reason/cause (karon) of accusing her (the mother in law) of witchcraft. We had no quarrels with anyone in the village. Why did they take her? Before this (incident) no one in the village had accused her of witchcraft or called her a daini.” Sumitra Oraon, a woman in her 50s and also lived with her mother in law. Her mother in law was in her 80s and Sumitra and she did not share a good relationship. When I asked Sumitra the question, Sumitra became angry and shouted, “Who knows?! Who knows what the old hag (buria) did! I do not know.”

Pokua, 45 years, male plantation worker, whose mother was murdered during a witch hunt said, “We did not know anything about this (accusation of witchcraft) beforehand. A group of people came, mostly men armed with kukri (crude hill knives), at night and took away my mother. They were all from this village. We were all at home. Around 10:30 at night. They took her then.”

Bila, 33 years, female said “Why they took her...kya malum (Who knows)? We never fought with them (the family of accusers) and neither did my mother in law. I do not understand why this happened. Does having white hair make one a witch? How do I know? They killed her. (Starts crying softly).”

Some of the responses to my question were denial of being present at the village during the incident. Sheela, 36 year old female plantation worker whose mother was

killed during the hunt said, “When they (the mob) took my mother away calling her a witch, I was not present. I was not at home. I do not know anything about the incident.”

Leela, 29 years, another plantation worker said: “My mother in law and my neighbor’s mother in law...the two buri (old women) were “caught” by the villagers. I do not know anything more about this. Why did this happen, how did this happen...we do not know anything. We were not at home.” My translator Shova tried to persuade her to speak. “Didi (meaning me) has come from a long way outside to speak to you. If you do not talk to her, then how would the outside world know of your pain?” Leela still refused to say anything that day. In the course of our next few meetings she told me how her mother in law was hunted down on the night of the attack. Her story kept on changing every time I tried to interview her. One day she showed me the place from where her mother in law was dragged by the villagers on the instigation of their neighbor. She told me how her mother in law tried to escape from the back door of the house and how the men were waiting for her even there. I asked her how she knew all the details. She said, “I have heard the details from others who were present. I do not know anything. I have a small child...if I go away who will look after him? Who knows why they accused mother of witchcraft...maybe...because she had a hunchback.”

It is interesting to mention though that even in cases of surprise attacks, where there were no prior warning signals that an accusation is taking place, there is an immediate cause that instigates the attack. The cause in most cases was an ailment while in few cases was quarrel or verbal exchange prior to the attack. Basanti<sup>37</sup>, 27years, lived with her second husband and her daughter. Her husband was a permanent worker in the tea garden and the couple was happy in their new home. Basanti’s closest friend was her

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 3 for details on the particular case.

neighbor Dipti, Lekha's wife. Basanti's mother in law and sister in law hated her (Basanti) and the two friends often confided in each other.

My friend's daughter (2years) was ill for sometime. That baby had jaundice. You can tell from her belly and skin color. I used to tell her show a doctor. Her (the baby's) stomach became really big. I really meant good for the child. But Dipti would not listen. She would bring medicines from who knows where (the janguru) and give it to the child. Would these medicines cure her? Tell me? I used to repeatedly tell her to show to a good doctor. That's why she (Dipti) used to get angry and tell me, "What does it matter to you to say these things? Are you giving taka (money)? Is your father giving the money?" She used to talk like that. Towards the end they took the baby to the government hospital. But it was too late. The baby died. After the baby died, Lekha, Dipti and her brother came over to my house with a churi (crude knife) and threatened me: "You have eaten our child." Prior to this incident, I never had any accusation of witchcraft against me.

Thus, in surprise attacks category of witch hunt, unlike the calculated attack category of witch hunt, it is the belief and the fear in the powers of the witch that instigates the attack against the witch. In surprise attacks, as mentioned before, the accused and her family members were unaware of the accusations against her. The accuser and his/her family were aware of the witchcraft at work during this time.

Going back to the case study of the women killed in Central Dooars (see chapter 3), Nepul's daughter Duli was so convinced of the power of the witches against her family that she refused to agree that her father and brother had committed murder. To her it was justice against the witches, and the proof of witchcraft lay in the fact that her nephew and sister in law became well after the women were killed. Similarly, in the Killkote incident, the accuser and his family were motivated solely by their beliefs in the powers of the witch.

Table 7 gives an estimate on the proportion of witch hunt cases, from the dataset, that fall under the two categories.

**Table 7 ESTIMATE OF THE TWO CATEGORIES OF WITCH HUNT (N= 57)**

Categories of witch hunts	
Surprise	26.31%
Calculated	73.68%

It is interesting to note that the calculated category of witch hunts constitute nearly three fourth of the cases in the plantations. This implies that incidents in the plantations are not motivated solely by the fear in witches among the tribals. Rather, most cases of witch hunts are oriented towards fulfilling goals beyond the killing of the witch and getting rid of her evil spell.

*Difference between calculated and surprise category of witch attacks*

One of the key differences between calculated and surprise attacks are the presence of a trial that may take place during a calculated attack. However, in cases of surprise attacks, trials are usually absent. The trial could be anything from an informal meeting to a normal meeting where the accused witch is given a “chance” to defend herself during calculated attacks. In contrast in the surprise category of witch attacks, the accusers and his/her supporters are so convinced about the identity of the witch that they do not see the need to hold a trial. To them, the entire purpose of the witch attack is to kill the witch as soon as possible so that the evil influence is done away with.

Another key difference between the two categories is the “time gap” between when an accusation is made to the actual hunt. In calculated attacks it can take anywhere from a year to a week, while in cases of surprise attacks it can be from a few days to a couple of



hours between the accusation and the hunt. The difference in time gap can be explained by the very nature of the two categories. In surprise attacks, the accusers are motivated by a real fear in the powers of the witch and thus there is impulsiveness in the attack. This explains for the suddenness of the attack, where the accusers attack without any planning or preparation. In contrast, in calculated attacks, the attacks have an ulterior motive where the accused woman is a scapegoat in the real scheme of events. Calculated attacks are thus carefully planned and this explains why there is some time gap in the chain of events.

Perhaps the most crucial difference between the two kinds of attack is the lack of awareness by the witch herself of accusation made against the accused witch. There is an element of surprise involved in the attack, as if it was unexpected, which gives the name for this category of hunts. Because of the time lapse between the accusation and the hunt in calculated attacks, there is some sort of “preparedness” in the attack that can sometimes be used to prevent the hunt. For instance, when I was collecting data, I attended a village meeting against anti-witch hunting, organized by the NGO, which helped me get access to the villagers. A woman at the end of the meeting told the director of the NGO that someone named Somari is going to be killed very soon on accusation of witchcraft, unless the NGO does something to stop it. In other words, the villagers and relatives on Somari’s side and Somari herself was aware of the immanent fatal witch hunt against her. This “preparedness” is not present during a “surprise attack of witch hunt.

In calculated attacks there is a pattern of events that lead to the witch hunt unlike surprise attacks that are “sudden” or “surprise” development. But in both the types of witch hunts, the belief in witches is present. This is a key element that has to be present

for witch hunts to occur. The following table outlines the main differences between the two categories of hunts.

**Table 8. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO CATEGORIES OF HUNTS**

	Calculated attacks	Surprise attacks
Trial	Extensive trial, typically attended by the janguru and villagers.	Usually there is no trial
Time gap between the accusation and the witch hunt	Longer time gap.	Short time span
Awareness of the accusation by the accused	Accused is aware of the accusation against her.	Accused is unaware of the accusations against her.
Opportunity to prevent the hunt by the accused	There may be an opportunity to prevent the hunt by the accused, as she is aware of the accusations	No such opportunity, as the accused typically comes to know about the accusation during the hunt.

Using the two categories of witch hunts in the tea plantations, one can explain the key characters in the hunts. The most important characters in these hunts are motivated offenders, taking resort to routine activity theory terminology. Motivated offenders act on the basis of their motivation in the two categories of hunt: fear of the witch or other vested interest. In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss who makes a suitable or a credible target.

### **In search of the deviant: The witch and her craft**

*The witch: “The one who gets the deviant label”*

One of the most intriguing questions for this project was finding an answer to the question who gets identified as a witch in the plantation. As the previous sections point

out, the belief in witches is strong within the tribal community. In such a scenario virtually everyone in the village is under the threat of being accused as a witch, when any unnatural event—either to humans or animals—takes place in the village. As the data show, women face the threat of witch accusations far more often than men (See Table 2, Chapter 3). As the data for my dissertation deals mainly with women witches, it is interesting to understand the kind of women that are more vulnerable to witch accusations than others.

I asked the activists in this study about the characteristics of the accused woman that made her more prone to witch accusations than others. All of the four activists that I had interviewed were in agreement that it was difficult to generalize in a community where the belief in witches was so strong that everyone was under the threat of an accusation, especially when illness or misfortune takes place in the community. However, they agreed that it becomes easier to identify the witch if she has some physical deformity like osteoporosis, has some dispute with villagers, or if someone stands to gain from her accusation. Gender, lack of education, conspiracy and prevalence of illness are the four factors that play a role in the identification of a witch.

Balwant, the social activist explains:

You will see that in areas where there is little education...and no resources for education...some matabbar people take advantage of the situation. To teach someone a lesson, to exert their influence over someone, they might start to malign the reputation of the individual, accusing her of practicing witchcraft. These people they take advantage of the superstition of the tribals. Who are these people who get accused? They could be relatives of individuals over whom the matabbar wants to exert his influence...it could be a woman who has some money, property. They target the women of such family. Then if someone in the neighborhood runs a fever, has malaria or dysentery (both common ailments in the plantations), then these people (the accusers) come together and start making trouble. They start spreading rumors about the accused woman...the illness was started by the woman. Naturally the illiterate people in the village do not understand the politics. They do not understand the illness too. All they understand is daini protha (witch) and jaddu vidya. They then join the harassment against the accused woman.

In relation to how gender plays a role in the identification of the witch, Chandana, another social activist says, “It is easier to blame the women...They are the root of all trouble.” She goes on to explain “In a society the women are always the victims. If there is any trouble the first name you will hear is that of a woman.” Chandana’s views seems to be similar to the arguments of scholars on witchcraft in New England where the idea that witches were women was held by local authorities, magistrates, and juries (that is men who had the power to decide on the fate of the accusers) than it was by accusers as a whole (Karlsen 1998:48). As noted from the quotes of Balwant, it is men, typically in positions of power that decide on the target, specifically among the calculated attack category. However, what is interesting in the plantation context is that the accusers too played a role in the accusations against women, especially in cases of surprise attacks. Thus, gender plays a crucial role in the identification of a suitable target.

Apart from gender, another defining characteristic in identifying a witch is proximity to the accuser's family or to the witch's victim. Rarely are witch accusations made against total strangers. It is common for witch accusations to be made against neighbors and relatives. As the discussions for both types of attacks show, in both surprise and calculated attacks, there were no strangers accused. The targets for witch hunts are usually chosen among groups and people who have been involved in prior conflicts and witch hunts are directed at other members of the same social system. The individuals selected have to be credible as targets but are vulnerable as they have low power of retaliation. Women, by virtue of their gender, along with their proximity to sources of conflict, typically with other women in the family or neighborhood, make a perfect witch.

However, sometimes the accusations stem from a random fight where a "credible target" is absent. Ramdev, 40 years, male, speaking of a recent incident said, "That day was a market day. All the boys drink (haria) that day. A fight broke out between two groups. Cursing, verbal abuses started along with accusations of witchcraft. Each group started calling each other dains and started to attack each other." I asked whether the two groups had any conflict before that. Ramdev said, "There was some conflict over property...the usual...but nothing that warned us of the attack." To the tribal mindset in the plantation, calling someone a dain or a daini is the strongest of curses.<sup>38</sup> The random attacks on witches can be categorized under the surprise attack category of witch hunts.

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<sup>38</sup> A case where males are accused of witchcraft.

*Are there witches? The belief in powers of the dark lady with horns*

For the tribal villagers (accusers), I asked a slightly different question; Are there real witches? What do they look like? What harm can they do?<sup>39</sup> Pukahni an 18 year old female plantation worker, whose father was one of accusers in a witch hunt incident told me, ‘Yes there are (witches). I have seen them. I went out in the night to relieve myself. As I came back to our house, I saw Liti (the accused witch) standing behind our fence. Liti was naked. She had horns and her mouth was filled with blood. I was very scared. I ran inside and saw my mother vomiting blood.’ Pukhani’s mother had tuberculosis and after this incident, the family accused Liti, a poor woman, of doing witchcraft on the mother. Liti was identified by the village janguru.<sup>40</sup>

The village janguru was responsible in identifying the five witches responsible for the illness of a villager in Killkote.<sup>41</sup> The janguru, after conducting rituals, randomly selected five women (all between the ages of 40 to 75 years) as witches who were responsible behind the unusual death of Anil, and behind the rise in the malaria and diarrhea epidemics in the village. These five women were either married or widowed, living with families consisting of husbands, sons, daughter in laws and grand children. These women were employed in the tea garden as workers or were former employees of the plantation and all lived in the village. They were neighbors, acquaintance and friends of the ill villager and his family.

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<sup>39</sup> I asked different question to the accusers, as they believed, or to believe in the existence of witches. I am interested in exploring the characteristics of the accused witch and what feature in the accused made the accusers attribute their suspicion.

<sup>40</sup> It was very difficult for me to get interviews with any janguru, because I am outsider to the community. The only Janguru who agreed to be interviewed denied that he had a role to play in witch identification. It is difficult to make an assumption based on the data I have as to how the janguru identifies the witch.: that is what characteristics in the accused woman makes her a credible witch.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 3 for details on the case.

Sumi, a woman in her 30s told me that her neighbor was a witch. Sumi said that the woman (her neighbor) was ill tempered and often quarreled with her and hurled abuses. She said, “Once she cursed me that my child will die and we will die childless. After a few days, I found a small packet of sindoor and rice in my yard. I threw it away. My child became very ill after that. I went to the janguru who gave my child medicines and conducted rituals to get rid of the kala nazar (evil eye). My child became all right after some days, but I never let him play with her children or eat food given by her. I know she is a daini. I am scared of her.”

I asked relatives of accused women and the accused women themselves, whether they knew why they, or their relatives, were singled out as witches. Almost all the interviewees said that they could not think of any reason. They said that they did not have a clue. Lattu, a boy whose grandmother was murdered in a hunt said, “No...my grandmother was not a witch. She loved me a lot. She used to sing for me and put me to sleep. She is not a dain. I never heard her chanting mantras or hurling gala-gali (abuses) at anyone. Yes there are witches...but not my grandmother. She was ill. I did not know that they would take her. They (the accusers) carried her away.” Shipli, 45 years, female plantation worker, whose mother was accused of witchcraft said, “My mother was a good woman. She did not have any knowledge about witchcraft. They blamed my mother. They are lying. Maybe the janguru came and did some rituals (at the house of the sick child)...I do not know.” I asked her whether the child who was ill became well after her mother was murdered. Sheila nodded her head and said, “... yes...”

Some of them pointed out to physical features like age (old women), hunchback or color of hair or skin as responsible for identification of witches. Lata, 29 years said,

“Who knows why they accused mother of witchcraft. Maybe...because she had a hunchback.” Bila, 33 years, female said “...I do not understand why this happened. Does having white hair make one a witch? She was a good woman.”

Basanti, one of the accused witches, told me that her reputation as a witch started just after she remarried and moved into her husband’s home. Her second husband’s<sup>42</sup> mother and sister disliked her and accused her of “eating” her first husband.<sup>43</sup> For Dulari<sup>44</sup>, her trauma started after her neighbor was told by the janguru that a “dark woman” caused his wife to be sick. Dulari’s skin color was the cause behind Dulari’s first accusation.

Shova, my translator took me to meet Ramani, a 60 year old woman who ostracized by the entire village on suspicion of witchcraft. Shova shared a personal bond with Ramani as she had provided shelter to Ramani after she was accused of witchcraft. Ramani: “I was kicked by the entire village. They told me that I had a buri nazar.<sup>45</sup> My dark skin tone was a problem too. I came to Shova’s house for help. Shova calls me kaki (Auntie). Ask her if I had never any karap bath<sup>46</sup>. They said my nazar (eye) was kharap(Evil). Bohut Juta bath hai (This is a terrible lie).”

For some accused witches, it was the reputation or suspicion of having an evil eye that led to their accusations. Lajju, 33 years female plantation worker, lived with her husband and children. The villagers were always suspicious of her behavior and Lajju was often involved in fights because of the accusations. Lajju’s neighbor’s child, and her

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<sup>42</sup> See chapter 3 for case study.

<sup>43</sup> I discuss Basanti’s story in Chapter 3. Her first husband died of illness.

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 3 for detailed case study.

<sup>45</sup> *Buri Nazar* translates as evil eye.

<sup>46</sup> *Kharap* means “bad” and bath translates as “talk”. It means bad language that consists of curses and abuses.



(Lajju) husband fell ill very frequently and the village janguru was unable to find a cure. Unable to cure the sick, the janguru told them that Lajju's evil powers made his medicines useless. The entire village, along with her family, was involved in the witch hunt that resulted in Lajju's murder [Police archive, JP case # 3]. In another case, also from the police archive, a husband suspected his wife of using witchcraft on him that resulted in his stomach ailments for the past 10 years. According to the husband, his wife had a nasty temper and the couple was always involved in domestic squabbles. He never felt safe around her and later on refused to eat food prepared by her [Police archive, JP, case # 5]. Rekha and Lekha were two sisters who lived together. Villagers suspected the sisters to be witches and often blamed them for any misfortune, bad luck or illness in the village. This led to regular arguments and fights between the sister's and the villagers [Police archive; JP, case # 8].

In some cases, sexual relationships outside the marriage can lead to accusations of witchcraft. Rimi, a 45 year woman, whose husband deserted her for another woman (Subra), accused Subra of using witchcraft on her husband to leave her. After a few months, Rimi's son fell ill and the couple began to suspect Subra of using witchcraft on the son, as she was jealous [Police archive, case # 3]. In another case, a man suspected a woman to use witchcraft on him as he had made sexual advances on her. According to his police confession, the woman, who spurned his advances, was a witch who made him fall ill as an act of revenge. [Police archive, JP, case # 29]

Thus, as the above quotes suggest, it is hard to point out to any single characteristic, cause or factor that is/are decisive in the identification of the witch. The witch can be selected on the basis of a single factor or a combination of factors: village

politics, domestic quarrels, reputation, physical traits, gender and proximity to the ill individual. From the in-depth interviews, it is possible to categorize the characteristics of the accused into two categories: physical and demographic. Under physical characteristics, there were wide assortments of characteristics that describe the witch. In some interviews she was described as naked with horns, sucking blood from her victims, with some physical “peculiarity” like hunchback, dark skin tone and white hair. Of course, these descriptions differed from participant to participant making it very difficult for me to come up with a definite description of the physical features of the witch. Thus, it was difficult to get a unified description of what a witch looks like from the quotes. There was only one quote that suggested that witches had horns and usually operate naked, but when asked to give physical description of the witch, most of my interviewees seemed confused. It is interesting to note in this context that, horns are mentioned in many of the anti-witch hunt dramas and songs created by the activists. Another interesting feature of the witch is “dark skin”. Most tribals (like other people in the sub-continent) have dark skin and it is interesting to analyze what qualifies as really dark skin. Is it really skin color or is it skin color and other features (like behavior) combined?

A common feature in most descriptions was the reputation of the accused as having an ill temper, ill reputation and the tendency to curse. The demographic characteristics of the women who gave in-depth interviews were age (between forty and seventy) and marital status (either married or widowed). This is an interesting finding especially if one compares the finding with the findings from the New England witch hunts where single, married and widowed women were found in significant numbers among the accused. Married women predominated the accusations, though Karlsen

argues that it had more to do with their relationship with older women in the family. Karlsen goes on to argue that the marital status of women were crucial in determining their relationship to their family and to the community. One can see the relevance of this argument when one looks at the cases in the surprise witch hunt category in the plantations. As seen in Basanti's case, her reputation as a witch grew during her initial conflict with her mother in law who accused her of murdering her first husband. This accusation played a crucial role in strengthening the accusers (Lekha) case that Basanti knew witchcraft. It was her troubled relationship with both the community that ostracized her and where she had no friends that worked against her when the accusation from Lekha surfaced. However, in the plantations, widows especially older widows were the target of surprise attacks of hunts. But as discussed previously given the arbitrary and spontaneous nature of this category of hunts, it is difficult to generalize what makes an accused a perfect target.

Commenting on the New England witches, Karlsen states that even the most unlikely among the accused usually exhibited some of the characteristics of the witch (1998:47). Going back to some of the descriptions of accused women in the surprise attacks, it is difficult to agree with the statement.

An analysis on the characteristics of the witches in the plantation should look into the beliefs among the tribals on the existence of real witches and in the power of the witchcraft that can cause harm to its victims. It is perhaps the belief in witches and witchcraft that explains for some of the "random" selection of witches. The following section taken from my field notes describes the randomness in the identification. In this

section, I went to the house of a victim's family who was murdered. The victim's daughter in law refused to believe that her mother in law was a witch.

We went to her younger sister in law's house, from where her mother in law was dragged. We asked her (the first daughter in law), "Do you think that your sashuri was a witch?" The youngest daughter in law of the accused witch said, "No. She was a harmless woman. She could not see properly or even hear. How could she harm anyone? She used to eat two fists full of rice<sup>47</sup> every day... She a "daini"? ...No."

In other words, even though the accused woman's daughter in law believed in her mother in law's innocence, she did believe in witches. This conviction in the existence of witches is present in most victims' relatives even though they themselves do not believe that their loved one was a witch.

### **Manifestation of deviant behavior**

#### *The scourge of the evil eye: The power of the witch's craft and her victims*

The witch, as commonly believed among the tribals of the plantation, can cause harm to animals, children, men and women, making them fatally ill. The witch can be responsible for causing illness like diarrhea, malaria, tuberculosis to the common fever or stomach ailments. Sometimes she may cause barrenness or infertility. The power of the janguru is ineffective in curing illness if witchcraft is used, unless the witch is killed or punished. The witch's evil eye operates through ban-mara.<sup>48</sup> It is through the use of ban, that the witch causes illness in her victims.

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<sup>47</sup> Small quantity of rice.

<sup>48</sup> *Ban* translates as arrow and *mara* means "hitting or shooting." The phrase translates as "shooting of arrows."

Radha, a tribal woman in her thirties, who believed in witches said, “Do you know ban mara?” When I nodded my head in negative, she seemed surprised at my reaction and explained, “You do not know? Witches can shoot arrows. Ban is a terrible thing. With ban, they can harm anyone. They can even harm you. The wind carries the ban to their victims’ houses.”

I spoke to Dolly, 21 years, a tribal woman, whose father and brother were in prison serving a sentence after they had murdered an alleged witch<sup>49</sup>. Dolly said, “Incidents started happening in our house that made us suspicious of witchcraft. There was someone who was doing ban-mantra on our house. There was illness in our family. Everyone was sick.” She asks me, “How does illness happen? Do you know? Do you understand ban? That was in our house. Our chickens kept dying. My sister in law could not conceive for years. It could not be cured. My niece became ill. Who was doing this (the illness). There were two buri in our para (community) who was doing the mischief.” I asked her whether the family members became well after the witch was killed. Dolly said, “The illness went away. Our chickens were okay. My sister conceived after the two buri died. We did jaar-puch (the rituals conducted by the janguru). But some of our chickens died.”

The cases from the police archives pointed to how the victims of witches could be anyone: men, women and children, and, how the victims could suffer from a variety of ailments. According to a police report, a witch in a tribal village caused liver cancer in a villager. The victim was a fellow villager with whom the accused witch had quarreled. The accused witch also caused bareness in her daughter in law and was responsible for other illness in the village. (Case # 15 in the dataset). Sometimes the witch can cause

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<sup>49</sup> See chapter 3 for details on the case.

breast milk to dry up (case # 32), infertility (case # 33), kill livestock (case # 21) and can cause bad luck or misfortune in the village (case # 49,58 and 59).

According to Shova, the tribals are especially fearful of small children falling prey to witches. Speaking of Ramani, the woman whom Shova rescued from being hunted, she says: “She (Ramani) stayed in my house for 4 years after that incident. In defiance of the entire community, I gave her shelter. She looked after my children. My children were all small. My daughter was brought up by her. She fed her bhath (rice), bathed her. Nothing happened to my daughter and to my family.” It is interesting to note that Shova is not a tribal or adivashi. She is a Nepali. She continues, “After 4 years, when the community began to see that nothing happened to my children or my family, they slowly started accepting Ramani back.” In another incident Chaili, a widowed woman in her 60s, was accused of witchcraft as her neighbor’s child fell ill after she bought him some sweets. Chaili was childless and lived alone. The child’s father believed that the witch had poisoned the sweets.

The nature of maleficium though harmful varied in kind and degree. The witch was typically responsible for causing illness or death in small children, spouses or infants, domestic animals and did have the power to interfere with nature. She was capable of causing bareness, miscarriages or deformed birth. The maleficium of the tribal witch is similar to the maleficium of the western witch.

The witch, thus, symbolizes evil and can harm anyone who is around her. However, even though the witch’s power could bring harm to anyone, her victims tend to be close neighbors, relatives and people who knew her well enough to anger her. The fear of the witch is deep rooted in the psyche of the people and the tribals blame any event or

development that is not “normal” on the witch. The tribal conception of the witch, although similar to the conception of witches in the west, differed from the West’s conception of witchcraft and the menace it posed. The similarity lies in the concern with the harm that the witches inflicted on neighbors and property. However, the difference lay in the fact that in the seventeenth century the clergy and some members of the congregation, especially in New England, began to argue that witches were not mere threats to the neighbors and their well being, but were heretics. They began to see witches as entering into contract with the Devil and thus witches were not just threat to the society but also to God (See Karlsen 1998:4). But, the tribal conception of witches ended with the threat to society. Perhaps because tribals do not have a unified vision of the divine and are nature worshipers, witches were seen as the supreme evil to society: a being that operated against the sacred instead of handmaidens of the Devil against God.

As the discussion in the previous sections suggests, according to tribal beliefs witches operate their craft through the “air” (vyayu). The craft can be transmitted through poisoned sweets, curses, touch or looks, as the previous cases have pointed out. Their craft is hidden and mysterious and ordinary people have limited powers against her. It takes some form of “extreme” violent punishment to overcome her. This leads to the discussion in the next section on forms of punishment for the witch.

### **Punishment for the deviant: The witch hunt**

#### *Types of punishment for the witch*

##### *Local newspaper clippings:*

##### Clipping 1:

*Lakshmi Murmu, a 22-year-old widow, was locked up in a room by fellow villagers. The villagers tried to set the room on fire because they believed that she was a witch. Police said she had been staying with her parents at Bohar Mandirtala village near Memari, about 90 km from Calcutta, ever since her husband died four years ago. On Thursday, a janguru (witchdoctor) told Lakshmi's uncle Lippo that his daughter Pushpa, 17, was suffering from mental derangement because of her cousin's (Lakshmi) influence. "She is a witch, she should be driven out," the janguru pronounced. The day after the verdict, Lippo, accompanied by seven-eight others locked her up, beat her and tried to set the room on fire. Lakshmi, However, managed to flee the room and finally reach her sister Sefali's house in Bhatar, 50 km away.*

Clipping 2:

*A day after watching a family of five being beheaded in accordance with a kangaroo court's decision, workers of Dil-dal tea estate organized their funeral and celebrated what they believed was the end of witchcraft in the area. The bodies of Amir Munda, 60, and four of his children were burned on a single pyre on the banks of the river. There was hardly any sign of remorse on the faces of the 150-odd people who witnessed the last rites of the family around 3.30 pm. Some of the slain Mundas' relatives were present at the funeral, but remained tight-lipped over the public beheading. Their stoicism was not surprising, given the surcharged atmosphere. The prime accused told interrogators they were convinced that killing Amir and his children was the "right step" to ensure the safety of their community. Sources said the killers actually rued the fact that they were forced to spare Amir's pregnant wife Terosi, his daughter-in-law Mukta and his three grandchildren — Bhola, Bhoni and Pappu. The surviving members of the family are believed to be in hiding.*

Clipping 3:

*After being branded as a witch, Chandmoni was beaten up by a few villagers, who suspected that she was behind a matchmaking that they disapproved of. When Sanjoy Singh of the tea estate married Sumitra Lohar, the latter's family*



*thought it was Chandmoni's doing and decided to "teach her a lesson". Sumitra's brother Shibu, his wife Kamala and three of his relatives went to her home and beat her up, kicking her and hitting her with brickbats, a villager said.*

The above quotes from newspapers suggest a variety of punishments for the witch. Sometime the punishment is administered by the family of the accused (clipping 1 and 3) and sometimes by an entire village (clipping 2). The role of the janguru is central towards both the identification of the witch (as discussed in the section on In Search of the Deviant) and in deciding what punishment should be administered to the witch. The belief in the witch is so strong that sometimes the family members of the accused witch/es might be a mere spectator to the events. As clipping 2 and other previous quotes in sections before this one suggest, the relatives are threatened with death by the entire village who think that they are doing the "right thing".

Beheading and beatings that lead to murder are some of the common punishments for the witch. For instance, the police reports often report the following outcome for the accused witches:

*Types of punishment*

<p>Beating leading to murder:</p>	<p>“5 men took the girl (the accused witch) from the family and beat her to death.”</p> <p>“The entire village dragged the witch out of her house at late night and beat her to death.”</p> <p>“The accused was attacked with sticks and beaten to death by those present in the meeting. The two women, who were previously accused of practicing witchcraft, also joined the hunt against the accused witch. The women wanted to take revenge against the accused "witch" for the threats.”</p>
<p>Murder:</p>	<p>“Accuser murdered the victim with his chopper.”</p> <p>“Murdered the woman and left the body in the canal.”</p> <p>“The accused witch was hacked to death with an axe by her son who believed that killing his mother would bring an end to his wife's barrenness and a cure for the illness in the village.”</p>
<p>Beheading:</p>	<p>“Beheaded his body and body dumped in the river.”<sup>50</sup></p>

(Selected from the dataset)

Sometimes the punishment might involve rape, but this is usually in cases where the accusation is preceded by other motives on the part of the accuser. In other words, rape is not a common punishment in surprise category of witch hunts though rape can be

<sup>50</sup> Example of a male accused as a *dain*.

a form of punishment in the calculated attack category. For example, in a case reported in the police archives, the accusers murdered the entire family of the accused witch, including her husband and children. One of her daughters was out during the murder. The accusers (all of them men) waited for her and took turns in raping her after she came back. The accusers had a long standing conflict with the accused witch and her family. Rape was thus used as a form of revenge against the other party instead of using it as a form of punishment against the witch.

Dulari, whose story is discussed in detail in chapter 3, said, "...Then the fights started (over a piece of land between her husband and his friend). It continued for a month. They (her husband's friend and his wife) used to threaten us...told me all the time "I will cut you, drink your blood, eat your flesh, burn your house..." They did not talk to us anymore, used to hurl abuses at us. Then one day I was alone in my house. He threatened me (sexually). I told him that I will go and complain to him wife. He then attacked me brutally inside my house. His wife stood outside and watched it all. And he ....what do I say..." Dulari was extremely upset during this conversation and had difficulty recollecting the incident. The rape had shamed her so much that she could not call the incident as 'rape'. She was traumatized by the entire incident and was in shock. To her, the consent of the wife in her husband's act of raping Dulari was a sign of betrayal.

Basanti, another accused witch whose story is also discussed in chapter 3, relates her incident. "Lekha (accuser, whose daughter was ill and suspected Basanti for it) came over to my house with a kukri. I locked the door to my room and waited in fear. Lekha broke the doors and windows at my house." She continues, "I pleaded with him to spare

me. But he did not listen. He said I was a dain who had eaten his child.” Lekha entered her room and raped Basanti who was pregnant with her son at the time. She talks about the reaction of the villagers to her rape. “There were a lot of people who had gathered outside my house. No one said a thing. Everyone was scarred. Nobody told me anything even after the incident (rape). I did not have any justice. I am very sad. But what can I do? I will be looked upon as “bad” by everyone after this incident. They will say that I have been punished because I am a dain...”

Other “gender” related punishments involve stripping or tonsuring the head of the accused witch. In a case from the police archives, the accused witch was ‘shamed” in front of the village. “Her head was tonsured; her face was covered in soot. She was then paraded naked all over the village.” In this case, as is typical in the cases of rape, the dignity of the women victims (accused witches) were taken away by the village as a form of punishment. Sometimes public humiliation is administered to the witch as form of punishment. In an incident in a tea plantation not far from the city of Jalpaiguri, a suspected witch was forced by the entire village to confess to witchcraft. After her confession, the villagers made the women conduct death rituals for her living parents. The death rituals signaled the triumph of the villagers over the witch emotionally, in a society where death is the most feared outcome for individuals.

Other forms of punishments involved for witches are social isolation and fines. The punishment for the witch is decided either by the individual accuser family (surprise attack) or by villagers through the village council (calculated attack). In cases of village meetings or trials, the accused witch might be given a chance to defend herself. In most cases she ends up confessing on fear of death and her punishment can be anything from

severe beatings leading to murder or fines and other monetary compensation for the family of the accuser. In one of the reports from the Jalpaiguri police archive, it is reported “There was no witch hunt, but the identified witch had to pay a fine to the accuser. Later she fled the village and never returned.” In some incidents, the witch pays for the rituals that the janguru conducts to “cure” the witch. Mita, 27, female, said, “I had to pay two thousand rupees (approximately \$40) for the feasting. I borrowed money to pay for it...haria, meat, and rice.”

Sometimes she is still punished on “suspicion even if the accusation against the witch is not proved. To quote another report from the police archives: “After the accusation failed, the accuser invited the accused witch to drink "haria" to sort things out. The accuser later killed him when the accused witch was drunk.”<sup>51</sup> (Case # 5, JP police archive).

In other words, the justification for punishing the witch arises primarily out of a deep rooted fear and hatred for the witch. As evident in a case from a newspaper clipping, “*The community’s hatred for Amir was intense. He was sentenced to death by the vichari, a kangaroo court of sorts, along with two of his sons and two daughters yesterday afternoon. The victims had been tortured into confessing that they practiced witchcraft, sources said.*” The punishment is given in the hope that evil would be driven out of the community and the community will be free from all its influences. If the victims of witch hunts continue to be ill after the witch is punished, it means that the witch has not learnt her lesson. This would call for further punishment of the witch, or if the witch is dead as a result of the punishments, the community would go on searching for the next witch.

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<sup>51</sup> Another case of a male being accused of witchcraft.

## *The witch hunt*

As discussed before not all punishments for the witch takes the form of a witch hunt. Most accusations of witchcraft lead to punishments in the form of fines or ostracisms. A witch hunt takes place when two or more people are involved in the process of identifying and punishing the witch. The important part in this case would be the actual “hunt” where the accused witch is hunted by a group of people, that can be anywhere from two people to a crowd of villagers. The main actors in the hunt are: the accused, the accuser/accusers, the victim of the witch’s evil eye and the janguru. A witch hunt, as discussed in the section on “The Instigation for Witch Hunts: The two types”, involves the following steps:

Step one, involves “the instigation for the witchcraft accusation and identification of the witch”. As discussed in previous sections, the instigation for witch hunt can be anything from revenge over personal conflicts, illness or diseases. The witch is identified in most cases with the help of the janguru. During this stage, the accused witch may or may not be aware of the accusations against her. If it is a surprise category of attack, then the accused is unaware of the accusations. The accuser on the other hand is aware of the witch’s craft and her mischief, most commonly in the form of illness.

Step two involves the “whispering campaign”. This is a crucial phase in the witch hunt as during this stage the accuser starts campaigning and gathering support against the witch in the village. There is a possibility of this stage being discrete, as evident in cases in “surprise attacks” where the accused witches and their relatives are unaware of the oncoming attack. If the accused witch and her family are aware of the attacks, then she

(and her family) may start facing social ostracism from the villagers. If the accused witch is fortunate, she may ask for help to police during this time through written complaints.

Step three involves “the trial” before the actual hunt. Prior to the actual hunt there may or may not be a trial. Trials are never held during surprise attacks on witches. If a trial is held prior to the hunt, then it can be of two types: formal and informal. In formal trials, the entire village becomes involved. It takes the form of a village meeting, where the Panchayat and the janguru preside over the meeting. Both parties (accusers and accused) take part in the meeting and the accused has some chance of defense. In the informal trial, held either at the courtyard of a villager (usually in some relation to the accuser) or at the janguru’s house, the accused has little chance of defense. It is during the trial that the punishment of the witch is decided, if she is proven guilty.

Step four consists of the “witch hunt”. During the witch hunt, typically two or more individuals attack the accused and administer the punishment to the witch. Witch hunts involve some form of violence in the form of physical abuse on the accused witch. It can involve mob beating, stripping, tonsuring, rape and murder. For example in the case in Central Dooars (see chapter 3 for detail description on the case): “The mother in law escaped, but they hunted her down. They dragged the two women into the house of the accusers and beat them. After beating them, they pushed the two women down a high drain and hurled big stones at them. The women died.”

In another case in the same village: “...when the hunt started only one man came and started to drag the accused witch out of her house. She was pregnant at that time. It was a day of festival. The men were drinking haria. The crowd was watching her being

dragged. They slowly rounded up on her and started beating her. The witch hunt had begun.”

The following table gives a representation of the steps in a witch hunt with regard to the four case studies.

**Table 9. STEPS IN A WITCH HUNT AND CASE STUDIES**

Steps	Calculated attacks		Surprise attacks	
	Basanti's case	Dulari's case	Killkote	Central Dooars
Instigation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whisper	✓	✓	X	X
Trial	✓	✓	✓	X
Witch hunt	✓	✓	✓	✓

The steps discussed in the witch hunt are ideal types and as mentioned before, not all incidents of witch hunts involve all the steps. The steps are also not chronological and may be combined with one another. These steps are typical in both categories of witch. In the surprise categories of witch hunts, steps one and two, that involve the instigations, identifications and the whisper campaign, are characteristic before the witch hunt. In the calculated categories of hunts, all the four steps take place. One interesting feature in steps that are common to both categories of hunts is the awareness or lack of awareness of the accused regarding the instigation and the whisper campaign against her. In calculated attacks, during both the steps, the accused is aware of the accusations and the whisper campaign.

For example, in the case of Basanti, who had a number of accusations against her, her ordeal started when her neighbor's child fell ill (stage one: instigation). The



whispering campaign started by her in laws, further confirmed the suspicion of her neighbor that Basanti was a witch. There was no trial in Basanti's case and her hunt took the form of rape and life threats from the villagers.

In the case of Somari Munda (the lady who was rescued by the NGO from the witch hunt), the first three steps: instigation, whisper campaign and trial, had already started to happen and it was developing into a full fledged witch hunt. After her neighbor had fallen ill, the local janguru identified Somari as the witch and a meeting was held in hut (janguru's) to kill the witch. The whispering campaign against Somari had started to take place and villagers were getting ready to kill her on a Friday. As mentioned before in a previous section, it was when the NGO got to know of her ordeal that Somari was rescued and the witch hunt was prevented.

Dulari's case is perhaps one of the most complex and typical cases of witch hunts that had all the characteristics. Dulari, who was a victim of multiple accusation of witchcraft was the common suspect whenever someone was ill or had a sudden death. As she had multiple accusations of witchcraft and was a threat to a number witch hunts, Dulari's case is unique as all the components in a witch hunt were present at point or the other.<sup>52</sup> The accusations of witchcraft, against her were accompanied by threats to her life, rape and social ostracism. Dulari narrates, "The women in the village were all a part of the conspiracy behind my continued accusations. They supported their men." She continues, referring to her rape, "They wanted it to happen. They gave their shai (consent)." "We all work together in the tea garden. But they did not walk with me to work. They did not talk to me... They did not let my son and daughter play with their children. They drive my children away. They say-- jao jao, dainir baccha. dainir baccha

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<sup>52</sup> For a detailed description on Dulari's case, see Chapter 3.

khelbi nah.<sup>53</sup> They said that my children will eat and chew their children and warned their children not to play with my children as they will fall ill. I am so sad...they are children after all (amar monner khub kosto. Ora to baccha).”

During her trial, Dulari tried to defend herself. She recollects, “I said let me go to the nearest kali temple. I will swear on the idol and prove my innocence. They laughed at me and said—what good will it do to go to the kali temple? She (Kali) is your bhut. Whatever we say, you will have to do to prove your innocence.”

It is interesting to note the role of the police and administration during the witch hunt. In most cases, the accused woman’s family is threatened by the village against going to the police. The villagers keep a strong vigil over the relatives of the accused so that the police would not be informed. And, even if some members of the family do manage to escape, the police do not pay attention to them. As one of the women’s (accused witch who was killed in the Central Dooars incident) son narrated, “I managed to give the mob a slip and escaped through the back door of the hut and ran to the nearest security post of the plantation (Special Security Bureau or paramilitary). I pleaded guards--My mother is going to get murdered by the village. They are calling her a witch. Please do something.” “The guards dismissed my claims and said--Go away. You are drunk. If you are serious, go back to the village and get us a written complaint approved by the panchayat. Only then we will do something... This is a domestic issue. Everyday you guys drink, get drunk and start fight between mother-son, husband wife...sobh din halla hoi.”

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<sup>53</sup> Translated from Bengali as “go away, children of the witch. Children of the witch do not play (with our children”.

### *After the scourge: Events after the witch hunt*

When I visited Chandmoni Tea Estate a week after the witch hunt, the village looked deserted. People stayed indoors and the air was tense. The villagers refused to talk to me. It was very frustrating as every person that I requested for an interview turned me down. Their common excuse was they were not present during the witch hunt. They did not know anything. Typical reactions were: “I was not at home. It was fagun masher purnima (day of festival). I was not at home. I went to visit a friend.” Or “There is no one at home. They have arrested the male members. The wife is living somewhere else.”

Even the local panchayat head refused to talk on the incident. Shanti Devi, the panchayat leader at Killkote told me that she was not at home. “I had gone to see my daughter...I was away for fifteen days. When I came back the incident was over.” Pointing to her main gate that had an iron cross, “See ...I am a Christian tribal. We do not have these witch hunts among us. It is the uneducated tribals who believe in witches.” I asked her about what she intends to do next to protect her people. She replies, “What can I do? I get only five rupees a month and tea for this post. I am a poor woman. I cannot do anything.”

In most witch hunt cases, the reaction of the police comes after the hunt is over and the witch is killed. A villager explained to me how the police react in the context of the witch hunt at Central Dooars: “They (the police) have everyone. They are all in Alipur Jail...they (the accusers) could not give bail. They are still in jail.” Dolly, the lady whose brothers and father were arrested said, “There is no one in our house now except for me. No one wants to stay here. How will they stay? The police have arrested everyone.”

A typical newspaper clip on the reaction of the police after the hunt reads:

*Earlier in the day, the police arrested the six prime accused — Anil Munda, Tarun Munda, Turang Munda, Bijoy Munda and two persons with the same name, Ramesh Munda — and charged them under Sections 147, 148, 149 and 302 of the IPC. All of them are in Biswanath Jail.*

It is poverty and not strict laws that often lead to longer prison (jail) time for the accusers. As the tribals are very poor, the bail money is often too high for them to pay. Dolly explains, “My father and brothers should have got bail within a week of their arrest. But where is the money? How will they get bail?”

After a witch hunt, the accusers often go into hiding. In such cases the police arrest anyone who is present in the village during the raids. Tippo, a 43 year male plantation worker whose wife was arrested during such a raid explains: “I do not know (meaning why his wife was arrested). She did not do anything. She was not involved (in the witch hunt)... they (the police) came and they arrested her. She was alone at home. They did not get the culprits. So they arrested whoever was available in the village at that time. My wife was innocent...I had to give bail to free her. The case is still going on. There has been no justice so far...” When I asked Tippo, why did he think that the police did not believe in his wife’s statement, he replied, “We are tribals. They hate us. They think that we are jangli (uncivilized)...boka-shoka manush (limited intelligence)...amader kothar dam nei...”<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Translated from Bengali as “There is no value in our words.”

### *The real victims of witch hunts: The accused witches*

The trauma experienced by the victims of witch hunts, the accused women, is extreme. Bhutiya, whose mother in law was dragged out of the house on accusation of witchcraft recounts the ordeal, “Buria kept on saying—let me go. I do not know anything. I did not do anything...but they did not listen to her. You know she had just eaten a fistful of rice...but they hit her...hit her a lot.” Bhutiya could not get over the trauma of her mother in law’s ordeal at how the helpless old woman was dragged out from her hut, just when she had started eating her dinner. Speaking in anger, Bhutiya vows, “I will not leave them (meaning the accusers). After they get out of jail I will kukri diyeh kuchi kuchi korey katbo (meaning that she will cut them into pieces with a knife).” The accusers, according to Bhutiya were threatening her and her family from prison. “After we get out we will see you,” they told her. Bhutiya was both very scared and angry at the events.

Chandmoni, an accused witch who escaped from her attackers, is yet to get over the trauma. “I am staying at a relative’s place and scared to go home, since Shibu (accuser) and others are still threatening me,” she said. Her daughter expressed unhappiness over alleged police inaction. The reaction of the police to her plight was insensitive: “We started a case before the second was filed in court. We have also arrested one of the accused persons. The rest are still absconding.”

Basanti expresses her feelings: “I am scared about my security. My ordeal is ...they trapped me. I will give up my life but I will never go back to the village. I am very angry...very angry and sad (amar khub raag acchey. Raaag oh dukh sobh acchey).”

To escape from witch accusations, many living victims of witch hunts convert to Christianity. Both Dulari and Basanti's families had converted to Christianity to escape the accusations. As they had changed their religions, they started attending Sunday mass at the local village church, but the witchcraft accusations against them are yet to stop. The local NGO has established shelter homes where victims of witch hunts can have temporary accommodations. But, as the name suggests these are temporary solutions and the victims often return to their villages after their stay, and they encounter the daily accusations and stresses once again. Basanti was provided shelter in such a home after she escaped to Falakata. Within a few weeks of her stay, Basanti decided to move back to her mother's home. The shelter did not have provision to keep children and Basanti was separated from her daughter. Unable to adjust to the life of the shelter, Basanti missed her daughter and decided to go back to Falakata, where the threats continued.

## **Conclusion**

There are two categories of witch hunts that take place in the tea plantations: surprise and calculated categories of witch hunts. Each category has its own pattern of events and the categories are separated by the motivations of the social action of the accusers or supporters of the witch hunts.

The surprise category of witch hunts is unique because the motivation is based on real beliefs in witches. In contrast, it is the calculated attack category where the belief in witches is taken advantage of by a section in the community. The patterns in both the two categories of hunts are useful in providing an understanding of witch hunts in the plantations. The forms of punishments for these two categories of hunts are different. In

cases of surprise attacks on witches the forms of punishment are beheading, beating and murder. In the calculated attack category the punishments are complicated and might involve rape in addition to other punishments in the surprise category. In calculated attacks the accusers know that the hunt is not against a real witch and thus there is no real threat of witchcraft.

The social factors that lead to witch hunts in the plantations are illness and diseases, lack of education, superstition, belief in witches and social stress caused by life courses such as infant mortality, bareness and complications during pregnancy and child birth.

Illness and diseases play a crucial role in providing the instigation for the two categories of hunts. Because of the lack of health facilities in the plantations, the workers depend on their traditional medicine practices for treatments. Often very simple diseases get translated into complicated ailments due to ignorance of hygiene and medicines. Thus, illness causes a lot of stress in the community and this stress gets manifested into witch hunts where the witches are viewed as the reason why illness occurs. Following the logic of functional theory as outlined by Stinchcombe, the threat of illness undermines the security in the family and the community and witches are seen as the reason why the illness persists. The witch hunts are thus a form of fear displacing response, after which, as the quotes from the interviews suggests, the sick get better or the community or the family feels secured.

Going back to the explanation of the three variables outlined by routine activity theory, one can see the presence of all three in incidents of witch hunts in the plantations.

The motivated offender category in the incidents of witch hunts are either individuals who experience real fear in the powers of the witches or individuals who use the fear in witches to fulfill personal goals that are outside the community's threat to security. The credible/suitable target group in witch hunts is the witches but exactly who the motivated offender category thinks is suitable is interesting. It is interesting because one can see two trends in the selection of this category. In the calculated category the suitable target is one the motivated offender thinks as a threat. The threat is personal and the witch hunt is used as an excuse to get rid of the target. But the motivated offender cannot target anyone who is a threat to him/her because there is always the fear of retaliation. The answer to the question why some groups get targeted when a number of them are available can be answered by Berkowitz and Green (1962). Of the several variables that Berkowitz and Green propose four seem particularly relevant: similarity to the instigator; probability of retaliation; preexisting prejudices; and prior conflicts (Jensen 2007:145). The credible target does seem to come from the same social and cultural community, from internal enemies. Basanti, Dulari were accused by their family members, neighbors and friends. They were not accused by people outside their community.

A suitable target has low probability of retaliation, meaning that they do not have the social power to challenge the claims of the offenders. In the case of Basanti, her reputation as a witch was already established before Lekha made the accusations against her. Her rape was an act that was meant to symbol her powerlessness in the community. Preexisting prejudices are the most important factor for witch hunts to occur in the community. As seen in the two categories of hunts in the plantations beliefs in the power of the witch played a huge role in the attacks. The variable of prior conflict does not



always seem to apply in the plantation witch hunts especially in cases of surprise attacks where the targets are chosen in random selection. It does However, apply in the cases under calculated attacks.

The police and the plantation administration are responsible for maintaining the peace and security in the villages. The interviews suggest that they often never interfere in the life inside the labor lines. Their interference comes in most times after the witch hunts have taken place. But their role in preventing hunts from escalating into panic attacks should not be undermined. The reluctance of the villagers to speak on the incident and the constant denial of being present during the incident conveys that the reaction of the police towards the villagers were harsh. The fear of arrests and the fear of legal retribution are vital in the prevention of these attacks into panic attacks.

## CHAPTER V

### ACTIVISM AND PROTESTS AGAINST WITCH HUNTS IN THE TEA PLANTATIONS

Oh hear all...hear all...hear all...hear all  
Oh come here oh brother  
Oh come here oh sister  
Put an end to the tradition of witch hunt.  
Put an end to the tradition of witch hunt.

Oh hear all...hear all...hear all...hear all  
Witch witch witch...  
She takes all our lives  
That's what you think!  
But there are no witches in this world  
Just a creation of your mind!  
So put an end to the witch hunt.  
Put an end to this tradition.

Oh come here oh brother  
Oh come here oh sister  
Put an end to the tradition of witch hunt.  
Put an end to the tradition of witch hunt.

Superstition and "bad" education  
Superstition and "bad" education  
The witch pleads you to grant her life  
Drive out this madness  
Drive out this madness  
Put an end to this tradition of witch hunt.

Oh come here all.  
Oh come here oh brother  
Oh come here oh sister  
Put an end to the tradition of witch hunt.  
Put an end to the tradition of witch hunt.  
Superstition (andha-bishash) and "bad" education (ku-shiksha)  
Superstition and "bad" education  
The witch pleads you to grant her life  
Drive out this madness  
Drive out this madness  
Put an end to this tradition of witch hunt.

*(After my first interview with Basanti ended, Balwant sang the song above. He had composed the song as a part of the anti-witch hunts campaign for the region. The song was in “Sadri” and it was translated by me.)*

## **Introduction**

When I first started studying NGOs in the Dooars area that worked on anti-witch hunt campaigns in the fall of 2003, one name emerged, North Bengal’s Peoples Development Center (NBPDC) or JEU as it was known then.<sup>55</sup> There are approximately twenty non governmental organizations that work in this area , but only one, NBPDC, actively worked on anti-witch hunt campaigns. Though it is surprising to find the lack of activism in an area where witch hunts are a serious social problem, the attitudes of the plantation administration, the police and state administrators can explain why such campaigns are rare.

In this chapter, I trace the anti-witch hunt campaigns of the NBPDC over two years. I focus on the audience of the campaigns, the frames that they use and their aims. In this context, I also focus on the involvement (or lack of) of the administration and the role that the plantations workers (women) play in the anti-witch hunt campaigns. A discussion on the anti-witch hunt campaign in the plantation is useful for an understanding and explanations of witch hunts in the plantations. Anti-witch hunt campaigns and activism will provide clues into the issues affecting the lives of the tribal workers and where witch hunts figure. As the previous chapters in the dissertation point

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<sup>55</sup> North Bengal’s People’s Development Center was known as JEU Mahila Vikas Sangstha till the fall of 2005, after which it changed it’s name to NBPDC. The change in name is the result of the NBPDC in broadening its focus from women oriented problems to a focus on the problems of the people in North Bengal.

out, social stress mainly caused by diseases and illness play a huge role in instigating witch hunts. How do the activists use the factors instigating witch hunts in the campaign to prevent hunts? How do the two categories of hunts play a role in the activism? In other words, do the activists promote different strategies for preventing hunts based on the two categories? To whom are these campaigns addressed to? What are the goals of the campaign? These are some of the questions that I will address in this chapter.

I begin this chapter with a brief background of the NBPDC.

### **North Bengal's people's development center**

*Somari Munda a member of our Sudata Self Help Group, Dhanirampur I Gram Panchayat, Falakata block, was called a witch... and was to be put to Janguru's scrutiny and killed... Suddenly, we got the news... Our Secretary met Somari... and we started holding group meetings there everyday... and informed the authorities From the Campaign, for the Campaign, by the Campaign... Our Volunteers and activists composed and wrote Songs and a drama respectively in Sadri and Sadri-Nepali-Bengali-Rajbongshi dialect... And Mobilization among the Women of Dhanirampur-I, against witch-hunting reached its peak... And Somari Speaks out to the general gathering of all women of that locality....*

*This is one example of all those daily core, for which we say:  
JEU symbolizes empowerment.*

*SP, Jalpaiguri Ajay Nanda, IPS speaking before the audience after he joined us our Final Rally for some time along with FPO Jalpaiguri Sri Charvak, IIS at Dhanirampur-I as Peoples' Awakening on witch hunting reached its peak....*

The excerpt above is taken from the anti-witch hunt pamphlet of the NBPDC "A Pictorial Story of Dhamiranpur, JEU pamphlet, 2005." NBPDC was established in the early 1980s at the courtyard of a private home. In its initial years the organization worked against various forms of abuses against women (dowry, domestic violence). Throughout the years, the organization organized campaigns and worked in the area of (especially in

the rural areas) mother and child care, hygiene, providing water in villages through tube wells, banking, adult literacy, vocational training for women ( tailoring, handicrafts, making of jams, jellies, and squashes ), family planning and child education.

As a part of its campaign, NBPDC provided counseling, especially on legal aid to settle disputes between families. It has also organized various health camps (polio vaccination camps), eye camps and blood donation camps in various parts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar districts.

Over the years NBPDC grew from a local community based organization to a representative of the Dooars area and her people. The primary focus of the NBPDC expanded from women's problems, to encompass, the marginalized population in the tea plantation areas. It states in the website that it "...aims towards the empowerment of women, tribals and other marginal groups at the grass root level in North Bengal, through economic independence, education and campaign against various forms of abuses against them." As a result it changed its name from being a "mahila sangstha"<sup>56</sup> to a "people's development center". In the last four years NBPDC has included witch hunts as one of the major social problems in this area and is working towards "sustainable development to eradicate the problem" (See <http://www.jeumvs.northbengal.net/>). It is interesting to note that that NBPDC is the only NGO in the Dooars area that is working against witch hunts.

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<sup>56</sup> "*Mahila*" means "woman" and "*sangstha*" means "organization" in Bengali.

## **Anti-witch hunt protest and activism on Sundays**

As mentioned above, anti-witch hunt protests became one of the primary focuses of the NBPDC in the last four years. According to Chandana Chakraborty, Secretary of the NBPDC, “We have been working against witch hunts (in this region) for the last nineteen years...well we are trying...so that it can be stopped. For the last nineteen years we have been unable to do something. For the last three four years we have been able to get the support from police, administration, media and money that helped in launching the campaign”.

Typically regular campaigns/meetings against witch hunts are held on Sunday afternoons at tea plantation villages. These campaigns are not explicitly named as “witch hunt campaigns” but are tagged along with meetings of “self help groups” and their progress. Self help groups are usually a group of eight women including the group leader. These groups are micro credit groups organized under the Government of India Schemes<sup>57</sup> and NGOs are typically assigned the task of administering these programs at the grassroot level.<sup>58</sup> Each woman in the group is loaned a small amount of money at no interest to start their own business that would supplement their family income. Scholars studying micro credit argue that women successfully repay loans more often than men and, thus, men are not a part of these schemes. Every month the NGO holds a meeting at the village with the members of the self help groups. Economic incentives are successful in ensuring that every woman in the village participates in meetings. Over the years the

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<sup>57</sup> Indian Government, at all levels, announces Welfare Schemes for a cross section of the society from time to time. These Schemes could be either Central, State specific or a joint collaboration between the Centre and the States. The NGOs are often assigned the task of administering the schemes. The schemes could be of a variety of topic from agricultural, educational, health and hygiene and so on. See <http://india.gov.in/govt/schemes.php>

<sup>58</sup> See Munshi et al 2008 for the role of civil society (NGOS) in governance in India.

NBPDC found that attendance for anti-witch hunt campaigns are poor, mainly because of suspicion and fear among the villagers. Instead if they organize a meeting under a different name, it brings together all the villagers to participate.

For instance, "...barely weeks after the Somari Munda case (a case discussed in chapter 4), where the villagers reacted against a witch hunt incident and rescued the alleged witch, a micro credit meeting was held so that the women could come out of their homes on the pretext of credit loans. Towards the second half of the meeting, the discussion turned into a campaign for anti-witch hunt." (Field notes June 2005).

All of you (addressing the women) are members of our micro credit groups. All of you are aware about a witch hunt incident in this village. In that incident you have together as a unit protested the incident and transformed it into a unified campaign. We (meaning the members of the micro credit group) have been successful in our andolan (movement). The people, who have been torturing women in the name of witches, because of our andolan, have been forced to confess their guilt and wrong doings in front of the entire community ...and had to beg for forgiveness. (Balwant, social activist)

In one of my "travels" with the NPDC, I was invited to accompany the NGO to a meeting organized in Falakata. The purpose of the meeting, as it was announced weeks before in the region, was to discuss the progress of the self help group (Chetana) and the launching of Below Poverty Line (BPL) schemes of the Government.<sup>59</sup> The meeting was held in the courtyard of the village high school. The school was a single storied three room structure furnished with broken furniture. The school needed a fresh coat of paint and repairs. However, as this was one of the "better" schools in the area with two brick structured latrines and a big playground, it provided the perfect spot for the meeting.

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<sup>59</sup> BPL schemes are a major crowd puller in villages. Under this scheme, families are classified on the basis of whether they fall "below" or "above" the poverty line. Falling below the poverty line brings in some benefits from the Government in the form of interest free loans and special economic schemes.

The meeting started around three in the afternoon. About seventy percent of the audience was women, and they came accompanied by the children. Sundays are the only day of the week that is a holiday for the plantation workers, and it is the only time when the villagers can attend a meeting. The discussion turned into an anti-witch hunt protest after BPL was discussed.

We did not form this group just to give and take loans. We, the organizers and you (addressing the women) want, through Chetana, that within this community, may there be peace. The Ku-shangaskar (superstition) that is within us, within our society, especially within our adivashi (tribal) community regarding daini pratha (belief in witches) we want to get rid of it. Daini pratha is in existence for a long time. This is not just today's problem. Why did this (meaning belief in witches and witch hunts) come to happen, what are the real reasons behind witch hunts, which areas are it most prevalent...we have to bring these forward in front of you (Chandana, social activist).

In other words, because of the fear and superstition of the community towards witch hunts and because of their previous experience with the police and the legal reaction against the villagers, meetings solely organized against anti-witch hunts have little participation. As it was seen in the discussion on the police and administration in Chapter 4, the police make large scale arrests where often innocent people get arrested after a witch hunt. The police along with the administration are often insensitive to the sentiments of the tribals and as a result the tribals are often suspicious about campaigns that attack their traditions.

For any movement to succeed it is important that the audience targeted (meaning the participants) resonates with the theme of the protest or movement. It is difficult to organize movements for sensitive topics such as witch hunts and the discussion in the next few subsection will focus on how the NBPDC is organizing the movement in the face of challenges.



## **Composition and character of the anti-witch hunt movement**

There has been considerable research in the field of social movements focusing on the composition of movements. Movement actors, who constitute the movement are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, bystanders, antagonists or observers (Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford & Snow, 2000). The actors are the active participants of the movement (activists).

No discussion on movements can be complete without the discussion of the movement's supporters, individuals who might not be directly involved in the movement. Likewise the audience targeted is an important part in a discussion of a movement. A social movement is made up and influenced by each of these component: actors, audience, supporters and counter actors who react to the movement and its supporters. Each of these components are linked to the other: the actors are the active participants who help in targeting the audience and the supporters; the actors react to the counter actors, who in turn create counter movements; the actors react again and the process continues.

In the anti-witch hunt movement, the movement actors are the primarily the social activists associated with the NBPDC and its networking partners. They are the active participants of the movement. In addition, the audiences of the movement, the women, in this case, are also an important composition of the movement. The supporters of the anti-witch hunt movement consist of villagers, legal and police administrators, who act as secondary supporters or passive supporters or actors.

The character of the anti-witch hunt movement in the Dooars area consists of a single movement organized by a single organization. The lack of diversity of the movement at this stage can be attributed to its “new” status. The movement is four years old and lack of finances and the sensitive nature of the issue has been a factor in the lack of interest among other agencies in taking up the cause. For the people involved with Arohi, a central government funded NGO, it is “too much trouble” to get involved in anti-witch hunt campaign. Subir, male, 45 years, social activist, explains, “Firstly it is a tribal issue. Tribals are very superstitious and they believe in witches. You cannot get this mentality away from them. It is impossible. All these campaigns (meaning the ones organized by NBPDC) are good...but they can never solve the problem. Can you cure the tribals from the superstitions?” Referring to the lack of interest from the administration and government on the issue of witch hunt, he continues, “The government does not want to get involved. It is very complicated. Tribals have their own rules. As long as they do it within their own (people) the government is not bothered.”

Every movement has counter actors and in the anti-witch hunt campaign, the counter actors are the accusers and the conspirators of the hunt. It is interesting to note that though the janguru is mentioned during the interviews as a conspirator, he is not overtly mentioned as a counter actor during the speeches in the campaigns.

### *Audience*

As mentioned before, in the anti-witch hunt campaign women are the main audience. The anti-witch hunt meetings, the frames that the movement use are all directed towards these women who are fellow tribal villagers. Chandana explains, “Targeting the

women is important. They are the ones that start the witch hunt initially. If they stop calling each other daini then at least sixty percent of the accusations would stop.”

Balwant agrees, “...most witch hunt accusations come from ghorelu jogra (meaning household quarrels.” As we saw in the previous chapter, in both the two types of witch hunt categories, surprise and calculated attacks, diseases and illnesses play an important part in instigating attacks. Women provide the main caretakers at home during illness, and the explanation that they provide regarding why the individual is having a prolonged illness is crucial in witchcraft accusations. This is a pattern similar in English witch hunts and for Salem where both women as accusations and women as accusers were of the largest category. As seen in the case of Basanti, Basanti’s conflicts with her in laws were instrumental in her growing reputation as a witch in the village. So was her conflict with Lekha’s wife who made the second round of accusations against Basanti when Lekha’s child fell ill.

It is interesting to note that these campaigns are not directed towards the men in the tribal society, even though ninety two percent of the direct accusations come from males (See chapter 3). But as explained before, even though the men make the bulk of the direct accusations of witchcraft against the accused, women play a huge role either in the form of lending support to the men or in the form of starting the initial conflict leading to accusation against the accused witch.

Meera, another activist explains, “Men come later. The accusations come from the women. Today if all the women are united against the witch accusations then witch hunt would not have taken place.” She continues, “Look at dowry cases. It is the mother in law

and the sister in law that harasses the bride. So if you manage to make these women understand that what they are doing is not right, the problem can be solved.”

But there are incidents of witch hunts where the men instigate the conflict, especially in surprise cases. For Meera this is not the real problem. She argues, “...there are two things. One the women have to realize that there are no witches. The troubles and the mischief that witches cause are not caused by witches. It is the men, their alcohol and their lust...the women have to realize that. And second the superstition is a big issue.” In other words for Meera, even though there are cases (cases in Killkote and Central Dooars) where it is the men who instigate the attack, the support that the women give to the accusers is a key issue. According to Meera if the women supporters realize that there are no real witches and belief in witchcraft is superstition, then they would perhaps refrain from lending support to their men. She argues that it is alcoholism and not witches that are the biggest threat in the tribal society. Meera’s comments provide clues as to why the activists target the women as the audience in the campaign. In both categories of witch hunts, if the support from the women is taken away then the accusations would lose much of their credibility. In Basanti’s and in Dulari’s cases if the women did not come forwards with accusations of witchcraft, then the cases against the women would not have been strong. In other words the women accusers and supporters are seen as an important element to the instigators of witch hunts during calculated attacks. Their role is vital during the initial stage and during the stage of the whispering campaign that leads to the social isolation of the accused. As seen in Basanti’s case her social isolation resulted in her forced confession during the trial. In cases of surprise attacks, the role of the women accusers is mainly in the form of lending support to the accusers and justifying

their act. To Dolly, whose father and brother are in prison serving a sentence, the murder of the two women were necessary to get rid of the evil spirit in her household. She did not see the murders as against the law.

As women are the primary audiences of the anti-witch hunt campaign, activists have formulated the frames used in these campaigns directed towards them. However, while targeting the women audience, the activists face the big challenge of making the tribal women speak on witch hunts. For instance,:

...speaking at a meeting after a witch hunt incident, Chandana wanted to know details about the event. She addressed the crowd asking for details. The women murmured among themselves. Chandana picked out a woman in the crowd and asked her “Why don’t you give us the details of the incident?” The woman replies “We do not know what happened.” (Field notes 2006)

As seen in the discussion on previous chapters, making the women respond to witch hunts was a challenge for the researcher. In this context the activists face the dual challenges of not only making the women speak but speak against witch hunts. But before that comes the initial hurdle of making the women attend the campaigns. As discussed before, the attendance problem is solved by tagging the witch hunt campaigns with the micro credit group meetings. It is interesting to see how the frames used in the anti-witch hunt campaign are directed towards addressing the challenge of making the women speak against witch hunts. The next subsection in this chapter deals with the frames used by the activists in the campaign.

### **The frames used in the anti-witch hunt campaign**

The study of framing is useful in understanding the social and political dynamics of a movement (Coy, 1996) and the literature on social movements has mentioned that

composition of a movement and other aspects of the movement (audience, supporters and counter actors) have some influence on frames (Benford and Snow 2000; McCammon et al 2004; Ryan 1996; Valocchi 1992).

The concept of frame and framing process has been popularized in sociology through the Goffman's (1974) book on the topic (Benford & Snow. 2000). The Goffmanian definition of frames as "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large is widely accepted today by most frame scholars in social movements. For the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to "frames" as a holistic concept that includes both the dynamic action oriented element and the interpretive function.

The framing perspective views movements as signifying agents engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for protagonists, antagonists and bystanders. The frames assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize political adherents and constituents, to gather bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow 2004).

The framing process has come to be regarded as a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements. There has been considerable scholarship on collective action frames and framing processes in relation to social movements in the past one and half decades (Benford & Snow. 2000). Moreover, there are a number of studies on the frame as the dependent variable (Snow 2004) and on the dynamic character of the frame.

The anti-witch hunt campaign uses a number of frames directed towards the audience, the counter-actors and the supporters of the movement. There are three

categories of frames used by the activists in the campaign: a superstition frame; women's development and development of a community of women; and a justice frame.

### *The belief in witches and witch hunts as “superstition” frame*

In most, if not all, meetings in the campaign against witch hunts, activists made a direct reference to witchcraft accusation and witch hunts as being a part of the “backward” mindset of the community. The belief in witches and witchcraft are attacked as being a part of the *ku-shangaskar* (superstition) and thus must be done away with. The song composed by Balwant, quoted at the beginning of this chapter sums up what the activists think about witch hunts by calling it a form of “madness”, “superstition” and a result of “bad education”. In other words the activists are rigid in their agenda that there are no real witches.

“...we have seen that no matter how many times we have fought against this *ku-shangaskar*, we have been victorious. We have to understand that this *daini pratha* (witch tradition) is *ku-shangaskar*. Not *Shu* but *ku-shangaskar*.”<sup>60</sup> (Activist speaking at a meeting in Dooars).

Similarly, another tribal activist speaking at a meeting explains: “We have to understand that this (witch hunt) has done us no good. It cannot do any good. Look at you. You fight to eat barely two meals a day...nothings fancy just rice and salt...you have to survive and being buried in superstitions does not help. We have to get rid of these beliefs...”

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<sup>60</sup> The word *Shu* means “good” and the word *Ku* means “bad”. *Shuu-shangaskar* thus refers to good traditions while *ku-shangaskar* refers to bad traditions or superstitions.

The above quotes are typical illustration of the frame of superstition in the speeches of the activists. The superstition frame is used to enlighten the audience that witch hunts cannot be beneficial to a community that fights to basic needs to survive.

Along with the stress on superstitions, the activists often refer to the witch hunts are a form of “conspiracy theory” in their speeches, by which the tribals are exploited to serve the interest of some people in the village. Chandana, addressing the village crowd at a Sunday meeting in Dhanirampur, said, “Opobadh, opoprochar, makes men divided...brings in division and animosity between families, just to serve an individual’s personal interest.”<sup>61</sup> The activists identify illiteracy as the main problem that makes the tribals so vulnerable to the conspirators. Balwant explains, “You will see that in areas where there is little education...and no resources for education...some matabbar people take advantage of the situation...What will the poor illiterate tribals do? Naturally the illiterate people in the village do not understand the politics. They do not understand the illness too. All they understand is daini protha (witch) and jaddu vidya...”

In other words, the superstition frame is an important and continuing reference in all meetings on the anti-witch hunts campaign. One can see that the activists make reference, without being explicit, on both categories of witch hunts in the speeches. While referring to superstition as the cause of witch hunts one can see the link to surprise category of hunts. Linking superstition to the conspiracy theory the activists make a reference to the calculated category of hunts.

In all of the speeches addressed to the audience, the activists stressed on the connection between beliefs in witches with the superstitious mentality of the tribals. The

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<sup>61</sup> The word *opobadh* means derisions or false accusations while the term *opoprochar* means bad publicity or spreading of false allegations.



common phrase that the activists use to summarize the development of the witch hunts is “ek dui tin” (meaning one two three). “The accusations start on day one; Wednesday-Thursday the janguru intervenes and three is on Friday when the witch is killed...” As the above quotes illustrate, the activists through their speeches, stressed how the simple, uneducated villagers were manipulated because of their superstitions by individuals who used witch hunts to serve their own purpose. The message in the superstition frame was direct: there are no real witches and thus there is no need to hunt for witches.

### *Women’s development frame*

Along with the stress on the beliefs in witches as superstitious, the activists of the anti-witch hunt applied a parallel frame when addressing the women audience of the meetings. As discussed in the section under “Anti-witch hunt protest and activism on Sundays”, the meetings of anti-witch hunt are typically “concealed” under micro credit meetings that involved mainly the women from the villages. The activists directly targeted the women as audience during these meetings by focusing on their development and encouraged a community building among the women. Frames such as “We want every woman in this village to be enlightened” and “We are a single community...we can fight all these evils and bring up empowerment” were used to attract the women. These frames were combined with the message of anti-witch hunt protests. The resulting message was beliefs in witches cannot go hand in hand with women’s development. This point is well illustrated by Chandana in one of her speeches “We are a group whose interest does not end with loans. We want to uplift our lives. You (the women) cannot continue to believe in witches and talk about unnati (development)...”

Chandana, the main speaker in these meetings often makes the connection between the two very explicit in her speeches.

Sisters you have formed this community...Because of this community you all have benefited some things. What are these benefits? I do not think that I have to explain because you know these (benefits) very well. In every para (community) in this village we have formed a “group”...there is good relations between everyone because of these groups...you are there in sorrow and happiness for everyone in this group. Previously you had to think to borrow a mere fifty rupees. Now you do not have to think about these any more...this has given all of you dignity. Your children go to schools... You have realized that there are no witches. Witches are mere creations of some evil conspirators... who do not want to see you developed. They do not want to see you debt free. They do not want you children to go to school. Because if they did (really want your children to go to school), then it would not serve their interest...

At a meeting addressed to the women after a witch hunt was “attempted” in the village, Chandana talks about how the protest meetings have served their purpose in preventing the hunt. “After the big incident (of witch hunting where two women were murdered) a few years ago, you have participated in meetings at the primary school, at the village ground, at the village sansadh. There was only one purpose in these meetings: to stop the tradition of witch hunt in this village.” Speaking of how the women’s micro credit groups came together, she continues, “There were five hundred women from our micro credit groups who participated...not one or two. The panchayat became tired at our persuasion and agreed to join us...Soon after this we thought that there will be no future witch hunts in this area. But what did we see? We saw that the hunts began again...within our micro credit groups. But we, the women have been again successful in preventing it. This is because we have come together as a group...we take development of our women seriously.”

The activists also focus on the major problem facing the women of the tribal villages. Within the women's development frame, alcoholism is addressed. Alcoholism is a severe problem among the tea plantation villagers. As discussed in previous sections Fridays are typically pay days and the beginning of the weekend. On Friday afternoons, visitors to the villages can smell the odor of fermented rice that would be used in the preparation of haria. Some of the local people that I interviewed talked about the link between alcohol consumption and witch accusations. According to these locals Friday nights are "nights of mischief". In other words on Fridays typically the entire village gets drunk and fights break out between people leading to an exchange of verbal insults. One of the common verbal insults are daini that leads to witch accusations between the conflicting groups in the fight. In some cases Friday night accusations lead to surprise witch attacks. In cases of calculated attacks, the accusers and their supporters often consume a large quantity of alcohol before the actual witch hunt starts. Participants in this study have often described about how the smell of haria and "red eyes" are a constant character of the accusers.

For the activists in the anti-witch hunt struggle, alcoholism is a major culprit for instigating witch hunt and accusations. In meetings, the activists address the issue of alcoholism along with women's development frame. The main argument was unless alcohol consumption in the villages stop, the witch hunts would continue. Lipi, a 34 year old female activist, addressed a meeting shortly after a woman was rescued by the villagers from a witch hunt. The villagers managed to drive the accusers and the janguru away from the victim and informed the NGO. "Even though we have managed to stop this (witch hunt), the foundations for the complete eradication of the witch hunts is still

shaky. The peena (alcohol consumption) is still on. As long as the peena continues you cannot do anything.” The audience often murmur and shake their heads in response. To them alcoholism is a part of their life, something that is hard to fight against. Dhani, a tribal woman responds, “...what do I say? Things (meaning alcohol) are like this here. What happens after the peena who knows? We all know the reality, but this is a tribal area. What do we do?”

Addressing the women, Lipi continues, “...you will have to tread very carefully in the plantation area. Your success story, our anti-witch hunt meetings, the songs that you have composed, the plays have been broadcast on television. The outside world now knows your story. The outside world knows that the women of Dhanirampur have fought and protested against the tradition of witch hunts. They (the women) have come out in the streets and the world thinks that the tradition of daini has been eradicated from this area. But if the witch hunts start again, and they will if the peena continues among your men, you will be ashamed to show your faces to the outside world. I am saying this, this will happen.”

The women’s development frame addresses the day to day problems of the women in the plantation like finances, schools for children, alcoholism and women’s empowerment to make the women of the plantation feel responsible for the eradication of witch hunts. Making the women feel responsible for witch hunts is a useful strategy in preventing witch hunts as most instigations come from women. In addition to responsibility, the tribal women now have a real in preventing hunts: the benefits of the credit groups that have resulted in significant changes in their lives. The activists have

been successful in employing these two strategies in making the tribal women become involved in the campaign and raise their voices against witch hunts.

### *Justice frame*

At the heart of the anti-witch hunt campaign is the focus on healing and sense of justice towards the victims and their families of witch hunts. The justice frame is used in meetings that are held in villages that have had a recent incident of witch hunt. Because of the delayed response of the police in cases where the administration decides to intervene or lack of police involvement, the justice frames are used to encourage the women in the micro credit group to stand up for their members. The justice frames use slogans like “victory for the women of Chetana”, “anti-witch hunt mobilization reaching its peak under NBPDC” and “confession of guilt” framework to make its case. Speaking of the Killkote incident where five women were murdered, activists from the NBPDC talk about justice towards the family members of the victims. At a village meeting, Shova addressing their families’ promises, “We will make sure that every guilty person in this incident is locked up. We will not let the guilty get away.”

In Dhanirampur area of Jalpaiguri, the anti-witch hunt campaigns have been successful. In 2006 Lalitha Oraon was accused of witchcraft. Lalitha was a member of the micro credit group. The accuser was a villager whose wife was in the same micro credit group as Lalitha. Speaking of the incident, Rajani a female activist addressed the crowd: “The women of our micro credit groups decided among themselves that the accusations against Lalitha were incorrect. Even the accuser’s wife joined our campaign...Our voices were stronger and the man became quiet. He stopped the threats

and begged for forgiveness. Today Behani Oraon lives in her own house peacefully.” Rajani’s quote is typical of the confession framework within the justice frame where the victim’s trauma is healed by making the accuser confess and ask for forgiveness.

### **Difficulty and challenges in the movement: The “other” actors**

The government administration and the police were often passive actors in the anti-witch hunt campaigns. In the initial years before the NBPDC got involved in the campaign, the police were either reluctant to interfere in witchcraft accusations. They arrived typically after the witch hunt was over and their role ended with arrests. Even though in the last couple of years the police have been working with NBPDC to eradicate witch hunts in the Jalpaiguri, the police tends to take a “passive” actor role in the anti-witch campaign. Much of their (the police) passive role in the campaign is partly due to their attitude towards the witch hunts and the tribal workers in the plantations. In one of the interviews with a police official (Ravi), Ravi dismissed any idea that witch hunts among the tribals have to do with culture. According to him witch hunts incidents occur solely due to economic reasons, where deprivation of education and health facilities play a role in stimulating an attack against an alleged witch. He justifies, “Currently poor pay in the tea gardens are one of the causes for their poor economic conditions. Don’t you think it is interesting that in a community that goes to attend polio drop health camps, would have witch hunts? The health condition, as these NGOs shout...is not a factor. It is pure economics.”

Another common response when I interviewed some government administrators was “witch hunts do not occur”. Of the two participants, one expressed surprise that

Jalpaiguri has one of the highest incidents of witch hunts in the last five years. The attitude was that a non tribal, especially some from my background, should not get involved in the study of witch hunts as it is “a waste of time” and “a threat to my physical well being”. Some of the mind-set that the police and the administrators had towards the tribals was that they (the police and the administrators) do not want to travel to the labor lines after two in the afternoon. This is because tribals start drinking after work and that can lead to trouble. In other words the prevailing prejudices and misconceptions towards the tribals influenced the involvement of the police and administrators in the campaigns.

In this context, it is important to mention the role the plantation management play in the anti-witch hunt campaigns. Most incidents of witch hunts take place over the weekend, at a time when the managers are away from the plantation. Thus, by the time the managers come back, the witch hunt is over. The attitude of the plantation management towards witch hunts are detached. As the plantations maintain a strict hierarchy, the managements prefer not to be directly involved in the lives of the workers.

Though the management readily gave me permission to interview the workers, they themselves refused to be interviewed. In a way they were dismissive of witch hunts, citing alcoholism to be the main factor behinds incidents. The activists working on the anti-witch hunt campaign have had limited success in their efforts to involve the management in the campaign.

In the anti-witch hunt campaign, though the police and the NGO are working together, there are differences between the two. One, the activists are frustrated and unhappy at the police reports. Most witch hunt cases, the activists argue, do not make it to the reports. Second while the activists want a policy change to prevent future attacks in

the region, the police and administrators prefer counseling centers to deal with the victims. To the activists, while counseling centers are useful for the victims and their families, it does not prevent future hunts. To prevent future hunts anti-witch hunt laws are essential, an opinion that local politicians and administrators do not want to take seriously. They are more interested in concentrating on issues of health and education rather than witch hunts as government aid for health and education projects are easily available. Chandana explains, “We requested one lakh rupees (1200 US\$) as aid for the anti-witch hunt project. This is not a huge amount...but they will not fund us. Witch hunts are just not important enough.”

One of the biggest challenges facing the NBPDC is rehabilitation services for the victims. Typically rescued accused women are housed in a “short stay home” managed by the NBPDC. But as the name suggests, the shelter is temporary and activists are confused as to how to rehabilitate the women. Thus, funding and lack of organized strategies towards rehabilitation of victims are some of the biggest problems that organizations face.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter on the discussion of anti-witch hunt campaigns provides important clues on how witch hunts are a product of the beliefs in the witches among the tribals combined with the daily stresses of illness, diseases, alcoholism along with the manipulation of a few individuals to serve personal motives. The frames used in this campaign particularly the superstition frame and the women’s development frame offer perspectives on how the role of the tribal women can play an influencing factor in the



eradication of witches. One of the research questions for this dissertation was why do women support the attack on other women as witches. In chapter 4, I discussed the reasons for the support and one of the reasons for support was for in exchange of economic and social support of the man. The micro credit loans are crucial in tilting the balance of economics in the plantation towards the tribal women. If the businesses supported the loans are successful then that would imply that the women would not have to rely on the men for finances. The question that comes to the mind next is whether the success of the micro credit loans would lead to decrease in support for witch hunts by women, and whether it would lead to a decline and a possible eradication of witch hunts in future.

One interesting observation in the study of the anti-witch hunt movement is, the absence of any reference to diseases or illness, as a main “frame” in the campaign. Though, there are references to diseases in the superstition frame, given the role diseases play in instigating attacks, the absence of direct reference to diseases seem to be stark. One explanation could be that the activists, driven by the incentives that the government schemes provide on programs on women’s development, tend to focus on the micro credit schemes as they are more successful and bring in a lot of publicity to the NGO. The women’s development schemes fit very well in their organization’s framework, as a group that promotes the enhancement of women. On the other hand, a focus on the diseases and its relation to witch hunts, would require a sustained focus on the tribal beliefs and practices, particularly towards traditional healing. This perhaps explains, why the activist overlook health as a frame, given their strong commitment towards promoting the NGO as a women’s organization.

In this context, it is also important to address the issue of the lack of a counter-movement, and thus counter-frames, in the anti-witch hunt campaign. As mentioned before, the tribals in the plantation are isolated from the outside world. In other parts of India, various tribal organizations have emerged that are raising awareness of the right to protect the indigenous culture of the tribals. Such campaigns are yet to reach the tea plantation communities. There is only one NGO that works on the anti-witch hunt campaign in the plantations, and it would be interesting to do a follow up study on the campaign after some years. At this stage in the campaign, there does not seem to be the presence of a counter-movement. One can predict the participants of the counter-movement could come from the believers and practitioners of the alternative medicines, such as among the janguru, and among the tribal people, who would perhaps advocate for an approach that is more sensitive to their beliefs and practices.

The anti-witch hunt campaign is an important illustration of a social movement on an issue that is neglected by the government and legal system. The frames in the campaign, such as the superstition frame, the women's development frame and the justice frame, are used interchangeably in their speeches by the activists. It will be interesting to study the campaign after some years and to compare whether and how the frames change and what impact does it have on the character of the movement, her audiences and her actors. It will be also interesting to study the legal activism part of the campaign and how does it affect the passage of laws against anti-witch hunts.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*“I suggest that the best way to understand the cause of the witch mania is to examine its earthly results rather than its heavenly intentions”*

*Marvin Harris 1989.*

#### **Discussion**

In this dissertation I have used data from forty five in-depth interviews, case studies and ethnography to explain why witch hunts are still a regular occurrence among the tea plantation tribal workers in India. Unlike Marvin Harris who explained the cause of European witchcraze as largely a creation of the governing classes in Europe to suppress the wave of Protestant Reformation, my dissertation does not provide a simple explanation of this complex problem. Instead my dissertation provides much needed data from the tea plantations in India and comes to two related explanations for the phenomena-- one focusing on surprise attacks and the other focusing on calculated attacks.

The explanation for surprise attacks is simple. These attacks are random attacks on accused women without any motive on the part of the accuser, except to get rid of the witch's evil spell. The motivation for these attacks comes from the belief in witches as the root of all evil among the tribals and a witch hunt is an attempt to get rid of the evil. The second category of witch hunts, calculated attack , is more complex. The motivations

for attack can be anything from revenge to personal motives serving economic or social purposes.

An important question relevant to both categories of hunts is who gets targeted and why? While it has been difficult to provide a characterization of the target group especially in cases of surprise attacks, the study was successful in providing some clues on the target in calculated attacks. One common thread that binds both categories of hunts is the role of disease and illness that provides the justification for the hunts in the eyes of the accusers and their supporters. In the next section, I briefly discuss the findings of the study along with future directions that the research provides.

## **Findings**

*RQ1. Does the presence of formal control system (either directly or indirectly) act as a deterrent to witch hunts in India?*

The in depth interviews did suggest that the presence of the formal control system did act as a deterrent to the witch hunts in the plantations. In the four case studies discussed in chapter three, the witch hunts took place in labor lines that were isolated from the mainstream populations and where the nearest police post was a few miles away. In a community that has few means of transport, reaching a police station that is even a few miles away takes time.

As seen in the data, the reaction of the police takes place after the hunt is over. The formal system reacts seriously towards witch hunts as witch hunts are against the law. The repercussion of the police comes in the form of arrests and other legal reactions. The witch hunts especially the surprise attacks takes place over the weekends when there

is a sense of lawlessness in the labor lines. The managers retire to their homes outside the plantations and the workers who already lead an isolated life are left to their own. Given the reaction of the villagers towards the police (fear and reluctance to talk), one can conclude that the presence of the formal guardians of law especially the law that views witch hunts as illegal will lead to a decrease in the incidents or prevent the hunts from occurring. In cases of calculated attacks, the data points to the conclusion that stronger laws against witch hunts would have been effective in preventing the hunts from materializing. The accusers would not have the social support necessary to carry out the hunts due to the fear of repercussion from the police.

*RQ2. Are witch hunts/hunts more likely to occur when the three variables outlined by routine activity theory (motivated offenders, suitable targets of criminal victimization and lack of capable guardians of persons or property) are present?*

The plantation incidents do point to the fact that the presence of all three variables is essential for witch hunts to occur. Motivated offenders as a category are present in both categories of hunts. The difference in this variable between the two categories of hunts lies in the fact whether the offenders are motivated by fear in witchcraft or whether they use the fear as an excuse to achieve other motives outside this fear. The demographics of this category, as demonstrated by the data, point to the fact that though men make more than ninety percent of this category, it is women who instigate the initial accusation of witchcraft. Second, motivated offenders always come from either relatives or neighbors of the accused witch who stand to gain by the hunt.

The category of suitable targets is also an important characteristic for witch hunts to happen. As discussed before, this category is composed mainly of women and

particularly those women who have a low retaliation power. The previous research question outlines the relevance of the lack of suitable guardians of property that can be a cause in instigating the hunts. Added to these three variables is the belief and fear in witches among tribals without which witch hunts cannot happen. There has to be a convergence of time and space dimension of these three variables for witch hunts to occur.

*RQ3. Are witch hunts higher in communities where the community is isolated from the mainstream population and is homogenous in its social structure?*

The data from my dissertation does point out to the fact that witch hunts are a common occurrence in a community that is isolated from the mainstream population. The tribal worker community is homogeneous in its daily struggle and social structure. Witch accusations do not come from strangers. Instead, the accusations come from individuals who share similar social settings. In other words the theory of witch hunts being search for a hidden enemy in a homogeneous community that has no other structured form of conflict with any other group has some relevance to the hunts in the plantations.

*RQ4. Is there a connection between disease rates and rates of witch hunts in the community?*

The data does point to the fact that all witch accusations originate, in both categories of hunts, from incidents of disease and illness. In other words there is a strong connection between illness and diseases and witch hunts. However, my dissertation is a qualitative dissertation and cannot answer the question how the rates of diseases and rates

of witch hunts in a community are related. To answer this question one would need a quantitative analysis of epidemic rates and rates of witch hunt. This analysis is presently outside the scope of my dissertation.

*RQ5 Is there some connection between the low social status of individuals and individuals being a suitable target for witch hunts. In other words does increase or decrease in social status contribute to witch hunts? Do women with property, skilled at midwifery, without male guardians face the threat of witch hunt?*

There is some connection between low social status and the credibility of being a suitable target. My findings suggest that women who have lower social status have a higher chance of being accused in witchcraft. The findings on property ownership and increase in witchcraft accusation are mixed. Though some of the data do suggest that some witchcraft accusations are motivated to gain a plot of land by the accuser, some witchcraft accusations are made on individuals who do not own any land. The finding on the connection between lack of male guardians and increase in chances of being a suitable target provides little evidence that witchcraft accusations have any relevance to the marital status of women. My dissertation finds that among the tribal community any woman typically above the age of forty could be under the threat of witchcraft accusation.

*RQ7 Are “suitable targets” and “motivated offenders” always known to each other in a witch hunt leading to a hunt?*

The findings from my dissertation do suggest that witchcraft accusations come from relatives or fellow villagers of the accused.

*RQ8. Are witch hunts a response by society towards individuals who do gender differently?*

The findings from my dissertation were mixed in regard to this question. In a community where there is a strong belief and fear in the power of real witches, everyone is under the threat of being accused as a witch. In both categories of hunts in the plantation the target was either chosen randomly or based on the motive of the accuser as to what purpose the hunt would serve. However, whatever the motive was, it was easier to find support for the accusation of witchcraft against the women if she had the following characteristics: a quarrelsome personality, frequent cursing and some form of conflict with another woman. Moreover, a child or a relative of the woman that the accused woman was in conflict with was ill and had some physical features such as color of hair, skin tone or physical deformity that added credibility to her image.

*RQ9. Why do women support attacks on women as witches?*

My dissertation provides evidence that women support the attack on other women as a form of showing support to their male relative, particularly if the male relatives are the accusers. The support is necessary for women in a community where their labor is valued lower compared to men and are paid lower wages by the plantation. In a way the support that the women show is perhaps in exchange for economic security.



RQ10. *Why midwives in the tribal communities in India cannot be suitable targets for witch hunts?*

As mentioned before, a suitable target for witch hunt is someone who has low power of retaliation against the accusations. Midwives are highly valued in the tribal community where health benefits are poor. They enjoy a high social status and by virtue of their profession they command respect among all villagers. Given their status, they have the potential to retaliate if an accusation is directed against them. As the data points out, midwives are never accused in the hunts in the plantations.

RQ11. *What are the “frames” that NGOs use in conducting anti-witch hunt campaigns? At whom are the frames directed at?*

The frames used in the anti-witch hunt campaign were a superstition frame, women’s development frame and justice frame. These frames were directed at the tribal women who are the main audience of the movement.

## **Implications**

My dissertation provides much needed data on the witch hunts in the tea plantations of India. Though there have been many works on witch hunts in general and a few on India, there have been virtually no study on the tea plantations of India. Through the use of in-depth methods of interviewing it does provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena among the tribal migrant workers.

My dissertation does support the finding on western studies on witch hunts especially on the link between witch accusations and neighbors and women being the

main targets. It does not provide evidence, as expected, on the relation between land ownership of the tribal widows and the witchcraft accusations in cases of witch hunts in India. This is an important finding in an area where some scholars conclude that witchcraft accusations are related to inheritance or land issues between the widows and their relatives. Instead, my dissertation provides two categories of hunts that are typical in the plantations. This categorization, though an ideal type, is useful in understanding the structure of hunts that take place.

Another finding in my study is that witch hunts are cultural; that is, witch hunts cannot take place in a community where there is no real fear in witches. Moreover, witch hunts are products of stresses impinging on the tribal population. They stem from village level conflicts. In conflicts between villagers, the women are the easy scapegoat. In addition, witch hunts are products of the prevalence of disease that provides the excuse or justification for the need for a witch hunt. Fourth, gender, poor health care, poor legal aid and belief in witches are the factors that lead to witch hunts in the plantations

### **Future research questions**

The data from my dissertation pointed to several research questions in the area of witch hunts that can be explored in future studies. These questions are:

1. Are witch hunts related to the conflicts within the plantations between the management and the workers? In their search for hidden enemies, as opposed to the external enemies (management), are witch hunts a reaction of the marginalized community to attract the attention of the outside world?

In their narrations on their lives as wage laborers on the plantations, the tribal workers often complained about the relationship between the management and the workers. The structure in the plantation community is one that is of a rigid class system where the workers are at the bottom of the hierarchy. In such an oppressive system, the marginalized has limited means of protests. Are witch hunts a form of protest by the marginalized to attract the attention of the outside world? It will be interesting to do a follow up study on the anti-witch hunt protest and explore the relation between the plantation managers and workers and the connection of witch hunts.

2. How are diseases and illness related to the hunts? In years where epidemic increase, does it lead to a rise in witch accusations?

The data in the dataset containing all the cases in the twenty six year period can be used to provide answers to the above question. But, a quantitative analysis that would observe the relation between incidents of witch hunts per year and the epidemics in the region is needed.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation is one of the very few and in some ways the only one, that has used in-depth interviews with accusers and accused in incidents of witch hunts to provide an explanation of why witch hunts occur. Even more importantly, this is one of the only studies to talk in depth with accusers to understand how the accusers justify their actions

in a society where witch hunts are viewed as illegal. This study has provided meaningful insight into the literature on witch hunts, tribal migrant workers and the protest campaigns. Though many of these findings are only suggestive, needing much more research and data to be validated, this work offers many exciting ideas for future research.

## APPENDIX

### Consent form

*Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board: Informed Consent Document for Research*

**Principal Investigator: Soma Chaudhuri**

**Revision Date: 06/21/07**

**Study Title: Witch hunts in the tea plantations of India**  
**Institution/Hospital: Vanderbilt University**

This informed consent document applies to all adults above the age of 18 who are involved in any way in incidents of witch hunts

Name of participant:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this study and the information given below. You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form.**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this study.

#### **1. Purpose of the study:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study to investigate the factors influencing witch attacks in West Bengal, India. This research is being conducted as a requirement for a Doctoral degree in sociology. Of particular interest are your views on the attacks and personal history.

#### **2. Procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:**

I am asking for consent for your participation in an interview for which you have volunteered. Therefore I would like to interview you and talk one-on-one about your involvement or experience on this issue. This interview can take place at a location of your choice. I will try to be considerate of your time and accordingly will keep the interviews at only one to two hours in length. Further I will only ask one interview with you and the interview will be tape-recorded. Please initial the box below if you consent to being tape-recorded.

All participation in this project is voluntary and confidential. I will change the names of the participants and no real names or location will be used. Accordingly you do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. In the written report of this project all names will be changed. At any point of the interview, if you do not feel comfortable participating, please let me know and your information will not be included. If you have any questions, you may ask me know or during the interview. Please read, initial, and sign the appropriate places in the consent document.

Even though I will keep everything you tell me confidential, it is possible that people who were involved in past witch attacks will learn that you have talked to me. It is possible that this knowledge will lead to conflict between you and these people

**3. Expected costs:**

The only expected costs of participation in this study are the transportation to and from the meeting place for the individual interview. To help with this cost, I will be happy to meet you at a convenient location and/or cover the cost of your transport.

**4. Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study:**

The only risk that I foresee is that it is possible during the interview, some questions will bring up uncomfortable memories. If this should occur, please feel free to ask me to contact the counseling center at the local NGO office.

**5. Compensation in case of study-related injury:**

N/A

**6. Anticipated benefits from this study:**

1. The potential benefits to science and humankind that may result from this study are a better understanding of the factors behind witch attacks. This study will be beneficial in the development of laws against witch attacks and in development social policies.

2. The potential benefits to you from this study are a self-reflection and awareness that may lead to new insights on your experience. In addition, this study may help you develop a social network to provide support and aid to witch attack victims.

**7. Compensation for participation:**

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

**8. Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw you from study participation:**

I will only withdraw you from the study if you ask to be withdrawn, which you may do at anytime. If you choose to withdraw I will keep your data in the study unless you specifically request all your information to be removed, in which case all your data will be deleted.

**9. What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation:**

Participation is entirely voluntary. Please notify me if you choose to withdraw from the study. I will keep your information in the project unless you ask me to remove it. If you ask to be removed, all of your data collected thus far will be deleted.

**10. Contact Information:**

If you should have any questions about this research study or possibly injury, please feel free to contact **Soma Chaudhuri, 615 4633079 (Nashville, TN, USA #) or 011-91-33-24641440 (Calcutta, WB, India #), email : [soma.Chaudhuri@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:soma.Chaudhuri@vanderbilt.edu)** or my Faculty Advisor, (**Gary F Jensen**) at (6153227434), email [gary.f.Jensen@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:gary.f.Jensen@vanderbilt.edu).

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 322-2918 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

**12. Confidentiality Information:**

All reasonable efforts will be made to keep personal information in your research record private and confidential, but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. I will use pseudonyms in all my field notes, reports. All information will be kept stored in a locked filing cabinet in either my Calcutta or Nashville home, depending on where I am. Your information may be shared with institutional and/or governmental authorities, such as the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board, if you or someone else is in danger or we are required to do so by law.

I will not write down your name or any other information that would allow you to be identified with the data I collect during the interviews. I will change all names to false names, and remove all references that would allow your village to be identified. Even if authorities look at my data, they will have no way of knowing who you are or where you come from.

**Statement by person agreeing to participate in this study**

**I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me verbally. All my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate.**

**Please initial below regarding your decision to be tape recorded during your participation in the individual interview.**

**Agree----- Disagree-----**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of volunteer

Consent obtained by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name and Title



*Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board: Request for Waiver or Alteration of Consent, Authorization, and/or Documentation of Consent*

**Please check the appropriate category and answer the corresponding questions.**

**Request for Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent and/or \*Authorization.**

The IRB may waive the requirement to obtain a signed informed consent document for some or all of the participants if the study meets one of the following conditions:

1. The research is minimal risk and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

The risks involved in the project are minimal. In accordance with the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics, I will do everything possible to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. To begin, I will assign pseudonyms to reference the participants in every stage of the process, including my interview transcripts. Real names will not appear on any document, and the taped interviews will be stored separately from any identifying information. I will keep no record of who participated and will only refer to participants by false names. I will also give not disclose the location of the villages. All proper nouns or any other identifying information will be removed from the text or sufficiently altered to prevent recognition.

Does this study involve procedures that, outside of the research context, would require written consent?

Yes  No

If "Yes", waiver of documentation is not appropriate.

**Request for Waiver or Alteration of the Informed Consent Process and/or \*Authorization.**

The IRB may approve a consent procedure which does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent, or may waive the requirements to obtain informed consent provided that the following conditions are met:

1. Check which is appropriate:

Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent Process

Requesting Alteration of the Informed Consent

If requesting alteration, which elements of consent will be altered, or omitted, and provide justification for the alteration.

I request for verbal consent procedure as some percentage of my subject population is illiterate. I do not propose to omit any of the items in the informed consent form, but I will simplify the elements and make it more conversational as some of my subjects are illiterate.

Script of verbal consent procedure (English translation): Hi I am Soma and I am a PhD student in sociology at Vanderbilt University in USA. This study will help me to fulfill my requirements for a PhD degree. I am requesting you for consent of your participation in an interview for which you have volunteered. I would like to interview you one to one about your views and experience on this issue. Your name and all your answers to the questions will be kept strictly confidential. The interview can take place at a time and location of your choice and will be of a maximum of two hours in length. There will be only be one interview and I will tape record the interview only if you consent to it.

Again, your participation in this study is confidential and voluntary. I will change the names of the participants and no real names or location will be used. Accordingly you do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. In the written report of this project all names will be changed. At any point of the interview, if you do not feel comfortable participating, please let me know and your information will not be included. If you have any questions, you may ask me know or during the interview. Please read, initial, and sign the appropriate places in the consent document.

The only expected costs of participation in this study are the transportation to and from the meeting place for the individual interview. To help with this cost, I will be happy to meet you at a convenient location and/or cover the cost of your transport.

The only risk that I foresee is that it is possible during the interview, some questions will bring up uncomfortable memories. If this should occur, please feel free to ask me to contact the counseling center at the local NGO office.

The potential benefits to you from this study are a self-reflection and awareness that may lead to new insights on your experience. In addition, this study may help you develop a social network to provide support and aid to witch attack victims.

I will only withdraw you from the study if you ask to be withdrawn, which you may do at anytime. If you choose to withdraw I will keep your answers in the study unless you specifically request all your information to be removed, in which case all your responses will be deleted. Real names will not appear in any published or unpublished reports to ensure confidentiality. I will also not report any information that you have disclosed to me to authorities. I will also keep your participation in this study confidential and no one but me will know that you have participated.

If you have any questions please contact me at my Calcutta home address and phone number: Soma Chaudhuri, 36 A Lansdowne Terrace, Calcutta- 26. phone: 24641440.

2. Describe how the waiver or alteration of consent and/or authorization involves no more than minimal risk and will not adversely affect the rights and the welfare of the individual (Also, discuss how the waiver will not adversely affect the privacy rights of an individual).

I have included all the issues addressed in the original informed consent form in the verbal script. Thus it has all the elements necessary to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, their rights and welfare.

3. Explain why the research could not practicably be conducted without the waiver or alteration. Some percentage of my subject population is either illiterate or is not trained in English. Having a consent form in English makes no sense. Thus having an alternate form in Bengali is essential.
4. Define the plan, where appropriate, to provide individuals with additional pertinent information after participation.

NA.

**\*Request for Waiver of Authorization. Note: Authorization only applies when protected health information (PHI) will be created, used, or disclosed in the course of the research.**

The IRB may approve a waiver or alteration in the Authorization procedure provided that the following conditions are met:

1. Explain why the research could not practicably be conducted without access to the protected health information.
2. Describe how the privacy risks to individuals whose protected health information is to be used are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits (if any) and the importance of the knowledge expected from the research.
3. Describe the plan to protect the identifiers from improper use and disclosure.
4. Describe the plan to destroy the identifiers at the earliest opportunity consistent with the conduct of the research, unless there is a health or research justification for retaining the identifiers or such retention is otherwise required by law.
5. Verify that the protected health information will not be reused or disclosed to any other person or entity, except as required by law, for authorized oversight of the research project, or for other research.

Please be aware, if a protocol is granted a “Waiver of Consent and/or Authorization” by the VU IRB, the PI must be prepared to provide the Vanderbilt Privacy Office the following information for any PHI disclosed outside VUMC:

1. *The date of the disclosure;*
2. *The name, title, and contact number of the VUMC workforce member making the disclosure;*
3. *The name of the entity or person who received the protected patient information, and, if known, the address of such entity or person;*
4. *A brief description of the protected patient information disclosed; and*
5. *A brief statement of the purpose of the disclosure that reasonably describes the basis for the disclosure.*

*This mandate is pursuant to 45 CFR 164.528, which states that an individual has the right to request and receive an accounting from the covered entity (VUMC) of all possible disclosures of his/her protected health information that was permitted without the individual's authorization.*

## **Interview guides**

### *I. Guides for police officers and activists*

#### **Involvement in the witch hunts:**

1. What is your occupation?
2. About how many incidents of witch hunts have you dealt with or are acquainted with within the last 4 years?
3. Did you provide any aid to the victims? What kind of aid (legal, investigative or social support) did you provide for the victims?

#### **Intensity of the hunts:**

1. To the best of your knowledge, how many incidents of witch hunts occur in India per year? How many of them occur in West Bengal? What are the major districts in West Bengal where the hunts occur?
2. Where does Jalpaiguri figure in the over all picture of witch hunts in India?
3. What do you think is the percentage of the incidents that gets reported to the police?
4. Do you think there are incidents that don't get reported to the police? About what percentage gets reported and what percentage do not?
5. Why is there some incidents that do not get reported?
6. Do you know if anyone tried to make an estimate of unreported incidents? (get details if yes).

#### **Community:**

1. Are witch hunts a feature of tribal communities in India?
2. How common are witch hunt incidents among the tribal migrant tea workers?

#### **Ecological and demographic characteristics of the labor lines:**

1. What is the level of literacy among the labor line community to the best of your knowledge? What is the literacy rate among men? What is the literacy rate among women?
2. How far is the nearest state run hospital or health center from the labor lines?
3. How far is the nearest police post from the labor lines?
4. How far is a local newspaper office from the labor lines?

**Reference on witch hunts:**

1. What do you think are the major causes of witch hunts in the plantations?
2. Why do the tribals belief in witches?
3. Who gets identified as a witch in the village?
4. Does disease seem to be a major cause leading to a witch hunt?
5. What role does prior conflict between the instigator and accused parties of witch hunts play?
6. Does internal village politics have a role in instigating an attack?
7. What is the role of the witch doctor or the *janguru* in the village? Does he have a role in instigating an attack?
8. Do you think gender is involved in the conflicts, meaning, does the conflict take place between a man (instigator) and a woman (accused), between two women or men? Is it common for men to accuse women of practicing witch craft?

**Witch:**

1. Who/what is a witch? What is the idea of a witch among the tribals? Does the witch always cause harm or good?

2. Who is considered to be a witch in the village?
3. How do villagers identify a witch? Are there any tell tale signs?
4. What happens after a witch is identified?

**Witch hunts:**

1. How old are the witches typically? Can you give me a range?
2. Are the accused witches typically single women (unmarried, separated, divorced or widowed)? Or are they married?
3. Do they typically have children?
4. What happens during an attack?
5. Do all the villagers get involved in the attack?
6. What is the reaction of the village authorities when there is an accusation of witchcraft?
7. Does the village authority try to mediate between conflicting parties? How do they mediate? How often are impositions of fines a form of mediation?
8. What happens if the accused refuses to pay a fine?
9. What happens if she does?
10. What instigates the witchcraft accusation to turn into a full-fledged attack?
11. Does the attack involve lynching, killing, banishment or ostracism of the accused witch?
12. What is the reaction of the village authorities after the attack? What happens to the accusers?
13. What happens to the accused witch (if she survives the attack)? Does she leave the village?

**Diseases:**

1. What do you think are some of the common diseases that have been attributed to have been caused by a witch?
2. Because some people think that witches are responsible for causing illness in people, what percentage of attacks is caused due to the prior occurrence of disease in the village?
3. What do you think are the common diseases that occur in rural India, particularly West Bengal?
4. What do you think are the major years (last 25 years) in which epidemics, such as of tuberculosis and polio, have occurred in West Bengal?
5. Could you say something about the witch hunt statistics in those years?

**Land:**

1. Who owns the land in the plantations?
2. Can the tribals own land in the plantations?
3. Is there a scarcity of land holdings among tribals?
4. Can women own land among the tribals? Do they inherit land?
5. What do you think is the rate of witch hunts that have been caused by a property (meaning land) dispute?

**Gender:**

1. What do you think is the gender of the individual who gets accused of practicing witchcraft? It is always female?
2. What do you think is the percentage of the attacks towards male witches?
3. What percentage of the attacks, do men compared to women, instigate?



4. Is there possibility of multiple instigations (example mixed gender coalitions: man and woman)?

**Status of women:**

1. Do you know anything about the status of women in the tribal society? Are they economically independent? Do they inherit property (land, house, money etc)?

2. Do you know if there is a traditional system of inheritance among the tribal women, or is this a new development? After the death of a father or husband, who has the first claim on the property: wife/daughter or son/other male relatives?

**Government reaction:**

1. What is the reaction of the state and central government towards witch hunts?

2. Are there separate laws against witch attacks, apart from registering it as a murder or physical assault case?

3. Are there laws against witchcraft in India? Describe them. What do they state?

4. What policies is the government thinking to combat witch attacks?

**Legal aid and social support:**

1. What kind of legal aid does victims of witch attacks (the accused witch) get?

2. Who provides it?

3. Are there any provisions of shelter for the victims?

4. Who runs the shelters?

5. What kind of social support, counseling do the victims get?
6. Who funds the shelters?
7. Are there any local bodies (in the villages) that work against witch attacks?
8. What are they doing to prevent such attacks?

**Police:**

1. What role does local police play in areas where witch hunts occur?
2. Do they intervene when there is a complaint of a witch accusation by the victim?
3. What action do the police take against the instigators of the witch attack?
4. Among the total number of cases registered as 'witch attacks', what is the percentage of cases that had the instigators punished?

**Other general questions:**

1. Why do witch hunts take place primarily in rural areas?
2. What are the causes behind it?
3. What do you think are the social reasons that instigate such attacks?
5. What is the state and central government doing to prevent further attacks?
6. How do you think that a law against witchcraft (India currently does not have a law) would affect the attacks?
7. Will there be a rise or decline in incidences of attacks? Why?

*Ii. Interview guide for villagers (accusers, accused, relatives and other villagers)*

*This particular interview guide is going to be very open-ended. The level of comfort experienced by the interviewee, during the interview, will determine the direction of the interview. The interviewer's aim will be to get a clear picture of witch hunt cases that have occurred, using their narratives. Sometimes certain questions will be dropped, while at other times a lot of additional questions will be asked during an interview, depending upon the cooperation of the interviewee. I have tried to make this interview guide as broad based as possible.*

**General questions:**

1. Has there ever been a witch hunt in this village?
2. When did the last incident of witch attack occur?
3. How often do these incidents occur in your village?
4. What was the age, gender of the accuser and relationship to the accused in the last incident of witch attack?
5. What was the age and gender of the accused? Is she single, married or widowed? If married, does her husband stay with her? Does she have kids?
6. Can you recall any other incidents of witch attacks? If yes then describe those incidents.

**On the incident of witch hunt:**

1. So tell me why the incident of witch hunt occurred in this village? In other words, what instigated the accusation of witchcraft against the accused?
2. Was there some conflict between the two conflicting parties?
3. Did the parties (instigator and accused) know each other?

**Accusation of witchcraft:**

1. What did the instigator accuse the witch of doing?

2. Did someone from the instigator's family fall sick?
3. How did the accuser and his/her family realize that witchcraft was taking place?
4. Did they consult a *janguru*?
5. How does a *janguru* know that a witch is behind the illness?
6. How did the accuser and his family identify the witch?
7. What did the accuser and his/her family do after the witch was identified?
8. What role do other villagers play in the identification of the witch?
9. What happens to the accused witch?
10. Is the witch punished?
11. How is the witch punished?
12. What happened during the witch hunt?
13. Who decided the punishment for the witch?
14. Who administered the punishment to the witch?
15. How was the punishment administered?
16. Was it necessary to kill the witch?
17. Does the punishment of the witch result in the eradication of witchcraft from the accuser's family?
18. What happened to the family member who was sick after the accusation/attack? Did s/he recover?

**Characteristic of the witch:**

1. Have you seen a witch?
2. Do you believe in witches and do witches really exist?

3. How do you know that the particular person is a witch?
4. How does a witch look? Describe some of her physical characteristics.
5. How does a witch operate? In other words what are her tools?
6. How does a witch harm individuals?
7. How do you get rid of the witch's spell?

**Questions for the accused and her relatives:**

1. Why do you think you/or your relative was accused?
2. Do you believe in witches?
3. Did you have any conflict with the accuser and his/her family?
4. Describe the accusation?
5. Did you try to defend yourself/your relative who was accused?
6. How did other villagers react to the accusations against you?
7. Was there a trial involved?
8. How conducted the trial?
9. Did you go to the police for help?
10. How did they react?
11. Describe what happened during the hunt?
12. Who led the hunt?
13. What do you think was the real motive behind the hunt?
14. What happened after the hunt?

**Questions for the accusers and their relatives:**

1. How did you know that the accused was a witch?
2. What did the accuse do?
3. Did you go to the Janguru?
4. Did the punishment help?
5. What is your reaction to the way the police reacted on the witch hunt?

**List of participants for interview (45 participants) <sup>62</sup>**

	Name	Sex	Age
Accused	Behani	F	Early 30s
	Basanti	F	27
	Dulari	F	30s
	Ramani	F	60
	Chandmoni	F	45
Relatives of accused			
	Lali Oraon	F	40
	Sumitra Oraon	F	50s
	Bila	F	33
	Pokua	M	45
	Lali	F	46
	Sheela	F	36
	Leela	F	29
	Lattu	M	15
	Shilpi	F	45
	Lata	F	29
	Mita	F	27
	Somari Munda	F	37
	Tippo	M	43
	Bhutiya	F	46
Accuser	Sukhni	F	40
	Duli	F	18
	Pukhani	F	18
	Sumi	F	30s
	Dolly	F	21
	Kalicharan	M	38
Fellow villager			
	Bhagawan	M	60
	Ramdev	M	40
	Radha	F	30s
	Biltu	M	40

<sup>62</sup> Most of the participants in the villages were not able to give an exact number for their age.

	Prema	F	30
	Asha	F	50
<i>Janguru</i>	Shanta Ram	M	60

Police, Administration and legal help:

	Salil	M	38
	Shanti Devi	F	50
	Minoti	F	45
	Ravi Jha	M	42

Activist

	Balwant	M	Mid 40s
	Shova	F	42
	Chandana	F	40
	Chandrima	F	45
	Shalini	F	46
	Sunita	F	38
	Subir	M	45
	Meera	F	38
	Lipi	F	34



## **List of abbreviations**

BSF	Border Security Force
FLDS	Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints
JEU	Jalpaiguri East Ukilpara Mahila Sanghstha
NBPDC	North Bengal People's Development Center
NGO	Non Governmental Organization

## Glossary

<i>adivashi</i> : tribals; indigenous community	<i>janguru</i> : medicine man
<i>amader kothar dam nei</i> : there is no value to our words	<i>jid dhorey thakkey</i> : express stubbornness
<i>andha-bishash</i> : blind faith	<i>karon</i> : reason
<i>andolan</i> : protest	<i>ki jani</i> : who knows
<i>ban</i> : arrow	<i>kala jaadu</i> : black magic
<i>ban mara</i> : shooting of arrows	<i>kala nazar</i> : evil eye
<i>bari</i> : house; home	<i>kharap bath</i> : talking ill about someone
<i>bhath</i> : boiled rice	<i>kharap</i> : bad
<i>boka-shoka manush</i> : simpleminded folks	<i>kukri</i> : local knife
<i>huri</i> : old woman	<i>ku-shangaskar</i> : superstition
<i>buria</i> : old woman	<i>kya malum</i> : who knows
<i>huri nazar</i> : evil eye	<i>laathi</i> : stick
<i>chowki</i> : low rise wooden stool	<i>matabar</i> : headman
<i>churi</i> : young girl	<i>mathar thekey</i> : creation of the mind
<i>dal</i> : lentils	<i>meye- cheley</i> : reference to woman
<i>dai</i> : midwife	<i>nazar</i> : eye
<i>dain</i> : witch	<i>opobadh</i> : spreading false accusations
<i>daini</i> : witch	<i>opoprochar</i> : spreading false accusations
<i>dainir boshobash</i> : where the witches live	<i>pahalwan</i> : wrestler
<i>dainir baccha</i> : children of the witch	<i>panchayat</i> : village headman
<i>daini Protha</i> : the tradition of believing in witches	<i>pati parameshwar</i> : husband is God
<i>daini vidya</i> : the knowledge of witchcraft	<i>peena</i> : drinking
<i>dal-roti</i> : lentils and bread	<i>pichla- rog</i> : complications during pregnancy
<i>didi</i> : older sister	<i>puja</i> : rituals
<i>fagun mash</i> : the month of February	<i>pujima</i> : full moon
<i>gala gali</i> : curses	<i>sansadh</i> : forum
<i>gharelu jogra</i> : household quarrels	<i>shai</i> : consent
<i>haria</i> : the name of the local rice brew	<i>shustho</i> : healthy
<i>jaar-puch</i> : the chanting of mantra used to get rid of the witch's spells	<i>sindoor</i> : vermilion
<i>jadu mantra</i> : magic	<i>tuktak</i> : hocus pocus
<i>jangli</i> : uncivilized or uncultured	<i>vidya</i> : knowledge
	<i>vyayu</i> : wind

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