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# Women as Easy Scapegoats: Witchcraft Accusations and Women as Targets in Tea Plantations of India

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Soma Chaudhuri<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article revisits a much-debated question: Why are women popular targets during witch hunts? By using in-depth interviews this article provides an answer. Women are easy targets or scapegoats for two reasons. First, it is widely believed in the community that was studied that witches do, in fact, exist, and the images of witches are always female. Second, tribal women hold lower positions than men in all social, political, and ritual matters, and this contributes to their vulnerability during the hunt for scapegoats. This article also highlights the roles that rumors play during manipulation of witchcraft accusations to gather support for witch hunts.

## Keywords

gender violence, scapegoat, witchcraft accusations

## Situating the Problem

In *Witchcraft, Women and Society*, Levack (1992) uses two approaches to analyze the literature in pursuit of an answer to the question: Why are women popular targets during witch hunts? In his introductory section, Levack raises the critical point that witches in all contexts have traditionally been women. First, he assumes that women have typically participated in roles (as traditional healers, midwives, heretics, and cult leaders) in which they have been portrayed as powerful actors rather than as helpless scapegoats. These roles are in stark contrast to the evil role of the witch. Levack contends that by performing these

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<sup>1</sup>Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Soma Chaudhuri, Department of Sociology and School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, 316 Berkeley Hall, East Lansing, MI 48823, USA

Email: [chaudh30@msu.edu](mailto:chaudh30@msu.edu)

powerful roles, women are rebelling against the traditional view that they are passive and powerless. However, in contrast to Levack's assumption, the literature on witch hunts is uncertain as to whether women really have typically performed these roles. The data that Levack cites contradict these assumptions and do not support the notion that most accused women in witch hunts have been women with social power (Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Harley, 1990; Jensen, 2007).

Levack's second approach emphasizes the belief that women, because they are considered to be morally weaker than men, are more susceptible to the advances of the devil and, therefore, practice witchcraft more frequently than men do. This is a popular approach among historians, and it has been reflected in a number of publications (Barstow, 1995; Briggs, 1996; Karlsen, 1987; Reis, 1997; Willis, 1995). A problem with this second approach is its sole focus on witch hunts that have taken place in Western Christian communities. It is difficult to use this approach to explain witch hunts that have taken place among indigenous populations that encompass nature-based or animistic native religious affiliations. The approach is inadequate because communities with such affiliations have a fundamentally different view of witches. Members of such communities do not perceive witches to be in a pact with the devil.

This article uses original data from contemporary witch hunts among the tribal (*adivasi*) tea plantation workers in India to revisit the question: Why are women popular targets in witch hunts? The article makes two important contributions to the analysis of witch hunts. First, the data used in this article are based on in-depth interviews and narratives of surviving victims of witch hunts, the relatives of surviving and deceased victims, and the accusers who initiated the hunts. This is a novel approach to the question. Few sociological studies, either on witch hunts or on similarly sensitive topics, use primary data. Second, in answering the question as to why women are often easy targets in witch hunts, the article uses a violence-against-women analysis that is based on a grounded theory approach in which the data reveal the structures and processes of witch hunts. The violence-against-women approach to understanding witch hunts proposes that men, through violence, exert their power and authority to control women's bodies and behavior. During witch hunts, men legitimize violence against the accused women by using rumor and conspiracy, and the women are made credible scapegoats in the process. The grounded theory approach gives insight into how the witch hunts take place in a given community, namely, through conspiracies that result in the selection of targets and end with the punishment of the witch. The study of witchcraft accusations against women is an important topic because the punishments against the accused women, both in the plantations and elsewhere, take on horrific proportions of abuse, up to and including rape and murder.

## The Literature on Women and Witch Hunts

Recent studies have commented on the fact that witchcraft-related homicides of women have been more frequent in the tribal populations of India than in other groups and nations (Adinkrah, 2004; Macdonald, 2009; Roy, 1998). There is considerable literature on women as targets in witchcraft accusations (Barstow, 1995; Behringer, 2004; Briggs,

1996; Godbeer, 1994; Harley, 1990; Hill, 1997; Karlsen, 1998; Reis, 1997), but there are few studies on witch hunts in India. The gap is perhaps due to a lack of interest in Indian witch hunt.<sup>1</sup> Among the scholars who have studied the issue in India, gender and property rights have been identified as the leading causes of witch hunts among the tribal communities. For example, Barman claims that witch hunts are a form of persecution of widows. Her analysis, based on a case study of the Malda district in West Bengal, confirms the findings of previous studies of the subject, that is, that witch hunts in India are mainly caused by struggles among widows and husbands' kin over property (Barman, 2002; Chaudhuri, 1981; Kelkar & Nathan, 1991; Mishra, 2003). Nathan, Kelkar, and Xiaogang (1998) posit that witchcraft accusations are a consequence of pressure that the male heirs of the husband's family exert on the widow to give up claims on land in exchange for maintenance. Mishra views family and village politics as playing a critical role in depriving the witch of her economic assets. Typically, fines are imposed on the accused woman. These fines often take the form of goods (holding a banquet for the village) or money. Kelkar and Nathan list two major functions of witch hunts. First, witch hunts provide an opportunity for the men of dominant lineage to get rid of any women who oppose the men politically, and second, witch hunts avoid social scandals and get rid of "unwanted females," such as widows and women who have become pregnant outside of marriage.

The focal point of Nathan et al.'s (1998) study on witchcraft accusations in India is the idea that witchcraft cults that were once central in indigenous tribal communities are now peripheral, underground, and marginal. The authors propose that there might have been a period in history when women held positions of power and that conflicts related to witchcraft can be viewed from this perspective. In that context, witchcraft can be viewed as a rebellion by women against the established authority and social order, and it can also be viewed as a rebellion by men against women to establish the order desired by men in society. However, the idea of witchcraft cults has not been mentioned in any other study on India, and Nathan et al.'s study does not provide much evidence to support this perspective. Therefore, the assumption that witch hunts serve to get rid of dominant women (i.e., women who oppose men) is problematic; the argument of cults is not substantiated by evidence. The use of the gender–property argument to explain witch hunts, although important, might not be relevant for all witch hunt communities in India. For example, in communities of tribal workers on plantations, the plantation owners own all the land. In this context, the gender–property explanation targeting widows as witches does not seem to work.

Much of the contemporary influential research on witchcraft accusations in Africa and South America has concentrated on religious and ritual analysis of this practice in communities (see Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Frankfurter, 2006; Taussig, 1980, 1986). The description of the ritual aspects of witchcraft is important in gaining an understanding of why witch hunts are a reaction to the imposition of the capitalist labor economy on the local peasant community. But this perspective ignores the gendered nature of the violence. In order to understand the gendered nature of homicide and violence, it is crucial to focus on what prompts witchcraft accusations and how scapegoats are selected. By taking a critical approach to understanding how witchcraft accusations develop from petty conflicts to full-fledged attacks on accused women, one may see that witch hunts are essentially acts of violence

against women. In other words, a broad approach is needed. We need to understand (a) what happens before a witch hunt, (b) how the scapegoats are selected, (c) what roles men play in the development of accusations, and (d) what role various factors play in the selection of targets. Our fuller explanation of this example of violence against women goes beyond the ritual aspects of witch hunts to include the politics of accusations. And of related interest, both to witchcraft scholars and to scholars studying violence against women, we examine the social (economics, age, marital status) and physical characteristics (hunch backs, sharp tongue, promiscuous nature) that lead a woman to be considered a witch (Levack, 1992).

## **Data and Methods**

The data for this article were collected in a tea plantation region of Jalpaiguri, India, over a period of seven nonconsecutive months between 2005 and 2007. The Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board approved the project. This study is one of only a few studies of witch hunts that include analysis of victims' narratives. This article is based on 45 in-depth interviews including interviews with 8 living victims of witch hunts (accused women), 14 family members and relatives of victims (either living or dead victims), 7 accusers, 6 villagers (passive participants in the hunts and relatives of accusers), and 10 local tribal activists.

Each semistructured interview lasted from 1 to 4 hours. I conducted and transcribed all of the interviews. For almost all of the interviews, I was accompanied by a translator who would intervene only if a word or phrase required translation. The interviews were conducted in a language that was a mix of Bengali and Sadri (the tribal dialect, very similar to Bengali), and I am a native Bengali speaker. During the interviews with the male participants, I was accompanied by a male translator; during the interviews with the female participants, I was accompanied by a female translator. Neither translator had any local connections to the communities. This prevented any power relations coming into play during the interview process.

The data collection for this article was a part of a larger study of witch hunts among plantation workers in the area. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, to get access in the field in 2005 I accepted the help of a local NGO. Over the next few years, I gained the trust and confidence of the local people through frequent trips to the villages, by taking part in the workers' daily lives, by living in the area, and by participating in the health and education camps run by the NGO.

Because there are no laws against witch hunts, there are no government records of the total number of witch hunts in the area. To get an estimate of the number of witch hunt incidents and to how see how these incidents are dispersed across the region, all records of witch hunt incidents in police and local newspaper archives were traced for the years 2000-2005. For the police records, I looked through the details of cases recorded under homicide, assault, and rape. I recorded all the cases that included witchcraft accusations in the case descriptions. For the newspaper records, I conducted an internet search and visited the archive offices of three local newspapers. I recorded all witch hunt incidents in the area. This initial list of cases provided a population for the selection of the cases for the study.

I obtained the total number of NGOs that worked in the district of Jalpaiguri (56) from the district government record office. Out of these, only one worked to eradicate witch hunts; this was the NGO that helped me get access to the field (see Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2012, for details). Using the incident data set and with assistance from the NGO, I was able to access the locations where the hunts took place over the prior 2 years. The earliest case selected for the study occurred in 2003. Because of the time that passes between a witch hunt incident and narration of events, cases prior to 2003 were not selected to prevent bias or inaccuracies. I did not interview individuals who were associated with cases more than 2 years prior to the start of the project. In addition, each interview was conducted twice with each participant (using differently worded, but similar questions), and for data consistency, I interviewed multiple people involved in the same case.

Snowball or network sampling methods were used to select the sample for the in-depth interviews. Despite criticism by survey methodologists, network sampling has been found particularly useful for the study of deviant groups (see Baker, 1994; Becker, 1998; Lee, 1993; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). As the name suggests, network sampling relies on social ties to get access to a group of participants, who then make referrals to other group members. Contacts are crucial for sampling in this method. One potential limitation of this sampling strategy is that it may produce a homogeneous sample. One way to avoid this bias is to sample "from different directions," that is, access socially diverse contacts that will help the researcher to tap into different networks.

Contacts in the police and district administration, along with contacts with a local NGO, allowed access to an initial pool of research participants. These participants, in turn, provided access to other interviewees and entry to the tribal villages in the tea plantation. But admittedly, the most challenging part of the entire project was getting access to the individuals (both victims and accusers) for participation in the study. My own class, ethnic, and gender positions as a privileged mainstream Hindu in a marginalized tribal community initially made it difficult for the locals to confide in me. In addition, because this was research on a sensitive topic, the first 3 months of the study were used to build trust and confidence between the participants and myself. This trust was crucial to the success of this study. Also, because this was a very different community compared to mainstream communities, signed consent forms could not be used. Instead, the IRB approved the use of oral consent for the participants. Furthermore, the interviews that were conducted during the first 3 months of the study had to be discarded because the idea of privacy was alien in a community where everything is public. Thus, conducting confidential interviews was initially difficult because family members and villagers were present during the interview. Later, as my familiarity with the participants and the location grew, I was able to conduct confidential interviews.

Despite these challenges, I was able to obtain detailed narratives from people involved in the witch hunts. Most important, by participating in the interviews victims, who were otherwise ignored by both the community and the outside world, got a voice. As one of the women who had an ongoing accusation of witchcraft against her said, "I want the outside world to know my plight and my misery. Nobody cares about me in the community. Your [work] will perhaps rescue me."

## Brief Background of the Research Setting and Status of Women on the Plantation

The research setting for this study was a tea plantation area known as the Dooars region in the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal, India. India's tea plantation industry in Jalpaiguri was set up by the British in the late 19th century using coercion, low wages, and an immigrant labor force (Bhowmik, 1981; Bhowmik, Xaxa, & Kalam, 1996; Jha, 1996). The labor force was brought from neighboring tribal areas, and to ensure a steady flow of workers through generations, family migration was encouraged. The laborers were kept in an area known as *labor lines* in the plantations. The lack of a modern drainage system, poor hygiene conditions, badly constructed huts, overcrowding in the labor lines, and the plantation owners' control of drinking water made living conditions very hard for the tribal workers (Chaudhury & Varma, 2002).

Little has changed for these laborers in the past 150 years. The labor communities have very high rates of infant mortality and anemia. They also have cholera epidemics, along with endemic fever, black fever, diarrhea, and malaria. Without modern health facilities and government health aid, these communities have to depend on local traditional medicine that is usually administered by people in the community who have little or no formal training (Bhadra, 1997; Chaudhury & Varma, 2002).

Belief in *dains* (witches) or *bongas* (spirits) occupies a central place in tribal spiritual and moral life (Sinha, 2007). The central idea of the tribal religious belief system is that people can seek the help of good spirits to control, through magic and exorcism, bad/harmful spirits. White magic (beneficial) is distinguished from black magic (evil). The *janguru* is the diviner or the medicine man in tribal communities. He uses his powers to counteract the powers of the *dain* or the witch.

The main tribal communities in the plantations belong to *Oraon* and *Munda* groups. Scholars have agreed that tribal women enjoy greater sexual and economic freedom compared to the majority Hindu women.<sup>2</sup> In the plantations, the women work as wage laborers, mainly as tea-leaf pickers, and they are paid less than the male laborers. Both men and women are free to select their marriage partners and can have a succession of monogamous marriages. However, women have no role in public decision making, such as day-to-day activities in the community, during conflicts, and in rituals. Men make these decisions on behalf of women (Baruya, 2005; Bhadra, 1992; Bhowmik, 1981). The complete dominance of men in all matters of decision making is critical in the politics of witch hunts, as I will show in this article.

## Categorizing Witch Hunts: An Explanation of How Witch Hunts Are Conducted

The data for this study reveal the factors that influence the actions of individuals involved in instigating witch hunts. Explanations of intravillage microdynamics and conflicts that went on before hunts provide clues to answer the overall research question: Why are

women easy targets during witch hunts? Study participants were asked to describe events that instigated the accusations of witchcraft. Their responses to this question may be divided into two categories: calculated attacks and surprise attacks. Even though in categorizing witch hunts one might run the risk of making the witch hunt actors and their actions a static entity that fits into only a single category, the reality is that social phenomena and its actors are always dynamic, and categorization helps in developing ideal types. The main purpose of this article is to understand the dynamics that surround women as easy targets; categorization helps in achieving that objective.

### *Calculated Witch Hunts*

In a calculated attack, witch hunts are preceded by “clear” motives on the part of the accusers based on what the accusers claim to be “instigations” from the accused. Accusers’ motives can be almost anything, including maligning the reputation of the accused woman, serving personal goals, seeking revenge to settle disputes over property, or explaining why illnesses or diseases happen. In cases in which witch hunts serve the purpose of revenge over personal conflicts, disease or ailments play a major role in instigating the hunt.

Dulari, a female tea garden worker in her early 30s, explained how the first accusation against her began: “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* [knife]. I ran away.” Dulari was asked whether she and her family had any conflict with Shankar and his family. Dulari said, “. . . no fight. . . . This was the first fight” [meaning the physical assault and threat].

In response to the question about how the accuser came to the conclusion that the accused woman was the witch, Basanti, also an accused witch, explained: “From his head [*mathar thekey*]. . . . Everyone said that I was a *dain* . . . he too started believing it . . . 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 the baby died, I was the witch. This was natural according to everyone.”

Dulari’s accusation is an example in which personal conflicts became manifest in witchcraft accusations when one of the individuals involved in the conflict underwent some unnatural development, such as illness leading to death. Dulari’s husband had a dispute with some villagers over loans, and Shankar’s wife’s death was the perfect opportunity to start accusations against Dulari. Two factors helped to legitimate the accusations against Dulari: (a) Dulari and Shankar’s wife already had a preexisting conflict, and (b) in a community that has a strong belief in witches and the power of the evil eye, Shankar’s wife’s death was a natural outcome of Dulari’s quarrelsome nature.

Balwant, a male tribal social activist in his mid-40s, explained that most witch accusations stem from fights between women in what he calls *ghorelu jogra* (household quarrels or conflicts).<sup>3</sup> To him, these petty conflicts, usually between women, got transposed into a conspiracy of calculated attacks of a 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's] 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 explanation that most witch accusations stem from household quarrels between women is similar to the arguments by some feminist scholars regarding witch hunts. In the book, *Malevolent Nurture*, Deborah Willis (1995) argues that the English and the colonial witch hunts were the results of quarrels between women. She explains that village-level quarrels that led to witchcraft accusations grew out of struggles between the women to control household boundaries, feeding, child care, and other matters in the domestic sphere. Willis maintains that the gender implications of the accused woman'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 relation to definitions of female identity which privileged nurturing behavior and well-governed speech" (pp. 13-14.) The witch, Willis argues, is a mother "gone bad." In the plantations, it is "the mother gone bad" that provides legitimacy to the accusations against the woman. As Balwant's argument implied, the men, who are the decision makers, use the conflicts between women to serve other interests. The women (the accused witch and those initiating the accusation against her) are thus bait or scapegoats in the entire conspiracy by the men in the village.

The gender relationships between accusers play an important role in the selection of targets in the calculated attack cases. Sukhni, a 40-year-old female plantation worker whose husband is in prison for murdering an accused witch, echoed the sentiment of women conspirators. She said, "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." On being asked how Sukhni knew that the woman was a witch, she replied, "because he told me so . . ." Particularly relevant to the focus of this article is how women join the conspiracy as a form of "bargain" with the men. According to Hindu philosophy, a woman is virtuous if she listens to and believes her husband *pati parameshwar* (the husband is equal to god). Tribal society has adopted as expected behavior for women some of the Hindu norms. In the tribal community, as is the case with most patriarchal societies, a woman's economic security and social position are controlled by men. Even though tribal women are employed in the plantations, they are paid lower wages than men, and their incomes are controlled by their male family members.

Referring to women's resistance to abortion and condom use in some African societies, Nathanson and Schoen (1993) argue 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” (p. 287). In the context of this article, the tribal women in a traditional setting barter their domestic service—and that service includes listening to and supporting their husbands without question, even if it involves supporting an accusation against another woman—in return for the economic and social support of their husbands.

According to Balwant, the psychological torture starts almost immediately after the conspirators target their victim: “[As] you saw [referring to the interview 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 as bait to attract more people to support the accusation against the witch. He continues:

Using *haria* . . . 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 *besahara* [vulnerable and without support]. There is no help for her and no one will listen to her. She might go to 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 about how the witch accusation develops into a full attack are intuitive as he outlined a pattern. It typically starts with conflicts between women in the neighborhood. Usually these conflicts are petty to begin with, but they get complicated when there were illnesses 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 might have had some ulterior motive for the witch hunt, start to gather support against the accused witch. They accomplish this through a “whisper campaign” that is accompanied by the isolation of the accused woman from the entire village. The psychological torture by the villagers and the members of the *panchayat* is often sufficient pressure to coerce the accused woman into a confession of guilt.

Bhagawan is a 60-year-old 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 agreed that some witch hunt incidents are planned months in advance with motives (calculated attacks), but he said that, even in these cases, it is often ailments rather than ulterior motives (like property or revenge) that have a bigger role to play in instigating attacks. He narrated:

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-viddhya* [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 500 rupees [approximately US\$10], black hens, and 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 . . . 2, 3 *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 five 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 progression of steps leading to a witch hunt:

- The first step involves some preceding conflict between the accuser and the accused, and the accuser typically stands to gain something out of the hunt.
- The second step involves the manifestation of witchcraft that usually takes the form of illness in the family of the accuser.
- The third step consists of the identification of the witch and a whispering campaign against her.
- The fourth step 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 is a strong belief in witches among the tribals. The suspicions, as one can see from the quotes from Basanti (*mathar thekey*) and Bhagawan (*meyeh-cheley*), play a major role in providing support for the witch hunt. These suspicions, along with the belief in the powers of the witches, are crucial in instigating the hunt. These beliefs are

present in the initial phase of the hunt, in which there is a conflict between parties. It is only when the conspirators (who have ulterior motives) decide to take advantage of the situation for their own purposes that the character of the hunt changes to a "calculated attack." In such an attack, the punishment of the witch is necessary to satisfy needs other than those that stem from illness or misfortune.

### Surprise Witch Hunts

In cases of surprise attacks, the women victims and their families, prior to the attack, were or claimed to be unaware of the accusations against them. The attack happened without any 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 whom I interviewed had a particular response to the question on instigations for hunts: *ki jani?* [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 a village mob led by her neighbor, explained the "surprise" element in the attack: "There was no 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's mother-in-law was also accused of witchcraft, and they did not share a good relationship. On being asked the question, Sumitra became angry and shouted, "Who knows? Who knows what the old hag [*buria*] did! I do not know."

Pokua, a 45-year-old 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."

Bila, a 33-year-old 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. [She starts crying softly]."

Some of the responses to the question of why women were attacked were denials of being present at the village during the incident. For example, Sheela, a 36-year-old female plantation worker whose mother was killed during a 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-old, another plantation worker said, "My mother-in-law and my neighbor's mother-in-law . . . the two *huri* [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." In the course of the next few meetings, Leela explained how her mother-in-law was hunted down on the night of the attack. Her story changed every time she was interviewed. One day she showed the interviewer the place where her mother-in-law was dragged by the villagers on the instigation of their neighbor. She narrated 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. On being asked how she knew 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 hunch back.”

The above quotes suggest two reactions from the group of participants who described witch hunts as an outcome of surprise attacks. The first reaction consists of a group who were genuinely surprised at the attack against their relative. Their response to the question as to why the relative was targeted gives an indication of the sudden development of the hunt in this category: The progression was from an accusation to a full-fledged attack in a few hours. The targets in these cases seemed to be randomly selected. In contrast, the second group of participants denied being present during the time of the attack. Interviews with this group were particularly difficult because these people were reluctant to talk. Sometimes in future rounds of interviews, details would slip out, as in the case of Leela, that belied their hesitation to reveal information. Their hesitation could be a result of their fear of retaliation by the accusers and their supporters in the villages. Because of the belief in witches, anyone could be subject to the threat of being considered either a victim of witchcraft or a victim of witchcraft accusations. Perhaps it was the threat of being the next target of attack that made the participants deny being present at the time of the incident.

It is important to mention here that even in cases of surprise attacks in which there were no prior warning signals that an accusation was taking place some immediate cause prompted the attack. In most cases, the cause was an ailment, but in a few cases it was a petty brawl or verbal exchange that preceded the attack. The petty brawls, ailments, and minor conflicts involved in these surprise attacks were used as “legitimizing incidents” to start the witch hunt and to garner support against the target. The scale of the dispute that leads to an instigation of a hunt is more intense in calculated attacks than in surprise attacks. In the calculated attacks, ridding the village of witchcraft or bad magic served as a cover for the real goal, an ulterior motive. These ulterior motives included settling a score over a loan, disputes over property, and personal malice. In the surprise category of hunts, the goals of the accusers were not ulterior motives, but the elimination of the evil with from the village. The goal of the accusers was best summarized by Sushil, 35 years old, one of the villagers who took part in a surprise witch hunt:

We were all drinking. Benglu and all of us were very drunk. The drink made us very angry. When Benglu said that the two women were witches, we decided that we would have to do something . . . today Benglu’s family is ill, tomorrow the entire village will be ill because of these witches. From every household in the village the men joined us. Soon we became a group of 30 men. We went to Benglu’s house where the rest were waiting. We went to the witches houses to kill.

## **Who Are These Witches?**

It is commonly believed among the tribals of the plantation that the witch can cause harm to animals, children, men, and women—and even make them fatally ill. The witch can cause illness ranging from diarrhea, malaria, and tuberculosis to the common fever and stomach ailments. Sometimes she may cause barrenness or infertility. The power of the

*janguru* is ineffective in curing illness if witchcraft caused it, unless the witch is killed or punished. The witch's evil eye operates through *ban-mara*.<sup>4</sup> It is through the use of *ban* that the witch causes illness in her victims. Radha, a tribal woman in her 30s who believes in witches, explains, "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."

Duli, a 21-year-old tribal woman whose father and brother were both in prison for the murder of an alleged witch, described the logic behind witchcraft operations: "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 . . . 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." On being asked whether the family members became well after the witch was killed, Duli said, "The illness went away and my niece became well. My sister conceived after the two *buri* died. We did *jaar-puch* [the rituals conducted by the *janguru*]. But some of our chickens died."

According to Shamita, the tribals are especially fearful of small children falling prey to witches. Speaking of Ramani, the woman who Shamita rescued from being hunted, she said: "She [Ramani] stayed in my house for four 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 Shamita is a *Nepali* woman (nontribal). She continued, "After four years, when the community began to see that nothing happened to my children or my family, they slowly started accepting Ramani back."

The nature of maleficium, though harmful, varied in kind and degree. The witch was typically seen as responsible for causing illness or death in small children, spouses, infants, or domestic animals. She had the power to interfere with nature. She was capable of causing barrenness, miscarriages, or deformed birth. The maleficium of the tribal witch is similar to the maleficium of the Western witch (Karlsen, 1998; Willis, 1995). The witch, thus, symbolizes evil and can harm anyone around her. However, even though the witch's power could bring harm to anyone, her victims tended to be close neighbors, relatives, and people who knew her well enough to anger her. The fear of the witch is deeply rooted in the psyche of the people, and the tribals blame any event or development that is not "normal" on the witch.

## Why Target Women?

One of the most intriguing questions for this project was finding an answer to the question: Why are women easy scapegoats for witch hunts? Because the belief in witches is strong within the tribal community, virtually everyone in the village is under the threat of being accused of being a witch when any unnatural event, either to humans or animals, takes place in the village. The data from this study, as well as the extant literature, suggest that women face the threat of witch accusations far more frequently than men. The selection of

scapegoats is connected to the concept of stigma—a process that includes labeling, stereotyping, differentiating a group or individual from the rest of the population, and then discriminating against them (Goffman, 1986; Link & Phelan, 2001; Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010). To label these individuals as different from the rest of the community, the selectors (the accusers in this case) use certain standards to create norms for the rest of society from which the stigmatized individuals deviate. The most common norms relate to physical appearance and behavior. These deviations from norms provide the legitimacy necessary to select the scapegoat (the accused woman).

All of the four activists interviewed for this study were in agreement that it was difficult to generalize what causes deviants in a community that has a strong belief in witches. In these communities, everyone is under the threat of an accusation, especially when illness or misfortune occurs. However, the activists agreed that women were easier targets than men. They also agreed that the selection of a target was easier if a woman had some physical deformity (such as osteoporosis), if she had some dispute with villagers, or if someone stood to gain from her accusation. Gender, lack of education, conspiracy, and prevalence of illness were the four factors that played a role in selecting the scapegoat. Balwant explained how the support for the witch accusation developed:

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* [witchcraft] 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, Chanda, another social activist said that “[it] is easier to blame the women. . . . They are the root of all trouble.” She went 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.” Chanda’s views are 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 the fate of the accusers, rather than by the accusers themselves (Karlsen, 1998). As noted from the quotes of Balwant, it is men, typically in positions of power, who decide on the target, specifically within the calculated-attack category. For instance, in a case in which five women were selected as witches, both randomness and preexisting



conflicts determined the selection of targets. The following quote taken from Ramlal, a villager who was present during the hunt, highlights how targets were selected:

It seemed very random . . . the selection of the women . . . but you know that nothing is random. The names [of witches] that Hariram [*janguru*] called out were all predecided. Suresh's friend, Lakhan, had paid an additional 500 rupees to the *janguru* to call out Sanchari's name. Lakhan and Sanchari's husband had a dispute over money. Sanchari's husband accused Lakhan of stealing money from him. So Sanchari's accusation was not random. Same with Atashi, Binshu, and Dhanshi . . . their accusations were related to disputes that they had. Manshi's accusation, however, was random. She was an old woman who lived near Suresh's house . . . maybe that is why she was selected.

The above-narrated incident is a good example of a case that fits under both the surprise and calculated attacks categories. Manshi's accusations—the woman in this case had no preexisting conflicts—show how proximity to the accuser plays a role in selection of targets.

Witch accusations were rarely made against total strangers. It was 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 no strangers were accused. The targets for witch hunts were usually chosen among groups and people who had been involved in prior conflicts, and witch hunts were directed at other members of the same social system. The individuals selected had to be credible as targets, but they were vulnerable because they had little power of retaliation. A woman, by virtue of her gender, along with her proximity to sources of conflict (typically with other women in the family or neighborhood), makes a perfect witch.

In order to understand how the accusers and other participants viewed the accused women, participants were asked to describe the witches they believed in. Pukahni, an 18-year-old female plantation worker whose father was one of accusers in a witch hunt incident said, "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." Pukahni'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*.

Sumi, a woman in her 30s, said in her interview that her neighbor was a witch. Sumi said that the female 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."



Relatives of accused women, and the accused women themselves, were asked in this study whether they knew why they or their relatives had been singled out as witches. Some of the interviewees said that they could not think of any explanation for the accusations. 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 *daini*. 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, a 45-year-old 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."

Physical features, like age (old women), a hunch back, or hair or skin color were used to identify witches. Lata, 29 years old, said, "Who knows why they accused mother of witchcraft. Maybe . . . because she had a hunchback." Bila, a 33-year-old female, said, "I do not understand why this happened . . . they said my mother's hair was as white as a witch's. Does having white hair make one a witch? She was a good woman." For Dulari, 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 accusation. Ramani, the 60-year-old woman who was ostracized by the entire village on suspicion of witchcraft and was rescued by Shamita, tried to explain why she was accused: "I was kicked by the entire village. They told me that I had a *buri nazar*.<sup>5</sup> My dark skin tone was a problem, too." In comparing the narratives of the two groups of participants, the descriptions of a witch's looks (e.g., Pukahni and Sumi), along with the notion that the physical features of accused women likely caused them to be deviant, reveal characteristics that this community considered to be in contrast to ideal feminine images of good. Particularly interesting was the use of the physical characteristics of the accused women as an excuse to label them as *witches*. The evil woman, the witch, was envisioned as someone who was in contrast to the "pure" image of good. The evil witch brought out her evilness through her evil eye and quarrelsome nature. Such characteristics were typically compared with the ideal images of good females as having a docile, calm temperament, and those who conformed to the ideal of good spirit. In the cases of surprise hunts, accused women with "bad" characteristics were more likely to be selected as credible witches, compared to women who possessed the ideal, "good" characteristics.

For some accused witches, it was the reputation or suspicion of having an evil eye that led to their accusations. Lajju, a 33-year-old 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 Lajju's husband often fell ill, 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

In some cases, sexual relationships outside of marriage led to witchcraft accusations. Rimi, a 45-year-old woman whose husband deserted her for 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 because she was jealous. In another case, a man suspected a woman had used witchcraft on him because he had made sexual advances to 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.

Subra's case is interesting for two reasons. It reveals the fear and suspicion of women's sexuality among tribal members, and this attitude perhaps accounts for the fact that tribal women are absent from religious rituals. According to tribal folk belief, women have the power to seduce men and wreck vengeance on their enemies; therefore, religious participation by women is taboo (Sinha, 2006). Interestingly, this belief was used to justify Subra's witchcraft on Rimi's family, thus legitimizing the accusations against her.

A combination of factors might explain why women are selected as targets. The scapegoat could be selected on the basis of village politics, domestic quarrels, reputation, physical traits, gender, and proximity to the accuser's family. Most study participants, however, seemed confused when asked to give a physical description of a witch. In some interviews, the witch was described as naked with horns, sucking blood from her victims, with some physical "peculiarity" like a hunchback, dark skin tone, and white hair. Of course, these descriptions differed from participant to participant, and this made it very difficult to come up with a definite description of the physical features of the witch. Only one subject suggested that witches had horns and usually operated naked, but when asked to describe a witch, most of the interviewees seemed confused. A common feature in most descriptions was the reputation of the accused as being ill tempered, having a bad reputation, and tending to curse.

The answer to the question of why women are easy targets in witch hunts lies in understanding how the witchcraft accusations developed from accusations to full-fledged attacks. In both categories of hunts, women were targeted either to settle scores with their family members (calculated attacks) or to blame them for causing misfortune in the community (surprise attacks). In patriarchal societies, men control social boundaries through norms and regulations imposed on women, and women are the first ones to be targeted during situations of panic. The status of women as dispensable is common across all societies, even today. This is indicated by rape and other gender-related crimes committed against women in times of stress, such as war. This study shows how, during cases of personal conflicts and illness, women become credible targets of witch hunts. This is similar to other witch hunts in history, such as those that took place in Salem or pre-modern Europe. The men who were selected as witches were related to the original witch hunt victims and were never independently accused. From the narratives of the participants in the study, one can see the following patterns in selecting women targets. Witch accusations are not made against strangers. In some cases, a physical deformity or unusual characteristic that makes a woman different from the norm (e.g., a hunchback, dark skin) is manipulated as a legitimate excuse to attack the woman. Along with physical characteristics, a "sharp" tongue or quarrelsome nature is also used as an excuse to select targets during hunts.

## Conclusion: Scapegoat, Rumor, and Conspiracy

The concept of a scapegoat refers to the punitive or negative treatment of people or groups who are held to be accountable for crises or problems they did not cause (Jensen, 2007). The scapegoat takes the blame for the crisis that is threatening the group as either “an intentional diversionary tactic or as a cathartic displacement of anger and frustration” (p. 53). The concept has been used to explain contemporary witch hunts against women in Ghana (see Aadinkrah, 2004), and it is perhaps the best explanation for why women are targeted as witches in the tea plantations in India. Most of the accusations stem from diseases or unexplained illness and, because modern health care is not prevalent in the area, the tribals look for a “supernatural” cause for the illness. The majority of the accusations leveled against women were by men. These women had reputations for being quarrelsome or having an evil eye, and they were in some way isolated from the rest of the village by their behavioral or physical characteristics. All these factors point to the vulnerable status of women in a male-dominated community, where all important decisions are made by men. The women in such communities are, thus, easy scapegoats during stressful situations, such as periods of illness and diseases.

The role of rumor and gossip in witchcraft accusations has been well studied by Stewart and Strathern. Their argument is that rumor and gossip play a crucial role in the early stages of stressful circumstances that might develop into accusations. Data from the witch hunts in India point to the role that “whispering” campaigns play in ostracizing a witch and gathering support for her accusers. Rumors enable people to believe what they want to believe (in this case, the evil deeds of the witch), and the rumors displace reality (Stewart & Strathern, 2004). This further establishes the status of accused women as easy and credible targets or scapegoats.

The study of witch hunts is an important and often overlooked topic in the area of violence against women. The present study, however, has some limitations. Perhaps the greatest limitation has to do with the sensitive nature of the research topic. Local people in some areas were reluctant to talk to outsiders, and this led to the sample size of the study being quite small. Second, I was unable to get access to the *janguru* or the local diviner who led the rituals during the hunt. All *jangurus* except one either refused to be interviewed or denied having any knowledge of witch hunt rituals. Future researchers who study this topic need to bring into their analysis more narratives by victims of hunts. These additional narratives would help provide a better understanding of scapegoating. In addition, a quantitative analysis would be extremely helpful in explaining whether the surge of epidemics in the area has a link to the rise of witch hunts in some years.

With the aim of addressing and eliminating this heinous example of violence against women, activists and activist scholars should note the following suggestions:

- The advocacy of witch hunt laws, particularly in the Jalpaiguri region, is crucial to the legal prosecution of accusers and to the prevention of attacks. Such advocacy should continue.

- NGOs in the Jalpaiguri region that are currently leading awareness campaigns against witch hunts need more support. The government needs to become more involved by providing funding and encouraging other NGOs to lead similar campaigns.

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### Notes

1. For example, see Behringer (2004), whose section on Indian witch hunts stops after the 1960s.
2. 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 property, marriage, and inheritance laws. Xaxa (2004) argues that “the very practices that are indicative of high status in one society can turn out to be in-built depressors in other settings” (p. 355). An excellent case in point is the practice of bride price in several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. 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 whereby men could purchase women as mere commodities. The system of bride price, thus, became a cause for proliferation of polygamy in the tribes, because wealthy men could take in a number of wives by paying the bride price (Nongbri, 1998).
3. Most of the people interviewed in the villages could not give a definite age in years. They gave an approximate age: for example, “*challish tallish hobbeh*” meaning, 40-ish.
4. *Ban* translates as “arrow” and *mara* means “hitting or shooting.” The phrase translates as “shooting of arrows.”

5. *Buri Nazar* translates as “evil eye.”

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## Bio

**Soma Chaudhuri** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. Her research interests are in the areas of witch hunts, gender, collective violence, and social movements. Some of her current research is on women's potential for collective action against witch hunts through the use of microcredit loans, and the study of women's agency among victims of domestic violence in South Asia. She is currently writing a book, tentatively titled *Witches, Tea Plantations, and Lives of Migrant Laborers in India*, under contract with Lexington Books.