

STRATEGIC FRAMING WORK(S): HOW MICROCREDIT LOANS FACILITATE ANTI-WITCH-HUNT MOVEMENTS*

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This article shows how a social movement organization focused on microcredit loans is able to mobilize a community against its own cultural practice of witch-hunts. Successful mobilization against witch-hunts are possible when two conditions are met: first, when activists are able to tap into microcredit groups' social capacity for collective mobilization (defined by ties of mutual dependence, reciprocity, and friendship); and second, when activists are able to use strategic framing to present a coherent argument about the congruence of microcredit and anti-witch-hunt goals. In this context a master frame (women's development) emerged that effectively forged the seemingly disparate goals of microcredit loans and anti-witch-hunt campaigns into one synthetic movement. In contrast, successful mobilization against witch-hunts was difficult in areas where the activists did not have access to the microcredit networks or were not able to strategically frame the campaign.

Drawing on local successes in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, microcredit programs have gained popularity across developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Related to this, a microcredit literature has emerged that is rich with examples of how small collateral-free loans extended to women can combat poverty, improve women's status, and allow access to improved political opportunities (Kabeer 2001; Deshmukh-Ranadive and Murthy 2005; Hirschmann 2006).¹ Interestingly, recent studies have also noted that microcredit loans for explicitly economic incentives can have "unintended beneficial consequences" (Sanyal 2009). There seems to be a growing capacity for collective action premised in the group-based lending structure of these loans. Women participants in microcredit groups have often been able to mobilize and intervene in incidents of domestic abuse and alcoholism.

Our research question is influenced by the documented successes of women participants in microfinance who are able to use their newfound social capacity and leadership roles to bargain collectively and negotiate gender equality (see Srinivas 1997; Mayoux 2006; Sanyal 2009). We examine how strategic framing is used by activists of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Dooars Development League (DDL)² to facilitate the mobilization of microcredit women participants toward anti-witch-hunt campaigns. Our research sites are tea plantation communities in the marginalized Dooars tribal (*adivasi*) region in Jalpaiguri district, India.

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Specifically, we focus on the following problems: Why would women, who participate in the noncontentious and low-risk microcredit schemes for improving the livelihood of their individual households, be motivated enough to undertake the risks and social costs associated with mobilizing against witch-hunts that are spearheaded by men, and in which powerful social and political forces in the community are often complicit? Second, how does this movement cohere and persist in pursuing two very disparate goals? The tea plantations are in a tribal community with a long-standing tradition of witch-hunts. This is fueled by local beliefs in the existence of witches, the powers of the *janguru* (diviner), and the desperate need of impoverished and illiterate individuals to make sense of mysterious, often life-threatening ailments that are commonplace given the lack of medical facilities. Witchcraft accusations are also often manipulated to gain the upper hand in local power struggles or household disputes.

The structural, social, and cultural barriers to collective action against witch-hunts are so high in this community that women's participation in the microcredit groups did not guarantee their acceptance of the new goal. In fact, these were competitive goals given that the tensions, differences, and suspicions among the women and their households on the question of witch-hunts could undermine the newly emerging sense of solidarity based on their mutually advantageous microcredit engagements. For movement activists seeking to mobilize women towards both goals simultaneously, this represented a "strategic action dilemma" (Jasper 2004).

We argue that activists tapped into microcredit groups' potential capacity for collective action (see Coleman 1988 for the social capital potential of group ties of mutual dependence, reciprocity, and friendship), and through the careful use of strategic frames, worked to persuade these women that one goal was not incompatible with the other. We show that microcredit groups and strategic framing are individually necessary and *jointly* sufficient factors that produce mobilization success. Without the potential capacity for collective action inherent in the microcredit groups, there would be no movement. Without strategic framing or meaning making, activists would not be able to translate the potential for mobilization into action on the ground on the one hand, nor could they manage to maintain movement coherence on the other.³

We compare three subdivisions within the district of Jalpaiguri to show that anti-witch-hunt mobilization produced some limited, but nonetheless remarkable, successes when DDL activists were able to tap into existing microcredit networks *and* also engage in strategic framing. Our comparison of subdivisions within the same district allows us to control for confounding variables such as worker incomes, police attitudes, ethnic composition of the tea plantation communities, gender relationships, and the extent of underdevelopment in this region. We find that in the subdivision of Jalpaiguri Sadar, women participated in the anti-witch-hunt campaign and continued to coalesce around the microcredit enterprise. While they have not been able to prevent witch-hunts from happening in this area, they have collectively rallied in many instances to rescue victims who belonged to their groups. In contrast, in the subdivision of Malbazar, where microcredit groups are present, the NGOs that supervised these groups (DDL was not involved in microcredit in this area) did not attempt to use strategic framing to harness this capacity for collective action. Women failed to mobilize even when one of their "own" (a microcredit group member) was targeted as a "witch." This comparison suggests that strategic frames are necessary for successful mobilization to occur.

In Alipurduar, DDL activists were unable to conduct a strategic frames-based advocacy campaign on account of the absence of microcredit groups in this area. First, there were no fora such as microcredit group meetings that could serve as a pretext for anti-witch-hunt advocacy. The fear and indifference of the population made it impossible to hold meetings for the express purpose of combating witch-hunts. Second, without access to microcredit finance, DDL activists had to solicit funds from the local police to launch an awareness campaign based on themes approved by the police instead of using their preferred form of strategic frames-based advocacy. Finally, DDL activists needed to be able to tap into an existing reservoir of social capital capable of producing collective action. Thus, on the one hand, the

existence of microcredit groups is not a guarantee that the NGOs supervising them will tap into their potential for mobilization by using strategic frames (Malbazar). On the other hand, the existence of microcredit groups appears to be necessary for any NGO that intends to launch a strategic frames-based advocacy campaign and successfully mobilize group members against witch-hunts (Alipurduar).

Microcredit groups (indicative of the availability of a low cost strategy to conduct advocacy and the existence of social capacity for collective action) *as well as* strategic framing appear to be vital ingredients toward successful mobilization against the community's longstanding cultural practice. Where DDL activists were able to frame issues strategically and also draw on the resources of microcredit groups (Jalpaiguri Sadar), women participants in microcredit programs mobilized against witch-hunts without apparent conflict between the two agendas for action.

Although the discussion that movements pursue disparate goals is not new, this article contributes to the literature by explaining how the same set of participants voluntarily shift from nonchallenging behaviors to include more risky behaviors that challenge social norms and pursue both simultaneously. In contrast to the bulk of social movement literature that focuses on mobilization against state or corporate actors for policy change, we focus on the problem of how female members of microcredit groups can mobilize against a practice that is fundamental to the spiritual beliefs of their community. In this respect, we respond to Melucci's (1996) call for expanding the scope of the analytic category of social movements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how movement actors successfully pursue disparate goals, we focus on the frames that DDL activists used to motivate the campaign and shape available choices for movement participants in Jalpaiguri Sadar. Various studies confirm that the most effective movements are those in which the frames used are culturally resonant and thereby meaningful to its constituents (Snow and Benford 1988; Reese 1996; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Trevizo 2006). At first glance, tribal beliefs in the existence of witches and the traditional practice of witch-hunts would appear to militate against the notion that a campaign calling for mobilization against witch-hunting would resonate widely with its intended audience. A closer examination reveals that there were other cultural resources available that movement activists strategically selected to frame and coherent argument for activism against witch-hunts.

A phenomenological approach to understanding culture as everyday lived experience suggests that individuals are embedded in worlds of meaning that may not necessarily take the form of a systematized or fully articulated structure of beliefs and attitudes (Reid and Yanarella 1974; Butler 1988; Throop and Murphy 2002; Ortner 2005). Lived experiences of the material world generate interpretive schemata through which individuals understand and make sense of their social existence. As a form of knowledge, this is distinct from either traditional belief systems or well-developed social or political ideologies. Tribal women's everyday lives are shaped in profound ways by the twin structures of economic exploitation and gendered domination, in which grinding poverty and male alcoholism are two direct and relentless modes of life experience.

Framing "work" involved tapping into these deeply felt emotions and generating an argument about their linkage to the witch-hunts phenomenon. In this way, the frames were able to strategically present the witch-hunts as part of the problems that tribal women experienced in common. Strategic framing work also involved building a rationale that explicitly acknowledged and clearly explained the connection between the microcredit enterprise and the campaign against witch-hunts. Women's development emerged as a master frame that effectively welded two disparate ends meaningfully into one synthetic movement.

The scholarship on framing has received relatively little attention within the growing corpus of literature on the causes of movement success (McCammon 2009: 45). Moreover, an emphasis on the strategic work performed by frames is a recent innovation in the existing literature on framing (Voss 1998; Jasper 2004; Meyer 2006; Noy 2009; Beamish and Luebbers 2009; McCammon 2009; Fitzgerald 2009). We focus on this subset of the framing literature and draw on the experience of social movements that confronted the problem of defusing tensions between the disparate goals and interests of intramovement or cross-movement coalition partners. While these are different types of movement organizations, the logic of the theoretical problem (maintaining movement coherence given disparate goals) is the same. We identify the core findings in this literature and apply those insights to this specific instance of collective mobilization.

Framing and Strategic “Work”

Social movements often build on past successes to advance to new “policy frontiers” (Gornick and Meyer 1998; Rucht 1999). The challenge of maintaining and mobilizing support as they advance toward new goals is a complicated matter, particularly in the case of single movements that seek to forge coalitions between moderate and radical groups with shared causes but different immediate goals (as in the case of the campaign for the homeless in San Francisco in the first decade of this century), or in the case of multimovement coalitions that subsume movements with different causes but shared immediate goals (such as the coalition between the women’s suffrage organizations and the Woman’s Christian Temperance movement in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America) (McCammon and Campbell 2002; Noy 2009).

The difficulties of reconciling competing interests, internal organizational differences, clashing leadership styles, and factional conflicts have been noted in the literature on the civil rights, environment, antinuclear, and a host of other social movements (Benford 1993; Obach 2004; Polletta 2006). As this study is about a movement spearheaded by a single organization, these difficulties have been largely avoided. Nevertheless, a brief survey of this literature on intramovement and multimovement coalitions is pertinent in that it demonstrates the importance of strategic framing in reconciling competing agendas for achieving movement success. We draw on Beamish and Luebbers’s definition of movement success: the movement must not only meet its stated objectives, but should be able to “persist (as a) . . . viable vehicle of social change” (2009: 648).

The literature suggests that successful frames are those that perform at least three kinds of strategic work. Beamish and Luebbers argue that successful frames are those that enable a bridging process across different movement ends by means of cause affirmation and the “co-development of cross-movement commitments” (2009: 665). A decade earlier, Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) had emphasized the importance of frame bridging, but their analysis was focused on the task of linking ideologically congruent frames that were only structurally unconnected. Also, they did not elaborate on the factors underlying a successful bridging process.

Beamish and Luebbers show that disparate movement groups were motivated to commit to a bridging process when faced with a collective adversary (2009: 665). The campaign against a federally funded National Biocontainment Laboratory in a low-income, largely African-American neighborhood brought together community-based activists from the environmental justice movement and activists from the antiweapons proliferation movement who were white, middle class, and from the larger Boston metropolitan area. The impetus for the development of mutual commitments arose from their “shared stories of outrage” as activists experienced setbacks in their confrontation with city officials (Beamish and Luebbers 2009: 669). Similarly, the move to bridge differences is largely contingent on the perception of a common threat. McCammon and Campbell (2002: 236) demonstrate that the conservative

Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the women's suffragist organizations faced a common threat from countermovement actors such as the United Brewers Association and its demand to keep the vote from women on the grounds that they would use the vote to demand prohibition. Coalition formation was enabled by mutual adaptation and a degree of shared commitments on both sides.

The second aspect of successful frames is that the frames do at least two different kinds of identity work. First, frames create shared collective categories that are culturally meaningful to movement participants and movement audiences. The construction of a shared identity binds movement actors, minimizes resistance, and enables them to mobilize collectively. For instance, the WCTU demanded prohibition from within a traditional gendered framework, in contrast to the suffragists who demanded that women's right to vote was recognition of women's fundamental equality with men. Upon suffering setbacks, the suffragists adapted their stance by moving closer to the traditional framework of different gender spheres and roles. They now argued that women's voting rights would allow them to bring their unique and separate perspective to the public sphere (McCammon and Campbell 2002: 237). This made it easier for WCTU activists to enter into a coalition with the suffragists. Second, identity work can impact the manner in which movement participants begin to think about their interests. Bernstein and De la Cruz (2009) demonstrate how activists instrumentally pressed for a new collective identity category "Hapa" for multiracial Americans of Pacific descent as they sought to challenge state policies and cultural systems of meaning about racial identification. The authors argue that identity deployment is a "form of strategic action, not simply an expressive, nonpolitical act" (Bernstein and De la Cruz 2009:735).

Finally, the frames that matter for movement success are those that do theoretical work in at least two ways: first, they are structured around clear arguments that provide the rationale for collective action. Building on Cress and Snow's (2000) concept of articulate frames, McCammon explores the argumentative structure of frames used in the women's jury rights movement in the US. She demonstrates how frames that "define the problem . . . as serious and broad in scope," "provide a clear rationale for supporting activists demands," and also "offer concrete evidence to support the frame's claim," are more likely to persuade an audience (2009:45). Second, successful frames forge an explanatory connection between disparate agendas that are not necessarily thought of as congruent. Fitzgerald (2009) shows how faith-based community development organizations (FBCDOs) framed their diagnosis of local social problems in a way that generated a theoretical link between purely religious service provision and the development goals of a welfare state system. Moral issues of drug abuse and prostitution were framed as community development issues because they drove away local businesses in low-income neighborhoods. Thus, FBCDOs were able to seek continued funding from local, state, or federal monies on which they were dependent. It also made possible cooperative relationships between the state and FBCDOs that might create more efficient welfare services provision (Fitzgerald 2009:187-190).

Unfortunately, movements sharing strategic framing can still fail if they are not able to mobilize the resources for independent collective action. In his analysis of the movement against the homelessness problem in San Francisco, Noy shows that material factors constrained the ability of factions to cooperate even when they shared the same diagnostic frames (2009: 237). The resources available for collective mobilization can also be symbolic or discursive in nature. David Meyer argues that movement actors use dominant narratives to claim credit by showing how their activism produced successes (2006: 292). In so far as these stories spur on activists to press new claims, they act as a resource for future mobilization.

Thus, while strategic framing is necessary in order to reconcile tensions within movements or between movement coalitions, it may not in itself be sufficient to produce movement success. An explanation of movement success (as in the case of the subdivision of Jalpaiguri Sadar in this article) must account for both strategic framing and activists' ability to mobilize resources for collective action.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Data were collected during seven months of fieldwork conducted between the years 2005-2007.⁴ As there is no law against witch-hunts, there are no governmental records for the total number of witch-hunts in the area. For the subdivisions in Jalpaiguri district considered here (Jalpaiguri Sadar, Alipurduar, and Malbazar), we traced all records of witch-hunt incidents in police and local newspaper archives from 1997-2005. From police records, we looked through the details of cases recorded under homicide, assault, and rape, recording all the cases that included witchcraft accusations in the case descriptions.

From the district government office, we identified a total of 52 NGOs that worked in the district of Jalpaiguri. Of the 25 NGOs that listed microcredit loans among their programs in the district, only one (DDL) also worked towards the goal of eradicating witch-hunts. Jalpaiguri Sadar (the subdivision with the lowest number of witch-hunts—see table 1) has the highest number of microcredit loan programs. DDL has a strong presence and a dual agenda (microcredit and anti-witch-hunt campaigns) in this area. Activists spoke proudly of local women's successes in saving targeted "witches." In Malbazar, DDL has a tenuous foothold, entering the field after six other NGOs working in microcredit programs had already established themselves there. None of these NGOs desired to work against the practice of witch-hunts. DDL's work in the area involves the implementation of government health and education programs. Since these programs are targeted at individuals and not groups, DDL activists lacked access to microcredit or other group-based networks that had potential capacity for collective action. DDL activists depended heavily on the intervention of the police rather than that of local women and were able to conduct only intermittent rescue operations. In Alipurduar (which has the highest number of witch-hunts in the region—see table 1), there are seven NGOs that are active, but none of these are involved in microcredit programs. DDL conducts anti-witch-hunt advocacy campaigns but is dependent on police funding for this work. The attendant consequence is that DDL advocacy is guided by a particular kind of police logic in place of the strategic frames that activists used with success in Jalpaiguri Sadar.

Case narratives were generated from in-depth interviews with twenty-five DDL activists that lasted anywhere from two to three hours, as well as participant observation of anti-witch-hunt meetings, rescue operations, and activities conducted by DDL. In addition, ten women, who belonged to approximately four different microcredit groups and had participated in successful mobilizations, were interviewed. All interviews, speeches, and field notes were transcribed with the help of qualitative software. Data were coded based on themes that are culturally meaningful (alcohol, gender violence, exploitation) and that resonated with the audience of the anti-witch-hunt campaign (empowerment, development). Each theme suggested a specific frame, and from each data source (interview, speeches, and field notes) sections were extracted and appropriately classified under the themes.

Table 1. NGO Operations and Incidents of Witch-hunts in Jalpaiguri District

	Jalpaiguri Sadar	Malbazar	Alipurduar	Total
Witch-hunt incidents (1997-2005)	11	15	33	59
Number of NGOs	38	7	7	52
NGOs that list SHG* as a goal	19	6	0	25
NGOs that list anti-witch-hunt campaign as a goal	1	0	1	1**

Notes: *SHG (abbreviation for self help group) is the official term for microcredit groups. ** DDL formally conducts the anti-witch-hunt campaign in both subdivisions. It is the only NGO that lists combating witch-hunts as a goal.

WITCH-HUNTS IN A TEA PLANTATION COMMUNITY

The labor force in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri district is comprised of a tribal population (mainly the Oraon and Munda groups) that arrived from the neighboring regions of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas (Bhowmik 1981; Jha 1996; Bhowmik, Xaxa, and Kalam 1996; Chaudhury and Varma 2002). There are very high rates of infant mortality, and outbreaks of endemic fever, diarrhea, cholera, and malaria are commonplace. The lack of modern health facilities or adequate government health aid makes these communities dependent on local alternative medicine, mostly administered by people with little or no formal training (Bhadra 1997; Chaudhury and Varma 2002).

Engaged mainly as tea pickers, the tribal laborers are paid a daily wage of approximately one dollar (Kumar 2006: 115; Centre for Education and Communication 2007) and women laborers are paid less than the men. They are disadvantaged in marriage, property, and inheritance laws (Nongbri 1998; Xaxa 2004) and have no role in public decision making and community rituals (Bhowmik 1981; Bhadra 1992; Baruya 2005). The complete dominance of men in all matters of decision making is critical in the politics of witch-hunts.

The belief in *dains* (witches) occupies a central place in tribal spiritual and moral life even today (Sinha 2007). The *janguru* (diviner) is solicited to use his beneficial (white magic) powers to counteract the evil powers (black magic) of the *dain* or the witch. Witch-hunts are frequent incidents in the Dooars region, numbering almost seventeen incidents per year.⁵ The attacks are undertaken in small groups or can sometimes involve the entire village. In most cases, the victims are female. In almost all cases of witch-hunts, the initial identification of a target (the “witch”) follows after household quarrels take place. Since women commonly participate in household quarrels, they play an important role in identifying the “witch” and providing a rationale for the accusation. Men take on a more prominent role in the escalation and organization of the hunt.

The data collected in the region by the second author suggest two distinct types of witch-hunts: surprise and calculated attacks (see Chaudhuri forthcoming). In the first instance, the victims had no warning beforehand of the witchcraft accusations against them. The immediate cause that instigated the hunt was, in most cases, an ailment in the household of the accuser. Sometimes there were quarrels or a hostile verbal exchange prior to the attack. These attacks are impulsive and the “witch” is often killed immediately. In calculated attacks the targeted victim is aware of the accusation. There is usually some prior conflict, such as a property dispute, between the accuser and the accused. The local belief in witches is manipulated to launch an accusation that might serve some interest of the accuser. The “witch” is given a chance to defend herself at a so-called trial, but this usually ends with the mob attacking the person accused.

MOVEMENT ACTIVISTS

The DDL is a local service-delivery NGO that disburses microcredit loans under Government of India Schemes⁶ in the subdivision of Jalpaiguri Sadar. Activists organized women into microcredit self-help groups that comprised about eight to ten members, including the group leader. Monthly meetings are held in the village. Each participant is loaned a small amount of money (no more than 750 rupees, or 18 US dollars) at interest to start her own business (poultry, tailoring, basket weaving) that would supplement the family income from the tea plantations. The interest amount tends to vary, as each group decides this. Usually the amount is lower than the prevalent market rate.

Over the last eight years, however, DDL activists have assumed a more expansive role akin to a social movement organization in trying to mobilize the community against the practice of witch-hunts. This has happened mainly in Jalpaiguri Sadar where its main offices

are located and where it has control over microcredit resources. In one of its promotional pamphlets, DDL clearly bundles the microcredit goals with its campaign against witch-hunts: “work towards sustainable development to eradicate the problem of hunts.” It is in this subdivision that DDL activists have chalked up a number of successes for the anti-witch-hunt movement. In Malbazar, it has acted episodically to stop witch-hunts without pursuing it fully enough to list this as a goal of its program. Its main profile here is that of a service-delivery NGO in the health and education sectors, not microcredit loans. In Alipurduar, where the problem of witch-hunting is most severe, it has made a sustained attempt to mobilize a movement. There are no microcredit groups in the area and DDL has limited involvement in childcare and health programs.

The NGO is headed by an outsider, a nontribal woman dedicated to the cause of improving the lives of tribal women. DDL activists are almost all women from outside the tribal community. Staff members are on the regular payroll but DDL activists may only draw a small salary when they are assigned to run service-delivery projects on behalf of the Government of India in areas such as education, health, or poverty alleviation. Since there is no financial support from the government for the anti-witch-hunt campaign, activists devote themselves voluntarily to this task, supporting their livelihood by holding other jobs such as teaching in schools and running small businesses.

DDL is the only organization to take up the issue of witch-hunts in the district. While poverty, superstition, and tribal backwardness have been cited as reasons for inaction by local government officials and various other NGOs, DDL, in contrast, has drawn on these very themes to generate a set of frames that have pulled microcredit groups under their supervision into the anti-witch-hunt campaign. We explore these dynamics in the sections below.

WOMEN AS TARGETED MOVEMENT PARTICIPANTS

Suchetana, a DDL activist, pointed to women’s involvement in household disputes and women’s casual or deliberately malevolent use of the slur *daini* (witch) to explain why mobilizing the women was important for an effective campaign against witch-hunts: “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” (personal interview, 2006, Jalpaiguri district). Also, as primary caretakers at home, women’s interpretation of the source of illness in the family turns out to be crucial in the initiation of a witchcraft accusation.⁷ While the open and direct accusation is launched mostly by men who then mobilize attackers for the hunt,⁸ the role of women is vital during the initial stages that lead to the social isolation of the accused. Meera, another activist, argued, “Today if all the women are united against the witch accusations then witch-hunts would not take place. . . . 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” (personal interview, 2006, Jalpaiguri district).⁹

DDL activists quickly discovered that attendance was poor for meetings organized specifically around the issue of witch-hunts. This was mainly on account of villagers’ suspicions that their traditions were under attack, as well as the general fear of discussing these topics openly given that witch-hunts often led to large-scale arrests and invited trouble for the community. DDL activists started pursuing the campaign against witch-hunts in a concealed manner. Advocacy against witch-hunts began to be introduced toward the end of meetings that were convened expressly for the purpose of discussing microcredit issues. Economic incentives were successful in ensuring that all members of microcredit groups participated in the meetings. Due to the close structure of each self-help group—built on ties of reciprocity, mutual dependence, and friendship—all women stayed until the very end of the meetings. Leaving the meeting early was discouraged, and women participants were constantly reminded

of the need to support each other when they appeared reluctant to express their opinions on witch-hunts. While men were not permitted to become members of microcredit self-help groups, they were not prevented from attending these public sessions. Symbolically, the meeting site represented a space where movement participants could discuss both issues. With careful framing, conversations about the simultaneous pursuit of both goals became possible.

STRATEGIC FRAMING OF THE CAMPAIGN IN JALPAIGURI SADAR

Movement activists are signifying agents who are actively engaged in the production and maintenance of interpretative schemata (frames) that guide action by “selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences” for constituents, bystanders, and even antagonists (Snow and Benford 1988: 137). This is not an unproblematic process given that cultural systems are repositories of multiple ideas, ideologies, and meanings that do not always coexist in congruent harmony (Oliver and Johnston 2000; Snow and Benford 2000). Recent social movement literature recognizes that culture is a complex, multidimensional resource from which new interpretive frameworks can be fashioned by innovative movement activists. In so doing, they create “expanding cultural opportunities” for political activity (McAdam 1994; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Williams 2004; Borland 2004).

In Jalpaiguri Sadar, DDL activists construct frames that amplify existing ideas stemming from the female tribal workers’ experiences of vulnerability and exploitation as they live embedded within the plantation economy and the gendered hierarchy of tribal society. Once operationalized, these frames perform a number of strategic functions and are used to orient the audience away from the cultural practice of witch-hunts.

These frames raise the specter of a dual threat that the women face in common and offer a reinterpretation of the witch-hunt tradition. The first threat is framed as the problem of male alcoholism. Meera, a DDL activist, argued, “the women have to realize that there are no witches. The troubles and the mischief...are not caused by witches. It is the men, their alcohol and their lust . . . the women have to realize that” (personal interview, 2006, Jalpaiguri district). Alcoholism is a severe problem among both men and women in the tea plantation communities. Meera’s narrative strategically constructs the other or the collective adversary as the inebriated male aggressor, thus overlooking (despite being aware of) the role of women in the early stages of a witch-hunt and producing a simplified binary account of gendered violence. Villagers often refer to the smell of *haria* (alcohol) and “red eyes” when describing the people involved in the witch-hunts. Friday nights are generally believed to be “nights of mischief.” As villagers spend their weekly pay on alcohol, drunken fights break out and an exchange of verbal insults could potentially escalate into witchcraft accusations.

Given that many women have suffered domestic violence at the hands of intoxicated male family members, and given the quite visible association between alcoholism and the launching of witch-hunts, it is not difficult to see why this frame might resonate with the women. The frame encourages them to make common cause of their suffering both on the domestic front and as potential targets of witch-hunts. It explains the violence as stemming from the ubiquitous problem of male alcoholism. Rallying her audience at a meeting shortly after a woman was rescued from a witch-hunt, Lipi, a female activist, warned, “even though we have managed to stop this [witch-hunt] . . . the *peena* [alcohol consumption] is still on. As long as the *peena* continues you cannot do anything” (public speech, 2006, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar).

The second threat is framed in the form of a conspiracy theory in which the tribal population is easily exploited because of their superstitious beliefs in witches and their lack of education. Similar to the arguments on male alcoholism, the activists use the logic of class stratification and inequality to create a second thread of the othering narrative. The conspiracy of the “others” resonates with women’s experience as tribal workers on the plantations and

their struggle to survive against the machinations of powerful fellow villagers and nontribal plantation managers. This frame suggests that the practice of witch-hunts makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and calls for common cause in defense of tribal interests.

Addressing the village crowd at a microcredit meeting one Sunday afternoon, Suchetana explained:

Opobadh [false accusation], *opoprochar* [spreading false accusations] . . . makes us divided . . . brings in division and animosity between families, just to serve an individual's personal interest . . . we have to understand that this [witch-hunt] has done us no good. It cannot do any good . . . you have to survive, and being buried in superstitions does not help. We have to get rid of these beliefs. . . . 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 your children to go to school. Because if they did [really want your children to go to school], then it would not serve their interest. (public speech, 2006, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar)

Another activist, Balaram, stated:

You will see that in areas where there is little education . . . and no resources for education . . . some *matabbar* [local goons] 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 tradition] and *jaddu vidya* [black magic]. (personal interview, 2005, Jalpaiguri district)

While not tantamount to a fully developed social theory of exploitation, these understandings constitute the basis of women's lived experience in the tea plantations. These frames offer a diagnosis of their most immediate problems and tap into deeply felt emotions and resentments. They attempt to forge a common identity and a common set of interests in place of an internally divided population in which women were indifferent to each other's plight or conspired against each other for private gain. The frames attempt to motivate women to undertake collective action to defend each other against the practice of witch-hunts.

The goal of campaigning against witch-hunts is theorized as being congruent with the goal of women's participation in microcredit loans. If microcredit loans are about tribal women's development, intervening to stop witch-hunts was framed as a step toward tribal women's empowerment. They had to fight against the superstitions and practices that reinforced the inequities of gendered, class, and ethnic hierarchies. This point is well-illustrated by a DDL activist 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]. . . . We have to understand that this *daini pratha* [the witch tradition] is *ku-shangaskar* [bad custom]" (public speech, 2007, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar).

The overarching theme of development emerged as the connective tissue that bridged the distance between the two disparate goals of the movement. By making women's empowerment contingent on their ability not only to improve their livelihoods (via the microcredit enterprise), but also to combat superstitious beliefs (via acting against witch-hunts), it affirmed the importance of mobilizing to achieve both ends. At the end of a meeting held in the courtyard of the village high school¹⁰ to discuss the progress of the self-help group (*Chetana*) and the launching of Below Poverty Line (BPL) schemes of the government,¹¹ the discussion turned into an anti-witch-hunt protest. Suchetana, the social activist, declared:

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, there may be peace. . . . *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, in which areas is it most prevalent . . . we have to bring these in front of you. (public speech, 2006, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar)

The women are reminded of the intricate connection between the pursuit of the microcredit enterprise and advancing the anti-witch-hunt campaign. In fact, the latter goal is framed as a defense of the gains of the microcredit program. Suchetana continued:

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 are 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. (public speech, 2006, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar)

Not surprisingly, the call for justice is an important ingredient in the demand for women's empowerment. At a village meeting held after five women were murdered in a witch-hunt, Shova, a DDL activist, promised the victims' families that "we will make sure that every guilty person in this incident is locked up. We will not let the guilty get away" (2005, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar). On account of the delayed response of the police, or sometimes the lack of police intervention altogether, the women participating in the microcredit self-help groups are encouraged to intervene and use social pressure to elicit a confession from the accuser. After the successful rescue of an accused "witch," a DDL activist celebrated, stating, "The women of our microcredit groups decided among themselves that the accusations against Lalitha [the accused woman] 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 Lalitha . . . lives in her own house peacefully" (public speech, 2006, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar).

The celebration of successes advances important mobilization goals. It bolsters the women's sense of agency and rallies them in the face of potential demoralization that can arise from failure. Barely weeks after another successful rescue of a "witch," a meeting was held to enable the women to come out of their homes on the pretext of microcredit loans. Balam, a social activist, addressed the women in the following way:

All of you are members of our microcredit groups. All of you are aware of 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 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. (2005, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri)

Suchetana picked up Balam's train of thought, stating:

There were 500 women from our microcredit groups who participated . . . not one or two. The *panchayat* [local council] 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 microcredit groups. But we, the women have been successful in preventing it again. This is because we have come together as a group...we take development of our women seriously. (2005, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar)

Kim Voss (1998) has argued that acknowledging failure can also serve as an important movement resource—it spurs participants on to fight harder. While the successes are celebrated, the women are also reminded about their defeats. In fact, they are told that losing their momentum would mean losing face. Lipi raised the prospect of public humiliation when she stated in a public address:

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 Bhirpur 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* [alcoholism] continues among your men, you will be ashamed to show your faces to the outside world. (2005, Mourighat, Jalpaiguri Sadar)

Thus, the frames constructed by DDL activists perform all three types of strategic work that emerge in the literature as significant.¹² As demonstrated above, these frames raised the specter of common threats—male alcoholism and class conspiracy—and forged a common sense of identity—of women dominated by their men and by the upper classes—in the process. The overarching theme of development and empowerment serves as the glue that welds the microcredit and anti-witch-hunt goals together. This master frame reduces the potential for cognitive dissonance between movement goal and long-standing cultural practice on the one hand, and between the two movement goals on the other.

SUCCESSFUL MOBILIZATION IN JALPAIGURI SADAR

The case of Lalitha Oraon, a married¹³ tribal woman, illustrates how microcredit self-help groups mobilized to rescue an accused “witch.” Lalitha had been accused on two prior occasions by her neighbor, Ravi, an Oraon man whom fellow villagers described as a powerful individual with close connections to *panchayat* (elected village council) members. In both instances, Lalitha produced a false confession and paid a fine in order to stave off a possible attack. It was not long before this neighbor accused Lalitha again, this time alleging that her witchcraft had produced disease in his livestock. A low-level police inquiry did nothing to stop the accuser from conspiring to kill the intended victim. By this time, however, Lalitha was a member of a microcredit self-help group. One of the women in Lalitha’s network received news of an impending attack and informed the local DDL activist as well as the other women in the group. Within a few hours, all of the twenty-six self-help groups in the village had been alerted. Some of the women gathered in a vigil around Lalitha’s home while others surrounded the accuser’s home and called out to his wife, Golap, who also happened to be a member of Lalitha’s particular group.

Recalling the events of that night, one of the women (Rajani) narrated:

We sort of outsmarted them [the accusers], by holding a meeting at their place. Seeing our numbers . . . and we had the local activist as well . . . Golap was frightened. . . . and of course there was Ravi who kept on saying that Lalitha was a bad influence and wanted to get some of us to support him. All the self-help group members started to persuade Golap to withdraw the accusations. We told her that Lalitha was our self-help group sister. She [Lalitha] needed our support. We reminded Golap how Lalitha had looked after her children when she was ill, and how much she [Golap] had benefited from our support financially. We reminded her that it was us who came to her rescue every time her husband got drunk and beat her. . . . Golap became persuaded, and she joined our group against her husband and his friends. This was a huge emotional boost for us. (personal interview, 2005, Jalpaiguri district)

The vigil lasted all night. It turned into a meeting in which many of the women were joined by their families and other villagers (including men and women), who collectively insisted on the withdrawal of the accusations. Rajani continued, “We were united . . . it was remarkable how the self-help groups came together. Everyone was speaking and talking about how there are no real witches. We kept the pressure on Ravi all the time. We spoke about the

superstitions and how some people [Ravi] took advantage of our simple minds. In the end it worked” (personal interview, 2005, Jalpaiguri district). Cowed by the unyielding social pressure and the arrival in the morning of a senior DDL activist from the city, the accuser and his accomplices capitulated. “Ravi and his friends became very quiet. He started saying that he had made a mistake. . . . As soon as he said that, we dragged him to Lalitha’s house . . . Golap was the one who insisted that Ravi should beg for Lalitha’s forgiveness. She said, ‘You should be taught a lesson. . . .’ They begged for forgiveness” (personal interview with Rajani, 2005, Jalpaiguri district).

While the above account illustrates the predominant role of local women’s agency in the rescue, there are cases in which DDL activists played a more active leadership role. Lipika Munda, a married member of a self-help group, was accused of practicing witchcraft. Since one of her accusers was a powerful member of the *panchayat* (elected local council), the villagers were reluctant to protest. With the *panchayat’s* support, the accuser procured the services of a *janguru* who would conduct the necessary rituals against this woman. The local DDL activist lodged a complaint with the police and launched a public campaign. Activists from the city poured into the area, organized meetings of self-help groups on a daily basis, invited representatives of various political parties, and pressured senior police officers to speak at these forums. A woman participant in the microcredit programs in the village narrated the events:

We . . . went to Lipika’s house and asked her to come and speak at the meeting. Lipika was very afraid. She looked as if she saw death in front of her. We told her that all her self-help group sisters were there with her. . . . She looked crazed with fear. . . . We conducted meeting after meeting . . . in the primary school compound, in the local *panchayat* compound. There was just one purpose . . . that we stop the witch-hunt. At the meeting in the *panchayat* compound there were 500 women. They came from neighboring villages too...all were part of self-help groups. The *panchayat* grew tired of us. We were just not one member but all of us. They finally gave up. . . . We created dramas and wrote songs overnight against witch-hunts, and performed them at the meetings. Everyone helped. We brought in tables, chairs, hand fans, water, and tea for the people . . . it was a big campaign. The remaining members of the *panchayat* saw our power and got scared. They too joined us and started speaking against witch-hunts. Finally the accusers asked for forgiveness. They had to do it in front of everyone. It was a moment of triumph for us. (personal interview, 2005, Jalpaiguri district)

The quick diffusion of news of an impending witch-hunt and the mobilization of the women against their accusers illustrate the importance of microcredit networks and the ties of reciprocity and friendship that were used to thwart these attacks. The following section demonstrates that when one or both factors (microcredit groups and strategic framing) are absent, failure to mobilize is the result.

FAILED MOBILIZATION: REFLECTIONS ON MALBAZAR AND ALIPURDUAR

DDL has worked fitfully to prevent witch-hunts in Malbazar and has not claimed advocacy against witch-hunts as one of its official goals in this area. It began to work in Malbazar after other NGOs had already established their dominance in the microcredit sector. At the time of this research, DDL’s presence in this community was limited to implementing the government’s health and education schemes that were targeted at individuals, not constituents organized in groups. Without involvement in microcredit programs, DDL activists could not organize women into self-help groups, call for anti-witch-hunt meetings concealed under the pretext of discussions on microcredit, or engage in the kind of framing that aligned microcredit goals of development with mobilization to prevent witch-hunts.

Malbazar has the second highest number of witch-hunt incidents in the district (see table 1 above), and interventions attempted by DDL have mostly been unsuccessful. We use the following example to illustrate this. In the Chandmoni Tea Estate, a local villager colluded with the *janguru* to accuse five women as “witches.” Four of these women were members of local microcredit groups whose other members did not rally to save them. In the presence of the entire village, the *janguru* tortured the women for three days before killing them. Men and women joined the *janguru* as active and passive participants in the torture.

DDL activists got word of the ongoing witch-hunt on the second day of the torture. Unable to mobilize the population in defense of the accused, they failed to stop the witch-hunt. They responded to this event in two ways. Although unable to access microcredit groups organized by other NGOs, they continued to emphasize the need for advocacy against witch-hunts and appealed to the district administration to allocate funds for an advocacy campaign. They also expressed their frustration at the failure of the authorities to intervene even though DDL activists had notified them of the witch-hunt underway. In a letter to the district administration, DDL activists wrote:

Our organization got the news on the second day when not all of the victims were even killed. Despite our request to the highest administrative authority of the district, no immediate measures were taken. Our report on the missing women who were taken on suspicion of witchcraft was received with a pinch of disbelief. . . . Our report...was not believed till dead bodies started appearing. (2003)

In another more recent incident of a witch-hunt in Malbazar, Purnima, an accused “witch,” fled the village and managed to reach the local police station for help. The local police then contacted DDL to give the woman temporary shelter. An excerpt from a journalist’s report appeared in a local newspaper describing the return of this woman to the village:

On our way [to Malbazar], we tailed two sleek vehicles. The first carried a posse of policemen, while the subdivisional police officer and the officer-in-charge of Matelli occupied the other. It was a strange spectacle: civil and state institutions—the police, the media, and an NGO—had colluded to force a reluctant community to take back an innocent woman. On reaching [Malbazar], a quaking Bishwanath [the accuser] was produced in the *mukhia’s* [elected local leader] office and then instructed to give a written undertaking guaranteeing Purnima’s safety. The man promised all that and more. It was arranged that Purnima would live with Bishwanath’s family till she got her job back. Before parting, the two were made to stand together and their photographs taken to symbolize Bishwanath’s [and hence the community’s] acceptance of Purnima. By late evening, the policemen had left and I could hear the activists talking excitedly about another successful rehabilitation. But I could not forget Purnima’s face as she stood near her attacker. What I saw on it was unspeakable fear: the fear of being abandoned once again. (Mukherjee 2010)

The above quote reveals how dependent DDL activists were on the police and its coercive apparatus for the rehabilitation of the victim. It also shows that existing women’s groups or even the community at large could not be entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring Purnima’s safety. The burden of protection was placed on the attacker himself, which might be an effective strategy, but it showed that the community felt it had no stake. In Jalpaiguri Sadar, however, our case narratives show that DDL was able to mobilize women’s groups to at least save their “own” members, and an entire community was threatened with public humiliation if they failed to protect the victim. The lack of community involvement in Malbazar is reflected also in the field notes taken during a trip to the Chandmoni Tea Estate. Driven by fear or indifference, villagers (with the exception of the relatives of the five murdered women) refused to talk about that witch-hunt. This was in stark contrast to Jalpaiguri Sadar, where villagers ventured without apparent hesitation to offer their accounts

of witch-hunt incidents to the second author. At the Chandmoni Estate, almost all requests for an interview met with a uniform response: “We were not present.”

DDL seemed to have no influence in the area. Suchetana explained why DDL failed to attract audiences for the anti-witch-hunt campaign:

Our hands are tied without the help of police in the area. . . . If we do not have the resources [through microcredit] then how will we stop witch-hunts? Why would the women [of the village] pay attention to our lectures? The other NGOs who operate in the area are not interested in collaborating with us against witch-hunts . . . and why would they? The government does not have programs to stop witch-hunts! No programs means no money. (personal interview, 2007, Jalpaiguri district)

Suchetana’s narrative supports the arguments advanced in this section. It attests to DDL’s inability (given lack of access to existing microcredit groups) to mobilize local women by inducement, persuasion, or the promise of safety in numbers that underlies group-based action. It betrays the activists’ dependence upon the local police for intervening in witch-hunts.

Although this activist stated that government funds were required (in the absence of microcredit finance) to support an anti-witch-hunt campaign, and that would presumably pull other NGOs into the fray, the experience of Alipurduar shows that government funding comes with its own drawbacks. It interferes with activists’ ability to design campaigns based on their on-the-ground knowledge of what incentives are likely to work or what arguments are likely to resonate with the local population. Their frames are likely to be guided by government objectives and campaigns stilted with the presence of powerful political outsiders.

Alipurduar is the subdivision that has the largest number of incidents of witch-hunts (see table 1 above). There are no NGOs that implement microcredit loan programs, and thus there are no existing women’s self-help groups that might be tapped for mobilization against witch-hunts. DDL formally recognizes its goal of working to prevent witch-hunts, but it has been able to achieve what might best be described as a general “awareness campaign” against witch-hunts that is directed toward the community at large.

DDL activists found that they could not expect people to turn out for meetings voluntarily. Nor was it possible to rely on their low cost strategy (used in Jalpaiguri Sadar) of conducting anti-witch-hunt advocacy by concealing it under the pretext of microcredit group meetings. On account of the severity of the witch-hunt situation in Alipurduar, the local police allocated some funds to DDL to develop a campaign strategy. Unfortunately, this has meant that the police also attempted to steer DDL toward solutions they believed were the most appropriate. Shipra, an activist with DDL, explains:

The police want the DDL to organize a family counseling center as part of the anti-witch-hunts campaign. What will a family counseling center do? We want total eradication of witch-hunts that can only be possible if we are able to involve the community, particularly the women, as a whole. There are differences in the way we and the police want to operate. We have grievances against the police for their neglect of the problem and for not realizing the importance of the problem of witch-hunts. (personal interview, 2006, Jalpaiguri district)

The involvement of the local police department and local political leaders ensures a good turnout at “awareness” meetings organized by the DDL, but by the same token, their presence at such meetings turns the conversation away from themes like women’s empowerment that have been used by DDL activists with success in Jalpaiguri Sadar. In one such “awareness” meeting that was held after two women were stoned to death on suspicion of practicing witchcraft, there were no direct references to local women and their challenges. No attempts were made to present the witch-hunts as a shared problem or craft an argument as to why it might be in the community’s shared interest to intervene against witch-hunts. In line with police logic, witch-hunts were presented as a problem that affected individuals and for which

other individuals were to be held accountable. DDL activists, police officials, representatives of political parties, and local leaders condemned witch-hunts as a heinous practice and in their speeches stressed the importance of increasing health and education services as a remedy to the problem.

The following narrative shows how DDL activists felt thwarted in Alipurduar. They were invited to subdivision headquarters to attend a meeting of locally elected leaders and present an update on the development situation in Alipurduar. Suchetana, a DDL activist, narrated that she began her report with the issue of witch-hunts: "As you all know this area has many witch-hunt incidents going on. Why does a witch-hunt happen...?" She was interrupted in mid-sentence by the chair of the meeting who asked, "Why don't we come to that later? Why don't you give us a report on the education, health, and childcare issues? The state government wants us to prepare a report soon." As she tried to argue that witch-hunts were a serious problem, she was diverted by the chair who noted, "The only way it [witch-hunts] can be stopped is through health and education programs. Once you get them educated, there will be no witch-hunts."

From the perspective of DDL activists, their problem in Malbazar and Alipurduar was the same: the lack of access to existing microcredit groups in Malbazar, and the absence of microcredit groups altogether in Alipurduar, prevented them from undertaking a strategic frames-based advocacy campaign. In Malbazar, DDL activists relied more on police-led rescue operations than advocacy, while in Alipurduar, activists attempted a serious advocacy campaign (because of the severity of witch-hunts in the area), but their dependence on police funding restricted them from using their preferred strategic frames. Attempts to mobilize the population failed in both places.

Alipurduar is the most remote of the three subdivisions in this study, and because of this, few NGOs work in the area. Every year parts of this subdivision are cut off from the rest of the district because of monsoon floods. In contrast, the district capital is located in the subdivision of Jalpaiguri Sadar where we have seen successful cases of mobilization. It has relatively better roads and public infrastructure. While a larger number of NGOs work here in general, this may not be consequential to our study, as most are reluctant to venture into the arena of combating witch-hunts. Arguably, any NGO committed to a movement against witch-hunts should be drawn to Alipurduar despite its relative inaccessibility. Furthermore, microcredit self-help groups, however numerous they may be, are not likely to generate mobilization against witch-hunts without active advocacy by NGOs that supervise those groups. This is evident from the experience in Malbazar. Better roads and communications infrastructure might enable more rapid mobilization against witch-hunts or quicker police intervention, but the challenge is to galvanize mobilization in the first place. In this regard, microcredit women's groups and strategic frames appear to be individually necessary and only jointly sufficient causes of successful mobilization outcomes.

CONCLUSION

It is not clear if strategic framing work produced a real change in long-standing beliefs in the existence of witches in Jalpaiguri Sadar. But in generating a new set of meanings and motivations for action, these frames proved effective enough to produce collective action against the practice of witch-hunts by drawing on, but not fracturing, the microcredit networks.

It is interesting to note the absence of any direct references to diseases or illness in the strategic frames used by DDL activists in Jalpaiguri Sadar. One explanation could be that the activists do not wish to challenge the government's record in terms of welfare service provisions (medical clinics, hospitals, etc.) in the area. They are possibly driven by the need to cultivate movement allies within the local government apparatus so that they can count on them to prevent or penalize witch-hunting. Of course, DDL is also dependent on government

schemes for economic resources that they can then distribute in the form of microcredit loans and harness participating women's groups in the mobilization against witch-hunts. It is primarily this work that has brought them considerable publicity outside the area. Finally, a focus on health and healing would inevitably involve an analysis of the role of the local diviner, the reliance on traditional practices, etc. This could alienate the community, but more important, the argument that apparently mysterious ailments can be explained and cured would be impossible to make in a credible manner given the lack of medical infrastructure and the possibility of a cure. In contrast, the connection that was strategically framed between male alcoholism and the launching of witch-hunts was observable on a regular basis on Friday afternoons, and the argument that witch-hunts divided the community and made them vulnerable to exploitation by conspiring nontribal interests and powerful villagers echoed with the resentments bred by their life experiences of deep poverty.

Also noteworthy is the absence of a countermovement to the mobilization led by DDL activists. In other parts of India, various tribal organizations have emerged that are defending the right to protect their indigenous culture, but such campaigns have yet to reach these remote tea plantation communities. Perhaps the leadership of such a countermovement could arise at some point from the truly committed believers and practitioners of alternative medicine, such as the *janguru*.

Despite limitations, DDL activists were able to mobilize successfully on numerous occasions in Jalpaiguri Sadar. They recognized the potential for collective action in the group-based structure of the microcredit loan programs that they supervised. Strategic frames were successfully used to translate this potential social capacity into actual mobilization against the community's long-standing cultural practice of witch-hunting. Evidence from Malbazar indicates that without the strategic framing of advocacy, these women participants do not mobilize even to save their own. We also find that microcredit groups are necessary if strategic framing-based advocacy is to succeed. In Alipurduar particularly, where microcredit groups were absent, DDL activists found themselves dependent on police funding to sustain their advocacy campaign and grew increasingly frustrated by police attempts to direct their agenda.

Ultimately, the combination of self-help groups *and* strategic framing seems to produce limited but still remarkable successes. Although cultural and material structures constrain the possibility of radical transformative action, strategic framing that successfully welds the microcredit groups with the anti-witch-hunt movement has managed to generate collective action that has the potential, if sustained, to produce gradual cultural change in these communities.

NOTES

¹ Critics of microcredit loans contend that instead of empowering women participants, recent experiences in countries like Egypt and Morocco suggest that microcredit can increase women's indebtedness and social vulnerability (Poster and Salime 2002; Keating, Rasmussen, and Rishi 2010).

² For the sake of anonymity, we have used fictitious names for locations, organizations and individuals wherever appropriate. For the same reason, official affiliations of interview respondents are not mentioned.

³ Although we have controlled for a number of factors that could potentially interfere with our explanation, we do not claim that these are the only possible factors explaining how members of the community can act to change their own spiritual beliefs and practices. Cross-regional and even cross-country comparisons may be useful to test our findings further. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ Data for this study were collected by the second author as part of a bigger project on the study of witch-hunts among plantation workers in the area. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the second author relied on an NGO (described as DDL in this study) to get access to the field in 2005. The confidence of the local population was gradually gained by means of frequent trips to the villages, living on-site, participating in their daily lives, and observing DDL activists' work in the areas of children's education, health, and poverty alleviation projects. Apart from the twenty-five activists and ten members from various self-help groups, the second author interviewed another forty-five participants for this study. These additional participants were villagers who participated in the hunt, women accused of witchcraft, and the family members of the accused women, among others. A translator intervened if required to translate some words from Sadri to Bengali. The interviews were conducted in a mix of Bengali and Sadri (the tribal dialect that is very similar to Bengali). The second author is a native Bengali speaker.

⁵ According to data collected by the second author, from 1980-2005 there were 462 cases of witch-hunts recorded by newspaper and police archives in the Dooars region. The problem of missing data is acute because many cases are not recorded in police files as "witch-hunts."

⁶ The Indian government announces these Welfare Schemes to benefit a cross section of society. These schemes could be either central, state-specific, or a joint collaboration between the center and the states. NGOs are often assigned the task of administering the schemes that range from agricultural to educational, health-related, etc. For more information, see <http://india.gov.in/govt/schemes.php>.

⁷ This is a pattern similar to the witch-hunts in Salem and pre-modern England, where women comprised most of those among the accusers as well as the accused.

⁸ In some cases, particularly within the category of surprise attacks, men can also initiate the accusation.

⁹ This argument is germane to other gendered practices, such as female genital mutilation and domestic violence, in which women have been found to support oppressive patriarchal practices (Yount 2002; Abraham 2002).

¹⁰ The school was a single storied, three room structure that badly needed a fresh coat of paint and repairs. However, as this was one of the "better" schools in the area with two brick latrines and a big playground, it provided the perfect spot for the meeting.

¹¹ BPL schemes attract a lot of attention 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 some benefits from the government in the form of interest free loans and other aid packages.

¹² In the concluding section of this article, we highlight some noticeable absences from the frames used by DDL activists.

¹³ Based on the data collected by the second author, 65 percent of the women who were accused were married.

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