

Unusual Expressions of Social Protest

Witchcraft Accusations in Jalpaiguri, India

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Abstract

In this paper I urge for a much needed sociological discourse to look at the unique story of witch hunts in the Jalpaiguri tea plantation. Taking a detailed look at the complex labor-management relationship within the plantation, I trace how seemingly petty conflicts within the adivasi workers community that result in witchcraft accusations are a product of alienation experienced by the workers, nestled in a wage economy. The paper has two goals: 1. To stress the need for a sociological analysis on the topic of witchcraft accusations and witch hunts in general; and 2. To highlight the problem of witch hunts among the tea plantation workers in Jalpaiguri.

I have spent a good decade of my academic career exploring, researching, and writing on witchcraft accusations among the *adivasi* migrant tea plantation workers of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. What started off as dissertation research, became a deeper exploration of legitimizing the area of witchcraft accusations as a topic of serious discourse within American sociology. American sociology is notorious for its adherence to what can be included under the American Sociological Association “Sections” (see brief note on what are sections here: <http://www.asanet.org/sections/whataresections.cfm>), and this becomes further

complicated by the assumption of many academics to automatically relegate the topic of witchcraft accusations, and anything related to witch hunts, to anthropology. Thus this topic never really found a home in American sociology, despite the existence of a small but influential body of scholarship (see Ben-Yehuda 1980; 1981; 1987; Jensen 2007; Erickson 1966; Reed 2007¹). My goal to advocate for the sociological examination of witchcraft accusations in Jalpaiguri goes beyond what could be seen as a normal academic exercise to expand the boundaries of sociology. The argument, i.e. to examine a topic sociologically, does not really offer much beyond what has already been covered by anthropologists, and historians working on the area. Critics would justifiably respond to my arguments by asking the "...so what?" question. Instead my goal is to demonstrate why a sociological analysis of witchcraft accusations is necessary, (thereby answering the question "...what is new that sociologists have to offer?"), and thus providing a unique perspective to the problem. To accomplish this goal I turn to C. W. Mills' (1959) arguments for the pursuit of social science research through "sociological imagination:" how social outcomes are shaped by social actors, social actions, and by the social context, and how seemingly private troubles are linked to broader social issues.

There is a second, and perhaps more pertinent reason, for the need to focus attention exclusively on the problem of witchcraft accusations and witch hunts among the group of *adivasi* workers in Jalpaiguri. The social location of this group of *adivasi* migrant plantation workers is unique, and is different from the other mostly *adivasi* regions of India where witchcraft accusations have been taking place. Their uniqueness is reflected in their social location as laborers in the tea plantations, a status that assumes the workers' identity as *adivasis* **secondary** to their status as workers. They are workers first and *adivasis* second, an identity that is reflected both in the attitude of the tea industry and West Bengal's state policies.

Related to the above comment, and perhaps most important for understanding the distinctive nature of witch hunts in the tea plantations, I argue that the witchcraft accusations and witch hunt incidents in Jalpaiguri tea plantations are **historically** and **contextually** different compared to the cases that are taking place in other parts of India such as in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar. For instance the hunts that are taking place in other *adivasi* communities in India relate to communities who have lived in these areas for hundreds of years and are considered indigenous populations for those states.

Their identity as *adivasis* is prominent in the respective state politics and features majorly in the political representations of these states. Both Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are states that emerged as a result of decades of *adivasi* politics. Thus *adivasi* rights and identity are predominant in the everyday political lives and debates of these states.

In contrast, the *adivasi* migrant workers in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri are in a different position, a position that affects their rights within the plantations, and is ultimately tied to the West Bengal government's dealings of the conflict between plantation workers and management. For one, the tea plantation *adivasi* workers are outsiders, who were brought in from neighboring states when the first plantations were set up more than a century ago². From the very beginning, the set up of the plantations were such that the *adivasi* workers were kept in isolation, through coercion, from the outside world. Though the coercive politics to keep the workers isolated has long disappeared, the long term implications of such policies are felt even today. For instance the *adivasi* migrant workers within the tea plantations do not identify (and are not identified) with the indigenous *adivasi* population of Jalpaiguri: the *bhumiputras*. Also when discussing *adivasi* politics within West Bengal, the tea plantation workers' problems are overlooked as West Bengal has her own *adivasis* who have their own issues that gain prominence within state politics. West Bengal's state identity and politics is not tied to her tribal/*adivasi* identity, as non tribals make up majority of the population. This is different from the situation for example in *adivasi* states like Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh. As a result, within the complicated politics of *adivasi* rights in a non-tribal state, the plight of the *adivasi* migrant workers in the tea plantations and stories of witch hunts get lost. Thus, witch hunts that are taking place within the labor lines in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri are contextually different from the witch hunts described by historians and anthropologists elsewhere in India (see for example Kelkar and Nathan 1991; Sundar 2001) where witchcraft accusations are tied to contentious *adivasi* land rights (Kelkar and Nathan 1991). In contrast, the witchcraft accusations and witch hunts that are taking place in Jalpaiguri, should be addressed within the broader rhetoric of the position of *adivasis* as tea plantation workers, the cultural change from agricultural workers to industrial wage earners, the history, consciousness and ongoing conflicts between the management and the workers within the plantations.

Piya Chatterjee in *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* describes the relationship between the planters and the workers within a culture and politics of patronage, whereby the image of the planter is that of a benevolent father figure: *mai-baap* (mother-father). Underneath the mask of benevolence and patronage lies a relationship of coercion that is enforced through social distance, hierarchy of orders and a social structure where the planter is positioned at the top of the pyramid (2001: 6). Such relationships of patronage are not peculiar to tea plantations in India, or had originated with the establishment of these plantations. Rather these relationships of patronage had existed for a long time, starting with the caste stratification in India, where certain caste positions were based on superiority, patronage and exploitation over the lower castes and people outside the caste positions (*adivasis*). Ajay Skaria also talks about a similar hegemonic stratification that existed in India since colonial times where the native population was divided according to various shades of wildness (1997 (b) and 1999). He writes: “But what do wildness, ascriptions of and claims to wildness mean? Conventionally, in much mainstream western thought, wildness has been understood in terms of an opposition to civilization. It usually signifies what comes before or lies outside civilization. Civilization is of course valorized, and ascriptions of wildness have justified much violence and oppression...two most common ways in which wildness is talked about—wild spaces and wild people” (1999, Preface v–vi).

Thus Skaria does not claim that castes were considered to be “civilized” while the tribes were considered to be “wild” tribes in British India. Rather the civilizing mission that was the foundation for the belief in colonialism, was based on the “rule of difference” a term borrowed from Partha Chatterjee (1993), where the colonizers (civilized) were *fundamentally different* from the colonized (wild). Thus the difference between tribes and castes in British India was not the wild versus the civilized, rather it was based on different shades of wildness, where the tribes were considered to be “more wild” than other natives in India (1997 (b): 727). I refer to the existing caste based stratification in pre-colonial India and construction of wildness in colonial India to argue how the planters’ image of the *adivasi* workers as wild, uncivilized, uncontrollable individuals, who are unable to make decisions for their own good, are based on historical assumptions of the *adivasi* image, where the planters see themselves as benevolent patrons who have a “paternalistic need to civilize” (Skaria, 1997 (b): 736) the wild incorrigible *adivasi*. Starting with the British

planters, the plantation management of today has a distorted image of the *adivasis*, where incidents of witch hunts fit naturally in. The *adivasis* carried the reputation of a wild, aboriginal nature that could be channeled into productive work and thus they were forcibly recruited for tea plantations starting in Assam and later in Jalpaiguri. Recruited through indentured contracts that were anywhere between three to five years, the contracts were enforced and administered by agency houses whose sole purpose was recruiting bound labor with threats of imprisonment and heavy fines against deserters (Liu 2010: 88).

There is a plethora of scholarly work that explores the unequal socio-economic relationship between the workers and the plantation owners/management and highlights a long history of economic exploitation and social neglect by the latter. Putting this social context in the forefront, and thereby demonstrating the importance of the sociological perspective in understanding the witchcraft accusations of Jalpaiguri, I propose an alternative method to interpret the problem: as a periodic reaction of the *adivasi* worker community against their oppression by the plantation management. As the typical avenues of social protest accessible to any other communities are often unavailable for the workers due to lack of organizational and political resources, the *dain* (witch) then becomes a scapegoat for the malice of the plantation economy and the incidents of witch hunts are a discourse. It is within this discourse that witch hunts are not viewed as exotic/primitive rituals of a backward community, but as a powerful protest by a community against its oppressors. Before I delve on the main arguments, I present a case study of a hunt that took place some years ago.

Dulari's Story

Mourighat is often referred to as the *daini boshobash* or the "area where the witches live" by locals. At the time of my fieldwork, there were already twelve cases of witch hunts for that year according to the reports documented by a local NGO. My contact in the area encouraged me to meet Dulari (who was at the time in her late 20s or early 30s and a female *adivasi* migrant worker), an accused witch. Dulari came with her husband to meet me, on a Sunday after attending church services. Their family had converted to Christianity recently. Dulari's story of witchcraft accusations started more than a decade ago, when her neighbor Shankar accused her of murdering his pregnant wife using witchcraft. Shankar's wife had complications during her pregnancy, and

the local *janguru* was unable to cure her. At the time the *janguru* suggested that Shankar should conduct a ritual to detect the cause behind the complications. After an entire day of rituals that accompanied offerings of rice, hibiscus flower, *hariala* and animal sacrifice, the *janguru* informed Shankar that a “dark woman” near his house was causing the trouble. Later that evening when Shankar came back home, he discovered that his wife was already dead.

After a few days following the death of his wife, the distraught man who had been drinking *hariala* to forget his misery, came over to the house of Dulari late in the evening and threatened to kill her with his *kukri*. Shankar was arrested by the police on charges of assault later that week, and was released on bail immediately. At the village *panchayat* meeting, Shankar confessed his assault against Dulari on suspicion of witchcraft. He cited his recent grief of his wife’s passing and his recent drinking that made him threaten Dulari. He promised in front of the villagers never to attack Dulari again.

Six months later Dulari was again accused of practicing witchcraft. This time the accuser was Otno Oraon, another villager from the same plantation. Otno had an infected wound in his hand that refused to heal. He threatened to kill Dulari and chop her into pieces if his wound did not heal. From this time onwards, all the illnesses in the village were blamed on Dulari, and she slowly came to be known as “*dain* Dulari.” The third accusation against Dulari happened a few days later when another *adivasi* worker had fever that continued over a week. By this time all illnesses and daily misfortunes were being blamed on Dulari’s witchcraft. Growing increasingly frustrated and threatened by the constant accusations, Dulari offered to “to take an oath before the goddess Kali” to prove her innocence. However Dulari’s offer was met with resistance by the rest of village, as the Goddess Kali,³ the source of power for the dark forces and witches, was a “natural” ally of the *dain* Dulari. When the worker got well after a few days, the accusations against Dulari died out, and she was able to get back into her normal life as a worker in the plantation.

For a few years, after the third accusation against her, Dulari did lead a normal life. She made a few friends in the village, and among those was the family of Jaggu Oraon. Jaggu Oraon and his family became so close to Dulari that she was beginning to contemplate moving closer to their family. Dulari’s husband had purchased a small piece of land very near Jaggu’s house and Dulari wanted to build a house on that plot. However, when they decided to go ahead with the plans, Dulari and her husband discovered that Jaggu had

taken over the land illegally. Since both Dulari and her husband were not able to read, Jaggu convinced them to put their thumb print on papers they thought were for some other cause. In this way Jaggu transferred the ownership of the land under his name. Troubles started between the two families.

Soon after Dulari found out that two of her banana trees were cut into pieces. When she confronted Jaggu and his wife, they did not deny it and the couple threatened Dulari with the same fate. The families, that had once been friends, now turned into enemies. The former friends fought frequently at any pretext and relations became very bitter. One evening Jaggu had organized a feast at his house where there was plenty of goat meat and *haria* for everyone. Dulari, who was returning home after fetching water, met Jaggu's wife at the village well. A heated argument between the women followed, and Jaggu's wife hit Dulari and fled home. Later that evening a group of five men, including Jaggu, attacked Dulari at her home and raped her continuously for the next one hour. Dulari's husband was not at home at the time and Jaggu's wife accompanied the men.

Dulari and her husband filed a complaint with the *panchayat* and a meeting was held. The *panchayat* asked Dulari to forget the incident and advised them to continue to live peacefully in the village. A few days later following her complaint, Dulari was again gang raped by the same group of men, as revenge against her complaints to the *panchayat*. Dulari went through a lot of trauma, and this time some local activists came to her aid. With their help, Dulari filed a case in the local police station and court. However, till date no legal action has been taken against her rapists due to lack of "sufficient evidence." Dulari's rapists are "friendly" with the local labor union and the entire village ostracized Dulari and her family. Women refused to talk to her and Dulari's children were called *dainir baccha*, meaning children of the witch, everywhere they went.

Two months after her second rape, a fifth accusation of witchcraft was made against Dulari. An *adivasi* woman, who was ailing for some time, died in the village. A few days after her death, Dulari, who was coming back home for lunch from the plantation, was stopped by the woman's husband Ramdar. When Dulari came closer to Ramdar, he threw chili power in her eyes and tried to slit her throat. Dulari managed to cry out for help, and a few passersby came to her rescue. Ramdar fled the village, and later the police arrested his father as Ramdar was absconding. He was let off a few days later after a bail of three hundred rupees.

Today, Dulari continues to live in the same village in fear of accusations. Unable to leave her permanent job in the plantation, her husband and she have few options of finding work elsewhere. Her rapists have joined hands with her accusers and have managed to successfully label her a witch. Not a week passes when Dulari is not accused of witchcraft.

Some Explanations on the Case: *Adivasi* Women in Plantations and Rape

Dulari's case of witchcraft accusations is both typical and unique. Her story is unique in the sense that she is perhaps the only woman I had interviewed who had experienced multiple rape and witchcraft accusations against her. The location of Dulari's village is also unique in the district of Jalpaiguri. This area is located in Jalpaiguri Sadar, a sub district where an anti-witch hunt campaign was successfully launched among the *adivasi* migrant workers (see Chakravarty and Chaudhuri 2012 for details on the campaign and strategies for success). Thus, this is also a case where the *panchayat* and the police were involved in an attempt to dissolve the accusations against Dulari. However, despite some initial attempts made by the *panchayat* and the police to prevent the accusations against Dulari and gather support from the rest of the villagers, her complaints to the *panchayat* made the threats against her worsen, and resulted in multiple instances of gang rape. Here I would like to make two comments on Dulari's treatment of rape (both by her the victim and by others), and on how Jaggu was successful in reinstating the *dain* label on Dulari. Both comments are tied to the politics of patronage by the management of the tea plantation.

According to Chatterjee (2001) rape is treated by the *adivasi* migrant workers in Jalpaiguri as a "secret knowledge shared between women...shamed into registers of public silence." Referring to two rapes that took place in the plantation, Chatterjee observes a striking contradiction that plays out gender, class and ethnic inequalities in the plantation villages. She illustrates this contradiction by contrasting the lack of a public discourse in the case of a rape of a lone *adivasi* woman by a manager (thus an outsider), against a case in which the same *adivasi* community publicly whipped the *adivasi* rapist as punishment. Because the alleged rapist in the second case was not fired from his job despite complaints to his seniors at the plantation, the workers community took justice in their own hands. Here in one case Chatterjee (2001) observes

social silence, while in another there is public shaming, both enacted by the same *adivasi* community against the rape of an *adivasi* woman (235-237). In the first case the perpetrator was a manager (a clear representative of power), in the second case a fellow *adivasi* was merely rebuked by the superiors, and was allowed to continue his work as a watchman in the plantation. In both cases the rape of the *adivasi* woman is trivialized. The community's reaction to the rape is a recreation of the politics of patronage (by the management over the *adivasi* migrant workers) within the power and authority of the *adivasi* migrant worker villagers (236). Dulari was ashamed of her experience of rape, and she did not want to go to the police to register a complaint against her rapists. Recounting the ordeal of rape before strange policemen is traumatic for *adivasi* women, as most of these police stations do not have lady constables. Further stereotypes of *adivasi* women as having "less sexual morals" compared to mainstream Hindu women would have placed the burden of rape on her. In a culture where political heads react to rape of urban educated women as provocation on the victim's part⁴, Dulari's pursuit of justice through police and law would have been utopian. "To forget and move on..." was the practical advice that the *panchayat* gave Dulari.

The descriptions of the accused women by themselves and by the accusers as dark (for example Dulari, and see Chaudhuri 2013: 86-95 for Bhagawan's explanation of why Vishnu accused his neighbor, and Ramani's own reflection on the accusations against her), reveals the civilized versus *jungli* duality that is at the heart of the tea plantation social order, and one that is crucial to its sustenance. Dark skin color is also used to describe the *adivasis* as a contrast to the upper-caste, anglicized, white bodies of the managers and planters, images that have roots in their colonial heritage. The management and owners who possess self images of superiority have rationalized the capacity of their minds to rule over and civilize the *jungli adivasi* bodies. The gendered nature of the politics of patronage is reflected in the image of the *adivasi* woman, whose thoughts are inferior to the planters, managers and other *adivasi* men, and who is trapped within the "cycles of her dark body." (Chatterjee 2001: 169-171).

My second comment on how Jaggu was able to mobilize support against Dulari, reveals the complex nature of the politics of patronage within the plantation. The plantation owners and management are the invisible forces of authority in the daily life of the labor lines, operating through social distance and strict social hierarchy. They operate through the union leaders, the post colonial replacement for the garden *sardars* in the tea plantations, creating a

powerful group of sub patronage (143-146). For the *adivasi* migrant workers, the union leaders are the life source who decide the distribution of the permanent and temporary jobs within the plantation and negotiate with the owners for wage raises. They are the only link to the plantation owners, and Jaggu's proximity to this group helped in establishing the *dain* label on Dulari, and alienating her from the rest of the village.

Alienation, Ostracism, and Witchcraft Accusations: A Story of Two Classes

I interpret witchcraft accusations and witch hunts among the *adivasi* migrant workers of Jalpaiguri as a product of alienation experienced by the workers within a capitalist mode of production. Here the witchcraft accusations are not a result of their superstitious primitive thinking as often mistaken by others, but a result of the oppression-protest discourse against the alienation experienced as wage laborers within the plantation economy. In other words, witchcraft accusations and the resulting witch hunts are a reaction of this community to an economy that is as alien to them as the resulting impacts (of wage economy) on the workers' daily lives. I devote the rest of the paper towards explaining how the alienation works resulting in a witch hunt.

Karl Marx, in reference to the alienation experienced by workers in the capitalist system, wrote that the increase in the worker's alienation is directly related to the increase in wealth for the capitalists. This alienation is necessary in a system where all human relationships are reduced to their profit utility and this makes them less than men. In other words, the alienation of the worker is not just an outcome of the capitalist system rather it is a *necessary condition* for increase in capital and profit. In this system of production the worker is not just isolated from the product that he produces, but from the very process of production, from his relationships to others in the community, and from his species being (Giddens 1971; Marx 2005). So how does this alienation work through witchcraft accusations among the *adivasi* migrant workers? Here I use Michael Taussig's (1980) work to explain the connections between *dain*, worker alienation, and plantation politics.

In a seminal work on the significance of the devil in folklores among the plantation workers in South America, Michael Taussig (1980) argues that the devil is a fitting symbol of alienation experienced by the local peasants as they

enter the ranks of the proletariat. The devil came to represent the tensions in the conquest and history of imperialism, a system that caused men to barter their souls for the devil's commodities which is represented by the evils of the wealth. This observation of wealth being in alliance with evil has also been observed by Parish (2005) writing about the African immigrants living in United Kingdom. Here a gambler, (who is originally from central Africa) feeling guilty of his earning and new fortune, is terrified that the witch and his other relatives who might feel that they have been cheated. Here witches are described as greedy women who are envious of people's wealth (105; 107). Humans souls cannot be bought or sold, yet Taussig argues that certain historical conditions (meaning market economies) creates conditions where alongside poverty and ethical laws, wealth and economic laws prevail. "Production, not man, is the aim of the economy, and commodities rule their creators" (xi-xii). Further describing folk societies, Taussig (1980) writes such societies have an *organic interconnection* with the mind and hand, where the world of magic and enchantment is as intensely human as the other relations that they enter into. With the entrance of commodity production through capitalism, this organic interconnection is challenged, and as a result the soul either becomes a commodity or becomes a deeply alienated and disenchanting spirit. Until the complete assimilation of capitalist spirit takes place in these communities, capitalism will be interpreted with "pre-capitalist" (devil) meanings (11). Taussig thus suggests that devil beliefs emerge during sensitive periods in human history to mediate "...two radically distinct ways of apprehending or evaluating the world of persons and the world of things" (17-18). Thus the devil represents not only the misery that the new plantations and mines symbolize, but it also represents the deliberation of the peasant-turned-wage workers in these new plantations and mines, who view market economy to be the distortion of the principles of reciprocity that were enforced in their own peasant communities by mystical sanctions by supernatural beings. The devil in these mines and sugarcane plantations reflects a self-conscious allegiance to the worker pre-capitalist peasant background that views the wage economy as exploitative, destructive and unnatural (37-38). It represents a class struggle in the classic Marxian sense.

The structure of the Jalpaiguri tea plantation resembles very much a capitalist system of production that Marx described, and Taussig used to describe the production at the South American mines and sugar plantations. Additionally the Jalpaiguri tea plantations have the culture of patronage that places the management class at the top of the pyramid of social stratification,

while the *adivasi* migrant workers are placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. This pyramidal structure is purposive as it serves two functions. One, it helps in keeping the working class in place by forming this boundary of seclusion around the workers, hidden through coercion that was initially administered through the *sardars*, and by the union leaders of the gardens today. The union leaders have been correctly described as the post colonial rendition of the *sardars* by Chatterjee (2001). She describes the union leaders as descendents, both metaphorically and in reality, of the notorious garden *sardars*, who were instrumental in keeping the *adivasi* migrant workers isolated in the colonial times. The *sardar* controlled the workers for the planters, initially by bringing them from the *adivasi* homelands to the plantations, and later took on a sub-patronage within the plantation economy, where the workers paid a commission to him to ensure safety of work and security within the plantations. The patronage later changed to “payoffs” for union leaders for acquiring a job in the plantations, where constant unemployment by an ailing industry is a reality. The trade union leaders thrive on a black market economy where bribing is almost necessary to get any work done (6; 144-149). Let me explain how the alienation and exploitation of the *adivasi* worker operates by looking at the terms of employment, wages, and the control of management through the union leaders.

The plantation system further continues the exploitation of workers by employing temporary or casual (*bigha* or *faltu*) workers instead of permanent workers to do the bulk of the work during peak seasons in the plantations. Here the exploitation operates in two ways. First, these temporary workers are employed on a sixty day basis as employing them beyond that would require the owners to pay benefits. The *bigha* workers are further contracted for a ten day cycle when the peak seasons are at its best. This results in the mass employment of temporary workers compared to permanent workers, thereby keeping both wages down and employment as a scarce resource in the plantations, a system that is most beneficial for the plantation management. Second, the employment of the *bigha* workers are further conditional on family employment situation for *adivasi* migrant workers (how many permanent workers are employed within the family), benevolence of the union leader and the assessment of need (implying appropriation of maximum profit) by the managers (Chatterjee 2001: 191-192). The employment of one third temporary workers in the plantations, and the employment of this casual labor force from the households of permanent workers, has resulted in the availability of a large pool of unemployed labor and has created an advantageous situation for the plantation owners (Bhowmik 2011:246-247).

Chatterjee and Bhowmik's arguments on the use of temporary workers in the tea plantations for profit maximization is also observed in the Cauca Valley sugar plantations where contractual labor consists of one third of the total workforce. The motivations for employing contractual labor are similar: lower than average wages required to hire permanent workers, and avoidance of benefits. Further, this contractual system brings in a time-work system of payment, intensifies labor and creates competition between workers for employment, leading to a vicious cycle where the contracting system appears to be appealing to the workers (Taussig 1980: 84). The debates and conflict over daily wages continue till today in the Jalpaiguri plantations, and the strategic manipulation of such demands by the plantation management class towards low wage but casual labor, versus higher wage but lower chances of employment ensures that the exploitation of the workers continue (see Bhowmik 2011 for details on the wage negotiation conflicts and outcomes in the current times in Jalpaiguri).

The isolation and marginalization of the plantations *adivasi* workers, a necessary condition for their alienation, was strategized by the very foundations on which the tea plantations in Jalpaiguri operate. Limited access to education and restrictions on alternative occupations as a result of lack of access to educations were deliberate on the part of the plantation owners. For instance most plantations have a school up to the fourth grade. However the lack of access to school supplies, teachers, and the permanent lack of resources for decades both from the Government and from the plantations towards education for worker's children has an effect. Second, in the initial years following the set up of the plantations, the forest departments in Jalpaiguri tried to recruit the *adivasi* workers for forestry jobs. However efforts to employ *adivasis* other than in tea plantations of Jalpaiguri were met with strong resistance by the planters associations, who claimed that these migrant workers should only work in the plantations as their migration had cost the planters substantial money (Bhowmik 2011: 245-246). Third, today within the plantation workforce culture, even among the workers, other groups (such as the *Nepalis*, *Totos* and *Bhumiputras*) demonstrate a culture of superiority over the *adivasi* migrant workers. These groups are employed as watchmen, guards, machine operators in the tea processing factories, and are also the ones who end up as union leaders. As Chatterjee (2011) argues, since patriarchies rest within patriarchies, the culture of patronage and isolation together with continuing stereotypes of *adivasis* as "wild" along with their migrant status (in a land that has its own indigenous "tribes"), is contributive to the marginalization and isolation of the migrant workers.

Thus, in a system where isolation is the biggest weapon, the trade union leaders use their powers to further isolate the workers from the planters. In most cases wage negotiations, conflict arbitration, and jobs are fiercely controlled by the union leaders from the workers, and the workers almost always have to come to them for problems in wages and employment. This is a powerful nexus of patronage and sub patronages, both of which are necessary to maintain the pyramid of authority over the *adivasi* migrant workers. Within this nexus, the position of the worker is merely that of a cog in the wheels of production. They have almost no rights, as trade unions in the region are mostly ineffective (and the history of wage negotiations through the trade unions have been largely ineffective; see Bhowmik 2011 and Talwar, Chakraborty and Biswas 2005). Thus all avenues of protest against the work conditions are closed off to the *adivasi* workers.

The pyramidal structure of the plantations also alienates the *adivasi* migrant worker, akin to Marx's explanation of the term. The migrant workers are not only alienated from the community and fellow workers, they are also alienated from the product (tea), and the process of production through the careful wage employment strategies employed through the union leaders by the plantation owners. They have only one identity: as workers, who are easily displaced and replenished. Coercion, patronage, and exploitation exist hand in hand in the plantation, where the wages are controlled by the patrons and the sub patrons. In a system where social mobility of these *adivasi* migrant workers is almost absent, and where geographical mobility is not encouraged, the job at the plantation almost represents a fetish. A fetish that is both hopeless and perhaps the only hope to make ends meet for the workers. Added to the misery of these workers is the crisis in the Indian tea industry for the last ten years over the control of the commodity chain that had led to closure of many plantations in the region and unemployment for the *adivasi* migrant workers. Starvation deaths are common in closed plantations, and reports of these incidents are mostly ignored in the media (Chatterjee 2008: 499). Thus the story of these workers is a story of alienation, neglect and dismissal: a story that echoes in the witchcraft accusations and witch hunts. Let me now turn to the significance of *dain* in *adivasi* everyday life in the plantation.

The *dain* has always existed in the spiritual life of the *adivasis* much before their migration to the plantations of Jalpaiguri and the change of their status from peasant agricultural workers to landless wage earners. Within the confines of the plantation the familiar symbol of all things associated with misfortune, the *dain*, took on a new role. While the devil in the sugar

plantations of South America was in direct confrontation with capitalism that was responsible for the alienation of the workers, here in Jalpaiguri the tight hold of the trade unions, along with the dependency of the *adivasi* laborers on the plantations, prevents the group from direct conflict with the management. Trapped in a system where the exploitation is hidden under benevolence and patronage, the *adivasi* turns to the old enemy closer home: *dain*. The *dain* has always represented malevolent powers, and the constant lack of resources in their lives, the persistent unemployment, lower wages, illness and anything that was the opposite of prosperity began to be attributed to the work of the *dain*. *Adivasi* women and the *dain* have an old bond. Much has been written on the alliance of women and witches in the *adivasi* community (see Chaudhuri 2012), and the further devaluation of the *adivasi* women in the plantation economy by the planters through lower wages, fetishization of their bodies, and violence against the women made them the natural icon of the *dain* in real life. *Adivasi* women are in competition with *adivasi* men over work in the plantations (Bhowmik 2011; Chatterjee 2001), and one hears of the constant arguments over the ownership of their wages by the men in the family. The conflicts over the control of women's wages are not unique to the *adivasis*, but are a reality in all cultures, tied to gender based social rules and is demonstrated through violence against women. For the *adivasi* migrant workers, the misery of their life conditions takes on a new meaning through the *dain* as they take control over their lives only through her demise.

Scholars in the past have made connections between witch hunts and communities that are witnessing tremendous impoverishment. For instance Federici (2010) writes that regions in India that have encountered some of the more intense witchcraft accusations (such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh) are areas that "...have witnessed a tremendous impoverishment of the peasantry during the past decades, with thousands of farmers committing suicide, mostly as a consequence of the fall in the price of cotton and other agricultural products triggered by the liberalization of imports in the region. They are also sites of conflict between the government troops and the Naxalites...For the moment, we can only speculate about the economic interests and deals that may be hiding behind many murders now attributed to tribalism" (18).

Going back to Dulari's case, there were two pressing observations in the entire episode of witchcraft accusations. One, the apparent ease by which Dulari's rapists could mobilize support against her; and two, the lack of any justice for Dulari. Both these observations could be tied to the alienation

experienced by the *adivasi* migrant worker community in the tea plantation. Also related to the observations is the conflict over resources during witch hunts⁵. In the following sections, I will elaborate the connections between alienation and witchcraft accusations, and the implications of these connections for the oppression-protest discourse.

Mobilizing Support during a Witch Hunt

In almost all incidents of witch hunts in Jalpaiguri, gathering support against the witch was often both planned and sometimes voluntary. While some of the villagers were persuaded to participate in the witch hunt through alcohol, and sometimes through small amounts of money (as little as fifty rupees), the bulk of the villagers joined without persuasion, and almost no transaction. In all cases gossip played a crucial role. Stories of the *dain* in the community exist through gossip that forms networks through which the fears and challenges are transmitted. As Stewart and Strathern (2004) have argued, rumors on the *dain* enter at the very early stages of social stress in the plantation through networks of gossip, and becomes instrumental in identifying the witch who is responsible for the evil. Conflict is thus produced and spread through gossip resulting in witchcraft accusations. This mobilization of public support is an important step during witch hunts. Dulari narrates the gossips against her: “The women in the village were all a part of the conspiracy behind my continued accusations. They supported their men.” She continues, referring to her rape:

“They wanted it to happen. They gave their *shai* [consent]... We all work together in the tea garden. But they did not walk with me to work. They did not talk to me... They did not let my son and daughter play with their children. They drive my children away. They say *jao jao, dainir baccha. dainir baccha khelbi nah*.⁶ They said that my children will eat and chew their children, and warned their children not to play with my children as they will fall ill. I am so sad... they are children after all [*amar monner khub kosto. Ora to baccha*].”

Dulari was portrayed as the blood thirsty *dain* who feasted on men, women and children in the village, responsible for all the illness and deaths. Her rape was seen to be a fitting punishment to control a *dain* who was perceived to have loose morals. The plantation in Mourighat was not closed, although

the wages were not paid regularly. The labor union holds a lot of clout in this region, and Dulari's attackers were able to tap into this network to label her as a witch. The transfer of the blame for the misery in the plantation on Dulari the *dain* was not difficult to comprehend for the rest of the villagers as unemployment, infrequency of payment of wages, along with illness and misery made life in this region very difficult. For the rest of the villagers, Dulari's victimization was necessary to soothe their brewing anger over the conditions in the plantations.

The transaction that takes place to attract the core group supporters in the initial stages of the hunt is typically negotiated between relatives and friends of the accusers. For instance Nepul, Benglu and Sushil, in the Central Dooars case (See Chaudhuri 2012, and Chaudhuri 2013 Prologue for case details), served *haria* during a meeting at their place to explain to their relatives why they were experiencing bad luck. Thus the feast at Jaggu's house and the rape of Dulari that followed were not separate incidents, rather are a series of related incidents. Though a feast and alcohol were used to buy consent to punish Dulari for witchcraft, support for witch hunt was not hard to obtain in the community.

Explaining how the support and consent to punish the *dain* was given, Hari, a friend of Benglu who was present at the meeting and later participated in the witch hunt narrates:

"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 thirty men. We went to Benglu's house where the rest were waiting. We went to the witches houses to kill."

The plantations in Central Dooars were closed for more than six months at the time of the hunt. Additionally this region is located in one of the most isolated areas in Jalpaiguri. During the monsoon for three months the region is virtually closed off from the rest of the district due to flash floods. Hari's comments expose the deep resentment and anger that is inside every *adivasi* migrant worker in the plantations: anger against the misery, the frustrations of not being able to do something, and the urgency of the community to take matters under their control.

Money too played a role in enticing some villagers to join. Gundur Oraon, a relative of one of the accused women in the Central Dooars incident provided some details on how the village organized against the women and their families, convincing people who were initially reluctant to join the witch hunt:

“Sushil and his friends went around the village telling us that they had found out that Savitri and Padma were witches. Some of us tried to reason with the group and told him that they were very old ladies...they cannot do any harm. But they would not listen. We saw that the villagers were joining their group and their group was becoming larger. Some of these people initially were going along with the group to watch the fun...later those same people would throw stones at the old women. Others joined in because Sushil was promising them money that Benglu will pay...They did not end up paying the money but there was a lot of alcohol...The group met at Benglu’s house, and by this time we had got the news that they were going to kill Savitri and Padma. I rushed to inform them but a large group of people were blocking my way. They all had *Kukri* and sticks...I stayed in my house...These men were all Sushil’s friends.”

A few points become evident from the above narratives. Even though alcohol and promises of money were made, most villagers joined in the witch hunt initially out of curiosity or to “watch the fun.” Some (mainly relatives of victims), expressed discontent over the accusations, but their protests were dismissed by the others with threats. In the end the entire village (barring a few who were related to the victims) participated in the hunt. While one can understand the support of those villagers who joined in with the promise of rewards, how does one explain the actions of the supporters who joined without any promise of rewards? After all, the threat of repercussions of homicide leading to imprisonment was a very high economic cost for the villagers where employment is a scarce resource. In previous incidents of witch hunts, the police often appeared long after the murder of the witch, and would arrest everyone (irrespective of their involvement) in the village (see Chaudhuri 2013, Chapter 4 for details on the Chandmoni tea estate case). Since the legal process works very slowly, often innocent people would be locked up for days and sometimes months before making bail. This would complicate life further for the villagers as they could lose jobs on the plantations, their only source of income. Yet both men and women were willing to ignore the high risk of being involved in a witch hunt. Perhaps their rationale for joining goes much beyond “joining in for fun” explanations. For instance in an

interview with Duli, the daughter of Nepul from the Central Dooars case, Duli explained how the witches worked: "Incidents started happening in our house that made us suspicious of witchcraft. There was someone who was doing *ban-mantra* on our house. There was illness in our family. Everyone was sick." She asks me, "How does illness happen? Do you know? Do you understand *ban*? That was in our house. Our chickens kept dying. My sister in law could not conceive for years...now her leg is swollen for months...My niece became ill. Who was doing this [the illness]. There were two *buri* in our *para* [community] who was doing the mischief." I asked her whether the family members became well after the witch was killed. Duli said, "The illness went away. Our chickens were okay. We did *jaar-puch* [the rituals conducted by the *janguru*]. But some of our chickens died."

At the time of the interview, Nepul and his son were still in prison. His family was going through economic hardships as the two primary earning members were behind bars. His house had a deserted look. "They [the police] have everyone. They are all in Alipurduar Jail...they [the accusers] could not give bail. They are still in jail." Duli said, "There is no one in our house now except for me. No one wants to stay here. How will they stay? The police have arrested everyone." It is poverty and not strict laws that often lead to longer prison (jail) time for the accusers. As the *adivasis* are very poor, the bail money is often too high for them to pay. Duli explains, "My father and brothers should have got bail within a week of their arrest. But where is the money? How will they get bail?"

The threat of being under the spell of witchcraft was perhaps a bigger threat than the threat of being arrested by the police or the threat of losing a job. Sometimes it is the fear of *dain*, along with the need to take control over their lives, that leads to the *adivasi* migrant workers joining the witch hunt. For some witch hunts are a good opportunity to settle scores. In the following narrative, Sunil, a villager, who was at the meeting when the causes behind Anil's death was revealed to the villagers in the Chandmoni tea estate incident, mentions individuals who joined in the hunt with other motives (creating trouble).

"They [Anil's brother and family] were very upset...came to the meeting drunk...Started telling the village that there was witchcraft involvement in the issue. And then what, other people in the village joined in...some of them were just looking for an opportunity to create trouble in the village. They

started supporting Suresh...there were a lot of people...they all looked like they wanted to do some harm.”

Frustration over the epidemics, anger, encouraged by alcohol and miscreants are some of the reasons behind the support for the hunts. In another interview, I had asked some of the villagers in Chandmoni about the rationale behind the selection of these five women as witches. Srabani, my interpreter, and also a local activist, explained: “There was no logic. In that entire day of rituals, everyone in the village was drunk. The *janguru* himself was intoxicated too. It was good business for him...Suresh had spent around thousand (\$20) rupees. The villagers were happy too. There was plenty of *haria*.”

Joining for fun, to create trouble, or because rewards were offered, are perhaps only touch the surface of the rationale of why people joined the accusers. The very fact that the accusers did not use threat to convince most of villagers to join reveals the real reason for the support. The only threats that were used were applied against the relatives of the accused women. In a community where diseases and illness are everyday occurrences that can lead to deaths, the power of the *dain* to cause harm is a very real threat. This can explain why individuals were ready to believe that the witch was responsible for the misery in their lives, or why the entire village stood vigil during witch hunts and prevented relatives of witches to ask for help from outside. This gave them the necessary legitimacy required to punish the witch: rape, torture and death.

Alienation and Fetish of the *Adivasi* Migrant Worker

Similar to observations among communities in Africa and South America (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Taussig 1980), even among the *adivasi* migrant workers, seemingly natural (natural to most of us in “commodity based” societies, borrowing the term from Taussig, 1980) occurrences in everyday lives that can be either good or bad, are deemed unnatural. Both failures and success in activities, illness and health, all have a reason and a purpose. While the good is credited to that of the powers of the *janguru*, the bad is always due to witchcraft. Thus when children die, they do not die because of lack of medications or nutrition. They die because the witch cast a spell. Similarly, when an individual falls ill, he falls ill because his spurned lover does not want him to lead a normal life, or because a *dain* has given him *huri nazar*.

The witch takes the shape of all anxiety in the plantations. Being in a social class where the fate of the *adivasi* migrant workers is decided from the day that they are born; where there is no opportunity of mobility; where ordinary curable ailments go un-treated; where they are nothing but workers required to keep the plantation running; the workers have no opportunity to better their lives. Ignored by political leaders, the government, and by the plantation owners, the *adivasi* workers are constantly at the mercy of the *janguru*, and the union leader. The plantation, that was supposed to have given the *adivasis* some respite from the economic troubles in the homeland, turned into a promise that was never delivered. Alienated from the local people, both because of the taboos against *adivasis* and the strict rules of hierarchy within the plantation economy that discourages the workers to interact with people outside their community, and having a new economic structure imposed, where everything is controlled by wages, the migrant *adivasi* worker transferred the belief in witches to make sense of the new world. Here everything is represented by wages, which are both a source of hope and despair. Wages, plantation jobs, promise of rewards and good health become their fetish. The fetish represents happiness and the *dain* becomes the only hurdle that stands in between the *adivasis* and happiness.

How did wages, jobs and other material objects become fetishized in this community that had no conception of private property? Explaining how objects are fetishized, Taussig (1980) argues that in traditional peasant communities in Bolivia, the fetishism that existed was the result of the organic unity between individuals and their products. Land, social wealth, environment were all owned by the community, where everyone, humans and nature had a stake. With the coming of the capitalist mode of production, individuals became subordinate to the products that they produced. In this new distorted economy, commodities are fetishized, and the goal is for accumulation of endless profit. As a result the devil becomes the mediator between two different systems of production (old organic versus the commodity production). Thus the devil not only became a symbol of the pain and havoc that the new system caused in the lives of the workers, but for the peasants the new economy was exploitative, non reciprocal and destructive of all relationships between men (ibid.: 37–38)

For the *adivasi* migrant workers, the witch represents all that is wrong in their lives, and wages are fetishized. One logic that might work to explain the witch hunts in Jalpaiguri is to see them as functional responses when the fetish is threatened. The accused women become credible scapegoats

for alienation of workers. The functional explanation of witch hunts from a sociological perspective is best represented in Jensen (2007: 39–44), who applies Stinchcombe’s logic of functional explanations (1968).⁷ Jensen explains:

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

Applying Stinchcombe’s model and Jensen’s adaptation to the hunts among the *adivasi* migrant workers, one can explain why the hunts continue to occur (See Chaudhuri 2013, *Extending the Logic of Functional Explanation*). Among the *adivasi* workers, threat to society or some of its members can occur in the form of diseases or illnesses. This threat is deep seated in insecurities about wages, employment, and politics in the plantations. This undermines security in the society and elicits a response in the form of the hunt for a scapegoat that would take the blame for undermining the stability in the community. The scapegoat takes the form of witches, and the fear displacing response takes the form of witch hunts. In scapegoating, the target takes the blame for the crisis that is threatening the group either “as an intentional diversionary tactic or as a cathartic displacement of anger and frustration” (53).

The Other Class: Failure of the Police

What does the attitude of state (through police involvement) tell us about the perception of witchcraft accusations⁸? What does it tell us about the larger policy of the state of West Bengal towards their *adivasi* migrant worker citizens? To answer this question, let me first introduce a case of violence that erupted at a soccer match in Palestine some years ago. On April 1981, two neighboring Palestinian Arab towns competed in a soccer match. Kafr Yassif

was a predominantly Christian town, and Julis was a predominantly Druze town. The match took place in Kafr Yassif, and a fight broke out between fans of both teams, during which a fan from Julis was stabbed. The match continued despite the violence, and the team from Julis won the match. As soon as the game was over, violence erupted from both sides causing a fan (later that day) from each side to die (Shihade 2011). As state is the sole body endowed with the legitimate use of violence against its citizens, the response of the state, through the police who were present during the attack and who did not do anything to stop the attack, reflected the attitude of the state towards the citizens: here the state is Israel, and citizens are Palestinians. The state claims that such violence is part of the Palestinian Arab culture of violence. In contrast Shihade argues that the claims of the state and the non interference of the police encouraged the violence between the towns as a part of their strategy to rule (139; 143-145; 147).

Shihade's arguments on how the non interference of the police during acts of violence is a strategic ploy to maintain power and control, can also be applied in the context of the witchcraft accusations and incidents of witch hunts in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri, particularly through the repercussions on the way the hunts are "tackled" by the police. I argue that the attitude of the police especially in the district of Jalpaiguri reflects the attitude of the state and plantation management towards the *adivasi* migrant workers, treated as wild, savage, incorrigible tribals: the construction of wildness as argued by Skaria (1997 b). Skaria argues that the roots of the construction of the category "tribes" in colonial India has continued in institutional structures of the state even today. As a result of its continuation, the question that begs to be asked is: how does the institutionalization of the category of tribes have a role in the way the Government (primarily through the police and the senior bureaucrats) neglects the situation of witchcraft accusations in the plantations of Jalpaiguri?

Perhaps the most problematic feature the reports on the witch hunt incidents in Jalpaiguri is the neglect of the police in serving justice to the victims of witchcraft accusations and their families. Typical reactions of the police towards dealing with the local incidents of witch hunts range from reluctance in getting involved in the lives of the *adivasis*, to treating the victims of witch hunts with distrust. Let me explain how the local police react to reports on an impending witch hunt by using a narrative. When Padma's (victim in the Central Dooar's case) son Viral managed to escape from the village and ran

to nearest BSF post to ask for help, his complaints were dismissed by the security guards.

“I managed to give the mob a slip and escaped through the back door of the hut and ran to the nearest security post of the plantation [Special Security Bureau or paramilitary]. I pleaded with the guards—my mother is going to get murdered by the village. They are calling her a witch. Please do something. The guards dismissed my claims and said—Go away. You are drunk. If you are serious, go back to the village and get us a written complaint approved by the *panchayat*. Only then we will do something... This is a domestic issue. Everyday you guys drink, get drunk and start fights between mother and son, husband and wife... *sobh din halla hoi*.”

Viral’s narrative brings out the attitude of *cultural superiority* towards the treatment of the *adivasis* by the BSF. Here in his narratives, the BSF guards dismissed Viral’s urgent cries for help to rescue his mother, as almost child-like—a drunk who does not know what he is talking about—and fitting behavior for *adivasis* who are always drunk (*matal*). This image of a drunk unruly worker, who is up to no good and who constantly lies, has been constructed as a part of the politics of patronage by the planters to exert control and discipline over the workers (Chatterjee 2001: 282). The worker is almost reduced to a child-like status—one who must be constantly dismissed, disciplined and put in his place. This treatment of the worker ties in to the paternalistic need for the government, the police and the planters to civilize the *adivasi* migrant workers (Skaria 1997(b) 737, 739).

Almost one third of the cases of witchcraft accusations do not make it to the police reports, and in about half of the cases, there is often no action from the part of the police after complaints are lodged. In the remaining cases where police intervene, often they arrive on the scene much after the hunt had taken place. In such cases of “intervention”, the most that the police do against the accusers is that they randomly arrest people in the village. These arrests are conducted much like raids, where the police arrest anyone who is present in the village. As a result both guilty and innocent people are arrested (for example in the Chandmoni incident, the entire adult population of the village was arrested). Tippo, a forty three year old *adivasi male* plantation worker whose wife Arati was arrested in Chandmoni explains:

“I do not know [meaning why his wife was arrested]. She did not do anything. She was not involved [in the witch hunt]... they [the police] came and

they arrested her. She was alone at home. They did not get the culprits. So they arrested whoever was available in the village at that time. My wife was innocent...I had to give bail to free her. The case is still going on. There has been no justice so far..."

When I asked Tippo, why did he think that the police did not believe in his wife's statement, he replied, "We are tribals. They hate us. They think that we are *jangli* [uncivilized]...*boka-shoka manush* [limited intelligence]...*amader kothar dam nei* [our pain has no value]..."

Tippo's and Viral's comments on why the police refused to take their complaints seriously are not unique. The attitudes of the police towards the *adivasis* are neglectful, resting on an assumption that as the *adivasis* are not "civilized," their problems are characteristic of their lower status. Thus witch hunts, drunken brawls, and homicides that follow are normal, and should not be taken seriously. Their attitude reflects simplistic constructions of causes behind witchcraft accusations. Skaria(1997(b)) calls this "selective blindness," when he describes two incidents where a British judge let off a Dang man accused of killing a witch on the argument that the poor man was innocent as he was only practicing his religion. The argument perhaps from the point of the Colonial officials viewed the Dangs as a group that believed that they were not doing anything wrong by killing the witch (726-727). But as Skaria writes "... surely there was more to the ambivalence of colonial officials than this..." Skaria traces the reluctance on the part of the colonial administrators to the root of the colonial distinction between caste and tribes, the colonial construction of wildness, how the difference between the two was based on different forms of wildness, each with its distinctive politics of gender and time. Thus *adivasis* being on the lowest end of wildness are expected to conduct witch hunts, a rationale that has continued in the institutional responses to witchcraft accusations among the *adivasi* migrant workers in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri.

For example, one of the common responses to my research topic by district administrators and the police was surprise at what they thought was "an incurable disease." "It is a simple case of economics. Witch hunts always have an economic motive..." was the reaction of a senior police officer who denied that there were more to witch hunts than conflict over material goods or a primitive practice of a primitive community. The solution was simple too from their point of view: "...avoid getting involved too much in their lives. After all what good will it do to them? They will never change their

[superstitious ways].” Isolation (through avoidance of getting involved in *adivasi* lives) is perhaps the biggest strategy of control that the plantation owners, and the state have administered over the workers, and the comment above is an expression of the ideology.

The attitude of the plantation management towards witchcraft accusations and witch hunts among migrant *adivasi* workers was similar to that of the police. Most planters did not have a clue what happened in the labor lines, and witch hunt accusations were treated with irritation. Others ignored the accusations, or sent the junior managers, trade union leaders or *panchayat* to intervene if it caused “too much trouble”: meaning disruption of daily work in the plantations. In most instances, the management came to know of witch hunt incidents after the hunt took place (Central Dooars and Chandmoni tea estate incidents). For the planters, witch hunts are practices that are indigenous to the *adivasis*, and getting involved would cause unnecessary trouble. Their tactic was one that maintains aloofness from the daily lives of the workers. As long as the *adivasi* migrant workers showed up for work and promoted the production for profit, all was good in the plantations. Similar to the Tippo’s and Viral’s complaints to the police, Dulari and Basanti’s complaints of the witchcraft accusations against them were dismissed by the plantation management. For example, referring to accusations against Dulari, one of the managers in the tea plantation where she worked remarked that her accusations against them are “..all false...,” thereby implying that she is speaking the untruth. “Yes there is someone by that name and we know her. But she is to blame ...*kharap meyeh* ... [bad woman] ..*beshi joraben nah*... [don’t get involved].” The Manager’s remarks on Dulari are symbolic of the image of the *adivasi* woman as a low moral character, promiscuous, and thus not fit company for civilized people like me and him).

Thus Dulari’s trauma, like Viral and Tippo, was dismissed. They were dismissed as individuals who had no claim to their lives or dignity. Their characters were already judged before they had made their complaints: drunk, superstitious, and loose individuals who did not have a right to justice. For the plantation management, they represented workers who were necessary for the production in the plantation, but not indispensable. As one plantation owner told me, “...*apni ki bujben? Ora ohrokom ee*...” [Implying that I should not waste my time on these workers as they deserve the misery].

Conclusion: Witch Hunts as Protest

What is particularly intriguing about the tea plantation community is the lack of outward show of protest (such as through public demonstrations, activism or strikes) against their conditions of life and work by the alienated and oppressed *adivasi* migrant workers. The strikes that have happened in the region, were mostly union led strikes that were motivated by mainstream political parties (see Bhowmick 2011 for details), where the *adivasi* workers did not play a dominant role. In my previous writing on the topic, I have mentioned how the very avenues of protest in this community that is much marginalized and alienated are nonexistent. By avenues I imply activism, organization of *adivasi* workers, political groups that only portray the interests of *adivasis*. For instance; while there may be sporadic protests against the unfair dismissal of a worker, the *adivasi* migrant worker has remained mostly silent to the oppressive existence in the plantations. Perhaps the reasons for their supposed nonreactions against their conditions are tied to their alienation, where the workers are controlled by a strict class hierarchy mediated through union leaders. Here coercion and control are tools in an economy that treats them as disposable.

How can the *adivasi* migrant worker who has no opportunity of getting away from the plantation in search of a different livelihood, react against the plantation that is the only source of livelihood? On my question, as to why there is lack of protest against the plantation management, an *adivasi* village elder, Shamlal, explained the “foolishness” behind the very thought of protesting against the owners. “If we say anything against the *Babu* we will lose our jobs the next day. Why do we want to kick our rice? We earn enough to make ends meet...if we lose that then we have nothing left.”

It is through their feelings of helplessness, in a culture of oppression and tyranny, that witch hunts emerge, as a normalcy/balancing factor in stressful times. The link between illness and instigation of witchcraft accusations provides the best illustration to the above connection. As health conditions, like most other social goods such as education and right to drinking water, are dismal in the plantations, diseases that can be easily cured through medications, become fatal. It is in this context that the role of the *janguru* becomes important: he represents the only hope that the community has towards getting some control. Once the *janguru* fails in his role, the community turns to witchcraft as the source behind misfortune and the failure of the *janguru* to provide a cure. The *janguru* can never be blamed for the misfortune or for his failure in finding a

cure. He is after all the symbol of hope. Just as the plantation managements can never be blamed for the poor wages, lack of health or educational facilities. In this context blaming the accused *adivasi* woman as a witch is the easier solution.

So how does an act that is prompted by extreme oppression become a protest against the very alienation that caused it? I argue that the act of witch hunt becomes a protest when it attracts the attention of the outside world on the conditions of the *adivasi* migrant workers. For them, witch hunts are the only way to shake the outside world's conscience on their plight. Ramlal explains it best: "They have to do something [against stress]...otherwise they will lose their sanity. They have to live..."

Notes

1. I will not go into a detailed examination of the witchcraft accusation literature in sociology here. A detailed analysis is available in Chaudhuri 2013 (chapter 2, Theory and Literature on Witchcraft Accusations and Witch Hunts); and in Jensen 2007.
2. Despite coming over from the neighboring states a century ago, I describe this workers group as "migrant." This classification is a conscious decision by me, to reflect feelings of alienation experienced by the workers. For details, see Chaudhuri 2013: 9.
3. It is interesting that Dulari, an *adivasi* woman, would make a reference to Kali, a Hindu goddess. It is however common for Hindu gods and goddesses to be worshiped along with *adivasi devta*, as a part of the social and cultural assimilation of the *adivasis* to the mainstream religions.
4. See The Telegraph 2012. Party's Murmur: It is Mamata's Mess. February 21.
5. As mentioned in Chaudhuri 2012, in surprise attacks of witch hunts, conflict over resources are never present. It is only in some calculated attacks that resources play a role in instigating conflicts.
6. Translated from Bengali as: "Go away, children of the witch. Children of the witch do not play with our children."
7. Functionalism came under harsh criticism from the 1970s. Stinchcombe's model seems to answer most of the criticisms leveled at functionalism. "Nothing is assumed about the nature of homeostatic variables—except, of course, that they must be of certain practical value to a group of people...Change, while provoked by extraneous factors, is inherent to the system...Moreover the model is not alien to a notion of revolution. And since the environment of a system can never be controlled, there is also no need to assume an end-state involving total equilibrium." (Arditi, 1988) Arditi extends Stinchcombe's model to show how equilibrium structures, structural conditions and social conflicts are variations of the extended functional model.
8. Some states in India like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have a very active police force that is more involved with *adivasi* problems than that of West Bengal police. For instance Free

Legal Aid group (FLA) in Jharkhand and Bihar work in close proximity with the police in that state to provide justice to victims of witchcraft accusations. Also see Macdonald (2009) for how the police intervene and provide justice in witchcraft accusations cases in Chhattisgarh.

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