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Research article

Knowledge, Authority and the *Daini*: A Feminist Reading of *Daini Pratha* with Matilda Joslyn Gage

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Abstract

Daini Pratha, the Indian witch-hunt, especially prevalent among central-eastern India indigenous communities, is often interpreted as a consequence of superstition, illiteracy, ignorance, or lack of scientific awareness. While these factors surely contribute to this ongoing practice, they cannot explain its heavily gendered character. This paper analyzes the social conditions under which, particularly, women are targeted and identified as *Dainis*, and argues that *Daini Pratha* needs to be understood not only as an isolated belief system but also as a misogynistic practice that puts women's knowledge, autonomy, and access to resources under scrutiny and suspicion. Historical, ethnographic, and folkloric account of several indigenous communities like Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Birhor, and others indicates that multiple gender factors are functioning underneath: the female *Daini* versus the male *Ojha*; women's healing, medicinal, and reproductive knowledge; restrictions on women's participation in ritual and political institutions; and the manipulation of women's labour, income, and property. Special focus is given to knowledge, because women's knowledge becomes threatening when practised outside male-dominated institutions. To understand these factors, Matilda Joslyn Gage's feminist theory of witch-hunting provides an excellent framework. In *Woman, Church, and State* (1893), she argues that the Western witch-hunt was an intentional suppression of women's knowledge and institutionalization of male authority. I do not simply imply that the Western witch-hunt and indigenous *Daini Pratha* are equivalent or that indigenous belief systems are simply patriarchal fabrications. But Gage's framework is useful in translating how women's knowledge and authority are weaponized against them. By initiating a conversation between Western feminist thought and indigenous knowledge systems, this study explores whose knowledge is recognized, whose authority is legitimate, and ultimately how that constructs the figure of *Daini*.

Keywords: *Daini Pratha*;
Indigenous
Knowledge
Systems; Witch-
Hunting; Matilda
Joslyn Gage
women,

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Witch-hunting continues to be a persistent form of gendered violence across many parts of the world, mainly within marginalized and indigenous communities in contemporary times. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan, in their book *Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy, and Structural Transformation* (2020), provide statistical data regarding witch hunts in India: the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 2,468 murders officially attributed to witch-killing between 2001 and 2016. In 2016 alone, 134 people were killed just because they were allegedly believed to practice witchcraft and to cause harm to individuals, families, or communities. Between 2001 and 2012, India recorded approximately 168 witch-related murders annually, ranging from 114 deaths in 2004 to 242 in 2011. The killings were particularly concentrated in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal, with isolated cases in Bihar, Gujarat, and Haryana. Among these states, Odisha recorded an average of 28.25 killings per year, followed by Jharkhand with 31, Madhya Pradesh with 16.25, and Chhattisgarh with 11 (Kelkar & Natha, 2020, p. 45-46). And the scenario has not changed much since then, as NCRB records 85 witch-killings in 2022 and 74 in 2023, according to an article published by Feminism in India (Ujala, 2026). The major concern here is the underlying gender dimension not explicitly identified in these NCRB reports, because Kelkar and Nathan's (2020) statistical report shows that Aasha, an NGO based in Ranchi that works against witch-hunting culture, recorded 371 witch-killings in Jharkhand between 2001 and 2008 (while the NCRB report records 250), and they also estimated that 100,000 women had been accused of witchcraft in Jharkhand. The researchers conducting fieldwork involving 110 cases across five states agree that approximately 95% of those persecuted as witches are women. Colonial missionary writings bear similar evidence, as Lars Olsen Skrefsrud and Paul Olaf Boddington agreed that Santhal witches were understood primarily as women. Based on the data, Kelkar and Nathan imply that Witch-hunting is a socio-political issue not completely exclusive to the indigenous communities, but an issue situated at the intersection of tribal communities and caste hierarchy (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 46-51). Jahnabi Gogoi Nath (2023), in her article *Society, Belief and Practice: Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in Assam*, also writes:

It has been observed that witchcraft and witch hunting as a belief is largely common among the tribal and economically and educationally backward communities and almost all witches were from among women. (Nath, 2022, p. 407)

Witch-violence generally starts with women being accused of practicing witchcraft by an identification made by a male witch-finder, mainly known as *Ojha* in the central-eastern part of India. Once labelled as a witch, a woman may be subjected to severe physical or sexual harassment, forced displacement, and even murder in extreme cases. Such acts of violence are mostly carried out openly as a collective and highly public act before the village members, including the community elders, rather than as isolated incidents occurring in public. The issue here is that most witch-related cases are registered under other motives like property conflicts or personal disputes and never appear in the NCRB's witchcraft-related category. And even when they are identified, the phenomenon is usually explained in public discourse and policy frameworks as a consequence of superstition, ignorance, illiteracy, or just lack of modern education within indigenous communities. While such factors do have some contribution to the persistence of witch-hunting, these explanations are ultimately reductive in nature because they fail to address the broader gendered structure within which the accusations appear.

This paper addresses the research question: Can *Daini Pratha* (witch-hunting) be understood as a gendered mechanism of control targeting women's knowledge, labour, financial independence and authority rather than merely as a product of superstition? To answer this question, this study interprets *Daini Pratha* through Matilda Joselyn Gage's feminist theory of witch-hunting with a special focus on the central-eastern tribal belt in India. Her theory challenges the conventional understanding of witch-persecutions as mass hysteria or mere

superstition. She demonstrates how accusations of witchcraft have historically functioned to suppress women's authority, control labour, and delegitimize forms of knowledge existing outside dominant patriarchal institutions. By placing the lived experience of indigenous communities in dialogue within the Western feminist framework of witch-hunting, this study seeks to move beyond the narrative of superstition and reveal the gendered politics underlying the construction of *Daini*.

***Daini Pratha* in Indigenous Communities in Central-East India**

Historical Context

The figure of *Daini* holds a fundamental place in the belief systems of several indigenous communities across central-eastern India, such as the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Bhumijan, Sabar, Kheria, Baiga, Bodo, Koch, Dhimal, Juanga, Khasi, and others, inhabiting present-day West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam. The term "*Daini*" itself comes from a Sanskrit word "*Dakini*" that can be traced back to Tantra. Dr. Asutosh Bhattacharya (2003) writes in his article *Daini* that a branch of the Mahayana Buddhist school was named *Daak*, and the female practitioners of this specific branch were called *Dakini*. But as they were Shakti worshippers and, in traditional Hinduism, women do not hold the spiritual authority to worship Shakti, they were gradually ostracized and became subjects of contempt and vilification (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 16). Dr. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (2017), in *Foreign Elements in the Tantra*, also argues that the concept of the *Dakini* in both Hindu and Buddhist Tantric tradition was influenced by Tibetan Lamaist Practices. Dr. Bagchi mentions Kamrup Kamakhya in his writing as the very hub of witchcraft, where the *Yoginis* mastered the *Dakini Vidya*. Through them only, this folk knowledge spread across India from the Eastern part (as mentioned in Saha, 2017, p. 69). And Jahnabi Gogoi Nath (2023) points out that unlike a few tribes like Santhals and Bhils, most tribes don't have a term for "witch" in their own language. From this, she deduces that "they borrowed the idea and the institution of witchcraft from their neighbours, most probably from the Hindu castes" (p. 408). Dalton also records that in the Chhota Nagpur region, witch-hunting was practiced by people of Aryan blood, even Brahmins. In fact, Nath further writes, citing an Assamese scholar, Indibar Deuri, that "the Bodos might have developed the idea of *daini* or *dayan* from their contact with the Santhals who used to migrate to Assam since the second half of the nineteenth century" (p. 408).

Therefore, the history of *Daini Pratha* in indigenous communities requires minute analysis of both their internal social structures and centuries-long interaction with larger religious and socio-economic systems. These indigenous societies were never really isolated from the cultures surrounding them. Despite their difference in social and economic standing from the dominant trends, they maintained trading, cultural, and political relationships with neighbouring communities. Such connections are proof that indigenous societies developed their beliefs and social customs, including *Daini Pratha*, through continuous interaction, rather than in complete isolation. Kelkar and Nathan (2020) cite Verrier Elwin (Elwin 1991; Sundar 2001, as mentioned in Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 90), who observed that among the Muria community, the enemy of humanity was traditionally imagined as male, whereas the concept of a female witch appears to have developed later through contact with Hindu beliefs. However, external cultural influence alone cannot explain the development of witch-hunting either. Existing gender relations within particular societies shaped the way imported beliefs were received and transformed (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 89-90).

The colonial period provides particularly important evidence for tracing the historical development of witch-hunting among tribes of India. Two major tribal rebellions occurred in central-eastern India: the Santhal Hul of 1855 and 1857, and the Munda Ulgulan, led by Birsa Munda towards the end of the nineteenth century, to challenge colonial domination. Witch-

hunting occurred within this broader period of political turmoil. A song associated with the Munda rebellion mentioned witches alongside Europeans as enemies who should be killed:

“O kill the witch, such the poison,

O kill, kill

O Father, kill the Europeans, the other castes

O kill, kill.” (K. S. Singh, quoted in Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 92)

Kelkar and Nathan (2020) further note that colonial authorities had already encountered witch-hunting when they established control over the region and attempted to control it through legal measures. During periods of rebellion, colonial authority weakened. Some indigenous communities believed that the Britishers were protecting the witches and became more prone to attack suspected witches as they no longer were scared of colonial punishment. In the meantime, some accused women and their families actively sought protection from British officials, demonstrating that witch-hunting was not uniformly understood as anti-colonial resistance. Other evidence suggests that accusations also had a link with socio-economic tensions. Survivors reported that well-off families possessing larger quantities of grain or enjoying better harvests had a higher chance of becoming targets. This indicates that jealousy, inequality, and interpersonal conflict were significant factors in witch accusations. And such motivations cannot simply be attributed to colonialism and capitalism. Witch-hunting and witch-killing definitely predated British rule, but colonialism transformed the character of the violence. Earlier, the witch herself was generally the primary target, but during the colonial period, entire families could be attacked and killed. Gendered patterns also shifted in some aspects across the communities. Edward Dalton recorded that among the Ho, men could as well be accused; John Hoffman observed that older women were more commonly suspected; and Paul Bodding, regarding the Santhals, described witches as exclusively female. (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p.91-93)

The historical evidence suggests that witch-hunting among indigenous communities in India cannot be traced to a single origin. It surfaced at the intersection of pre-existing beliefs, gender relations, kinship structures, economic tension, and cultural exchanges with dominant societies. Colonial rule did not create witchcraft beliefs, but it definitely altered the circumstances, scale, and forms through which *Daini Pratha* was practiced. The colonial period represents not the beginning of witch-hunting, but an important stage in its historical transformation.

Gender Factors in Witch-Hunting

I. Witch and the Witch-finder

Among the Santhals, witchcraft is fundamentally gendered. It all starts with their origin story of the *Daini*: set in a distant past, the story depicts women as the primary providers within the community while men are inactive. Disturbed by women’s influence, the men approach *Marangburu* (Santhal deity) to acquire sacred knowledge that would enable them to control their wives. Suspicious of their intentions, the women follow the men and secretly obtain this knowledge before the men do. Angered by this deception, the deity grants the men a superior form of knowledge that enables them to regulate and counteract the powers acquired by women. From that point onward, women become *Dainis* while men become *Jangurus* (Saha, 2017, p. 82-87). This origin myth identifies women alone as witches, making every woman potentially vulnerable, and men, by contrast, are not subject to such accusations. This distinction is also apparent in other communities like Munda and Oraon from Jharkhand. While women occupy the category of potential witches, men assume the role of witch-finders (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 94). Unlike a neutral division of social roles, this arrangement assumes a gender hierarchy of authority in which legitimacy depends not upon the nature of knowledge itself, but upon the gender identity of its bearer.

II. Women as the Evil Gender

The association of only women with witchcraft also stems from the construction of women as a source of all evil. In the Munda, Ho and Oraon belief systems, both genders may theoretically possess supernatural powers, but women are more likely to cause evil because women's supposed social and physical weakness encourages them to resort to magic (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 95). A similar account can be found in Mahasweta Devi's (2003) article *Daini Biswas*, where she refers to a theory given by P. O. Bodding in his book *Taboo Customs Among the Santals* (1898): witchcraft is an alternative path for women to gain power where patriarchy excludes them from the spiritual sphere. According to Bodding, when women attempted to master in secret what was religiously forbidden to them, it resulted in the tragic spread of atrocities like witch-hunts (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 28). In Santhal tradition, only women are understood as possessors of harmful magic. Their mythical ability to inflict harm establishes female power itself as a source of danger and presents the control of women as necessary for maintaining social order (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 95).

III. Land, Inheritance and Patrilocality

While forest produce provides an additional source of livelihood and can be exchanged for necessities, in predominantly agrarian indigenous societies of central India, land constitutes the principal resource. And within such an economic structure, witchcraft-persecution is closely connected with the erosion of women's rights over land. Widows traditionally possessed significant rights to use their deceased husbands' lands, but witchcraft accusations can be used to remove them. Once a woman was dispossessed, the land generally passed to the male relatives of her husband, fuelling the patriarchal control over property. In a largely non-monetised economy, land represents accumulated wealth because the labour of women and their children is embodied in agricultural production and property. Taking control of that land is also a means of appropriating the economic value accumulated through that labour. Such accusations can therefore also operate as a mechanism through which women's property is transferred to male relatives. In this sense, persecution becomes a broader misogynistic arrangement where women's access to productive resources becomes dependent on their relationship with men, particularly their husband and his lineage. Historical evidence shows that in Mundari-speaking communities, although they were patrilineal when missionaries encountered them, women, especially widows, possessed substantial land rights. These could range from claims to maintenance to a lifetime interest in their deceased husband's land. Such rights delayed the immediate transfer of property to husband's male relatives. If a widow had children, her children could inherit the property, but if childless, she was more vulnerable to pressure and attack (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 95-97).

IV. Control Over Women's Income

Patrilineal accumulation in indigenous societies was sustained not only through control over land but also through the expectation that women who married into a household would direct the benefits of their labour toward their marital families. Yet women never necessarily severed their socio-economic ties with their natal households after marriage. They also traditionally exercised some control over money earned through their own labour. This financial autonomy has declined considerably according to the 2015-16 National Family Health Survey. Within this context, witchcraft accusations could function as powerful means of enforcing this conformity: women who devoted excessive attention or resources to their natal families risked being branded as witches, pressuring them to ensure that the benefits of their labour remained within their marital household. Economic control was also divided according to the production involved. For

example, men generally exercised authority over agricultural output produced through plough cultivation, like rice. Only the male household head was permitted to remove it from the storage bin. But forest products operated differently. Income obtained through gathering and selling forest produce was only for the individual who performed the labour; and thus women and children could earn from such activities. Women could also historically convert these earnings into personal movable property like money, goods, and livestock. Such possessions could even accompany them after marriage and be recognized as their own. However, they were discouraged from displaying personal wealth or use them for themselves or their natal family. Their earnings were expected to contribute to the welfare of the husbands' families, while men could exercise greater freedom over their own earnings. With the expansion of the market economy, men's attempts to gain control over women's earnings increased, sometimes through persuasion, sometimes through physical coercion, and sometimes through witchcraft accusations. This proves that women being labelled a witch operates as a patriarchal mechanism through which women's control over their own earnings, their obligations towards natal and marital families, and their resistance against the male-dominated economy can be controlled (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 97-99).

V. The Polluting Body

The association of reproductive labour exclusively with women, along with menstruation and menstrual blood are crucial factor in understanding the idea of ritual pollution. Among Munda communities, men whose wives are pregnant or menstruating may participate in the spring hunt (*Pagu Porob*) and communal fishing, but they are prohibited from receiving the most valued portions like the animal's head. Childbirth is also associated with pollution. Among the Birhor, both birth and death affect the ritual status of the entire band, but for Santhals, the whole village is polluted. Among Ho and Munda, the parents are considered truly unclean. Though restrictions surrounding childbirth may sometimes serve a practical purpose, the narrowing of pollution from the community to the family and ultimately to women constructs them as inherently impure. This transformation sets a gender hierarchy and contributes to the violation of women (Kelkar & Nathan, p. 99-100).

VI. Women's prohibition from political and ritual spheres

Across several tribal communities of central and eastern India, women have historically been excluded from political decision-making. Village assemblies were generally male institutions, with women permitted to appear only when their testimony was required and not to participate in discussion or collective decisions. The exclusion existed regardless of whether communities practised female- or male-centred agricultural systems. For example, even matrilineal Khasi society maintained an exclusively male governing body (*dorbar*). As interactions with mainstream societies increased the significance of political institutions, women's attempts to enter this sphere could be treated as transgressive (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 100-103).

Religious authority was also similarly gendered. Among the Santhals, men alone could enter inner shrines, perform sacrifices, communicate with spirits, and participate in village worship. The worship of both male and female sacred spirits was controlled by male priests. A woman displaying extensive spiritual knowledge or authority could be suspected of witchcraft. In fact, their folktale on the origin of *Daini* holds a similar view: the tale starts with a family consisting of a husband, wife, son, and daughter. During a ritual sacrifice, the father and son consume the sacrificial meat while excluding the daughter, since women are forbidden from participating in the ritual. The daughter secretly tastes the remaining meat and acquires supernatural powers along with her mother. After she and her mother are expelled from the household, these powers transform them into *Dainis* capable of harming others (Saha, 2017, pp. 79- 82). Superficially, the

story appears to explain the origin of witchcraft, but in another, it reveals a deeper concern with female access to restricted spiritual knowledge. The daughter's desire to participate in a ritual reserved for men is represented as the transgression that ultimately threatens social order. Knowledge of ritual practices was itself treated as male property among tribal communities. Women were forbidden to learn prayers, chants, or priestly techniques. In Chhattisgarh and Odisha, even priests' wives could be suspected of attempting to acquire forbidden knowledge, while among Warli, women were reportedly denied priestly education because such knowledge was believed to make them witches. Women who secretly acquired ritual knowledge could therefore be labelled witches or other supernatural threats (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 100-103).

Witchcraft Practice in Indigenous Communities

Although the terminology widely varies from *Daini*, *Dayan* to *Fushkin*, the underlying concept remains the same: a person, most frequently a woman, is believed to possess supernatural powers, capable of causing illness, death, infertility, crop failure, or other forms of misfortune. Within indigenous cosmologies, human existence is understood in connection with ancestral spirits, deities, and invisible forces that hold influence in everyday life. Unexplained illness, sudden death, or any form of hardship are often interpreted not merely as natural events, but as manifestations of supernatural interventions. The *Daini* emerges as a figure through whom these indigenous communities explain suffering and social disruption (Saha, 2017)

Among the Oraon of Jharkhand, witches and wizards are believed to possess the capacity to cause damage through an envious gaze (*Nazar*) or malicious *speech*. *Dainis* admiring healthy children, prosperous cattle, or flourishing crops with ill intention attracts malevolent spirits who bring illness, death, or material loss. Similarly, among the Munda, Ho and Santhals, witchcraft is understood as the power over malevolent spirits (*Bonga*) and their use against others. Though the immediate misfortune is believed to be the *Bonga*, the witch invokes it. So expelling and killing the accused women is believed to be a means of eliminating the supernatural source of the problem (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 29).

Numerous myths continue to circulate regarding the activities of alleged witches even in present days. Sanjit Kumar Saha, in his book *Daini: Adivasi Somaje Protha* (2017), records a popular belief from rural Bengal that *Dainis* gather on moonless nights in isolated fields, dancing naked around fires while performing occult rituals (p. 87-90). Similar descriptions appear in Asutosh Bhattacharya's (2003) discussion of Oraon beliefs, where groups of women are said to assemble secretly at night to perform ritual dances (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 14). Significantly, both accounts acknowledge that no one has ever directly witnessed such events. The persistence of these narratives despite the absence of evidence demonstrates how witchcraft beliefs are sustained through collective imagination rather than empirical verification. Bhattacharya (2003) further documents beliefs concerning the acquisition of *Daini Vidya*, including initiation rituals, secret incantations, and the transmission of knowledge from older women to younger apprentices. Yet he also notes that much of the available literature on witchcraft among indigenous communities was produced by Christian missionaries whose interpretations were shaped by their own religious biases. After examining the available evidence, Bhattacharya concludes that he found no direct proof of either the alleged harmful activities of witches or the actual practice of witchcraft itself (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 15-17).

In tribal communities, the identification of a *Daini* is often mediated by male ritual specialists such as *Ojhas*, *Gunins*, *Jangurus*, *Bishharis* or *Sakhas*. Through divination, spirit consultation, or ritual diagnosis, these figures claim to identify the person responsible for communal misfortune. Kelkar and Nathan write: "the woman who is identified as a witch is subject to varying forms of torture and humiliation such as beatings, burning of body parts, being forced to drink urine and eat human excrement, rape, insertion of sharp metallic or wooden objects in her vagina, cutting

of body parts such as nose and fingers, pulling out teeth and hair, and even killing by beheading” (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 45). Bodding was particularly critical of the role played by *Jangurus* in sustaining witchcraft accusations. He argued that some ritual specialists exploited community fears for personal gain, using accusations of witchcraft to settle disputes or reinforce their own authority (Chowdhury, 2003). From this perspective, the branding of women as *Dainis* functions not merely as a religious practice but as a powerful social instrument capable of regulating women’s behaviour and resolving communal tensions.

In summary, *Daini Pratha* operates at the intersection of gender, knowledge, power, labour and authority. The recurring association between women, knowledge, labour and danger raises important questions about the underlying gender hierarchy that weaponizes misogyny through such an evil custom. It is these questions that Gage’s theory of witch-hunting seeks to address. By examining witch persecutions as historical mechanisms of patriarchal control rather than irrational episodes of superstition, her theory provides a critical framework through which the phenomenon of *Daini Pratha* in indigenous communities of central-east India may be reinterpreted.

Western Feminist Theories of Witch Hunting

The exclusive targeting of women in indigenous communities through witchcraft accusations can be analyzed through feminist scholarship on European witch-hunts to reveal the patriarchal value system functioning behind such a custom. Though early modern Europe and contemporary indigenous communities belong to very different historical and cultural contexts, both reveal a pattern between women, supernatural danger, disorder, and forms of power that challenge existing norms. In both contexts, women possessing financial independence, specialized knowledge, authority, or property particularly become vulnerable to accusations. Feminist scholarship points out that witch-persecution must be perceived beyond its superstitious appearance and must be situated within wider structures of gendered power hierarchy. And Matilda Joslyn Gage’s theory provides us with the required framework to tackle this question.

In *Woman, Church and State* (1893), Matilda Joslyn Gage challenged the conventional interpretations of witch-hunts for the first time, by interpreting them as a historically organised crime against women rather than the mere consequence of mass hysteria or religious fear. For Gage, the predominance of women among the accused itself is the key to understanding the hidden propaganda. She associated accusations with women who departed from expected norms and gender roles, especially those who were outspoken, independent, knowledgeable, or influential in their communities. Their social authority conflicted with patriarchal expectations of female obedience (Gage, 1893).

Gage focused mainly on practical knowledge holders like midwives, healers, or herbalists, as these women held considerable authority in their expertise in childbirth, illness, and healing. With the expansion of male-dominated religious and professional institutions, these forms of knowledge were increasingly delegitimized by being classified as witchcraft. Christian theological representations of women as morally and sexually dangerous further contributed to an ideological environment where violence against women could be morally justified. Religious ideas were subsequently reinforced through political and legal institutions that enabled practices such as torture, public punishment, and execution. Gage interprets witch-persecution as the institutional suppression of alternative forms of female authority. Rather than viewing witch-persecution as a deviant and criminal figure, show allows us to read her as a remnant of traditions in which women exercised religious, communal, and intellectual influence. Her perspective is highly efficient to examine accusations against women whose authority exists outside dominant structures of power (Gage, 1893, p. 152-209).

Reclaiming the Daini: Knowledge and Authority in Indigenous Society Through the Lens of Matilda Joslyn Gage

Gage's framework in understanding *Daini-Pratha* in indigenous communities from a feminist point of view is particularly useful. The comparison does not suggest that tribal witch-hunting in any sense is identical to Western witch-hunting; rather, Gage helps reveal a social mechanism through which women are transformed into figures of danger when their knowledge, authority, independence, or access to resources challenge accepted gender hierarchies.

In Gage's interpretation, the Christian Church turned witch-hunting from the punishment of a supernatural offence into a morally sanctioned campaign against women as they declared "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (as qtd. in Gage, 1893, p. 130). The Church strengthened this understanding by placing witchcraft within its jurisdiction and interpreting it as a grave offence against both God and society. Scriptural authority was invoked to legitimise severe punishment, while ecclesial writings portrayed women as especially inclined towards sorcery. Witch trials acquired the character of a moral purification in which eliminating the alleged witch was represented as protecting the religious community from evil. Witch hunting was systematic institutionalized violence against women under the veil of a righteous act against evil (Gage, 1893, p. 158-163).

The same pattern can be recognised within indigenous communities in India, as Kelkar and Nathan write:

Within these cultures, witch persecution or killing is understood to be a moral action, an action necessary to preserve the moral fibre of the society. Being understood as a moral action, the perpetrators sometimes do not attempt to hide their role in the actions. There have been cases where the perpetrators have gone to surrender themselves after killing the supposed witches. This can be seen as an understanding of their action as being morally justified, an action to support the moral fabric of their society.... (Kelkar & Nathan, p. 27)

Sanjit Kumar Saha (2017) has recorded a similar incident in West Bengal from 2012: in a tribal village at Purulia, a son murdered his mother after accusing her of being a *Daini*. When the father tried to inform the police, the son caught him and murdered him with the same weapon. The son, Rabi, declared after killing, "I have finished off a witch" and surrendered at the local police station with great pride (Saha, 2017, p. 33). In the same year, another woman from Malda, West Bengal, was beheaded by her village community for being a witch by the *Janguru*, and her own son was part of the decision-making (Saha, 2017, p. 34- 36). The moment those women were declared evil, punishing or even eliminating them could be presented not as wrongdoing but as a duty necessary for protecting the wider community. The moral legitimacy attributed to the witch-hunting is crucial to its persistence: violence becomes acceptable because it is represented as the defence of a higher moral order.

Gage also emphasized the gender character of witch-persecution. She writes:

... a witch was held to be a woman who had deliberately sold herself to the evil one; who delighted in injuring others, and who, for the purpose of enhancing the enormity of her evil acts. ... (Gage, 1893, p. 152)

As Gage mentions, in Venetian folklore, Satan was angry because paradise had more souls than hell, and to fill hell with more souls, he decided to tempt only women because they are more ambitious and have a greater desire for revenge. So, she argues that "witchcraft was regarded as a sin almost confined to women" (Gage, 1893, p. 157), and marking witchcraft as a female crime was connected to theological ideas about women's sin. A similar gender dynamic is apparent among the indigenous communities, as Kelkar and Nathan write that among Munda, Oraon, Ho, and Santhal communities, it is strictly believed that women are the source of evil. Even in Santhal folktales, women's ability to consume flesh or manipulate men establishes female power and authority as a source of gender, making it necessary to control women with

punishments. The association of female identity and supernatural power is an important element of the socio-political construction of *Daini*.

Gage's theory draws attention towards the special vulnerability of women possessing practical and specialised knowledge, as she argues that "a vast amount of evidence exists, to show that the word "witch" formerly signified a woman of superior knowledge" (Gage, 1893, p.166). Women healers, midwives, physicians, and other "wise women" (Gage, 1893, p. 168-172) could become targets precisely because their knowledge gave them authority outside male-dominated institutions. Gage shows the connection between women's knowledge and the hostility of the church:

. . . the church having forbidden its offices and all external methods of knowledge to woman, was profoundly stirred with indignation at her having through her own wisdom, penetrated some of the most deeply subtle secrets of nature . . . (Gage, 1893, p. 163).

As women developed informal wisdom of herbs, plants, healing, surgery, and medical treatments, their expertise challenged the assumption that scientific and medical knowledge was primarily a male contribution. The accusations of witchcraft were also fuelled by professional interests, rivalry, envy, or personal hostility (Gage, 1893, p. 168-172).

The same applies to the central-east Indian tribal communities. Ayanti Karmakar, in her doctoral thesis, mentions that Birhor women possessed exceptional knowledge of medical herbs and healing practices (Karmakar, 2021, p. 230). Nath (2023) writes: Gunaviram Barua's 19th-century account records Assamese women practicing witchcraft (*Ku-Kriya*) and causing harm to society. At the same time, Assamese folklore preserves evidence of women possessing specialized knowledge or herbal medicine. The ballads of *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar* describe *Bejini*, female healers who were even sometimes consulted by royals and aristocrats for issues connected with pregnancy and abortion. Nath argues that as male authority over medicine increased, women's independent healing knowledge was represented as dangerous and illicit, contributing to the emergence of witch-hunts (Nath, 2023, p. 410-411). The suppression of female healers extended beyond eliminating witchcraft, as it also affected women's control over reproductive knowledge, especially contraception and abortion. Abolishing this female lineage of medical practice diminished women's authority over childbirth and fulfilled patriarchal control over the female body and knowledge system.

This leads to the fourth parallel between Gage's interpretation and indigenous witch-hunts about the control of legitimate knowledge. Gage argues that the Church restricted women's access to recognized intellectual and religious institutions while treating independent female knowledge as dangerous. Women's knowledge was met with suspicion, and the Church completely prevented women from accessing or practicing forms of knowledge that could increase their intellectual legitimacy and social authority, as they declared: "the church any woman who healed others without having duly studied, was a witch and should suffer death" (Gage, 1893, p. 169). Gage mentions that "death by torture was the method of the church for the repression of women's intellect, knowledge being held as evil and dangerous in her hands" (Gage, 1893, p. 170).

Similarly, in indigenous communities women are excluded from knowledge about clan and household spirits, prohibited from learning religious rituals or prayers, prevented from performing sacrifices and denied entry to sacred spaces. Kelkar and Nathan (2020) note that some evidence suggests that some indigenous women may have maintained religious practices outside officially sanctioned institutions. Missionaries like Bodding believed that reports of female witchcraft might partly reflect secret forms of worship conducted by women who were excluded from public religious life, and witchcraft was a language of resistance for them. Later observers also reported possible clandestine rituals by women in sacred spaces from which they were officially barred. Because women were denied legitimate access to political and ritual

authority, independent attempts to acquire religious knowledge and/or exercise spiritual power could be reclassified as attempts to obtain supernatural abilities capable of harming others (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020, p. 100-103). Witchcraft accusations operated within a broader structure in which women's independent form of authority was treated as threatening. The category of *Daini* is a boundary between forbidden female knowledge and authorized male knowledge.

Finally, Gage's broader analysis presents women's subordination as a structural condition in which women are expected to perform domestic and reproductive labour while being deprived of authority over themselves, their property and earnings. Within a patriarchal household, the husband is the ultimate authority. On the other hand, the wife has the responsibility of domestic labour without an equal participation in decision-making. Her labour sustains the household, yet the use of that labour remains under male control. Women are responsible for managing resources and fulfilling family obligations, but they cannot possess the products of their labour, as Gage links women's economic independence to their broader loss of personal freedom. Such subordination is sustained by institutional norms that define male dominance as natural and legitimate, while religious teachings provide the ideological support and law turns these ideas into concrete restrictions on women's rights. Women's labour becomes a mechanism of subordination when their labour is utilized (Gage, 1893, p. 236-245).

A similar relationship between women's labour and patriarchal authority can be observed in indigenous communities, particularly through the institution of patrilocality. Upon marriage, women leave their natal families and relocate to their husbands' households, where their productive and domestic and domestic labour becomes integral in the maintenance of the marital family. Yet these contributions do not necessarily translate into equal authority over resources or decision-making. Women participate in agriculture, forest-gathering, household production, and other income-generating activities, while remaining subordinate to the socio-economic responsibilities of the household. Patrilocality has implications beyond physical relocation. It weakens women's access to natal support networks while placing greater expectations upon them to dedicate their labour and resources towards the husband's family. Women who attempt to gain control back over their earnings, property, or connection with natal families challenge the expected feminine conduct and face suspicion and violence, including accusations of witchcraft.

Through Gage's framework, *Daini-Pratha* can thus be interpreted at the intersection of several interconnected domains: morality, gender, knowledge, authority and labour. The woman labelled as *Daini* is a woman who possesses knowledge reserved for men, exercises religious or political initiative, controls economic resources, refuses complete submission to male authority, and, most importantly, challenges the existing norms. Her supposed supernatural power is a language through which female autonomy can get redefined as a social threat. This does not mean that indigenous beliefs about spirits or supernatural causation are just fabricated patriarchal lies; rather, Gage allows us to examine if such beliefs are gendered and can be weaponized through social institutions and practices.

Legal Critique: Limits of Anti-Witch-Hunting Legislation

The continuation of witch-hunting despite the existence of legal protections raises questions about the capacity of existing legal frameworks in India to address the practice effectively. Mohanty (2022) writes: though witch-hunting is a serious violation of human rights, the legal response to it remains fragmented across jurisdictions. At the international level, instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Declaration against Torture establish principles concerning the rights to life, dignity, equality and freedom from violence and degrading treatment. As a

signatory to these instruments, India is also obliged to protect women from discriminatory and abusive practices, including witch-branding and witch-hunting. But India still lacks a comprehensive national legislation specifically dealing with witch-hunting. For several decades after independence, cases arising from witch-hunting were generally addressed through provisions of the Indian Penal Code concerning offences such as assault, criminal intimidation, defamation, and offences against women. Such provisions tended to treat individual incidents as separate criminal offences rather than recognizing witch-hunting as a distinct form of gendered violence emerging from broader social inequalities (Mohanty, 2022, p. 352-368)

According to Mohanty, in response to the persistence and severity of the practice, several states introduced legislation specifically addressing witch-hunting. Bihar enacted the Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act in 1999, followed by Jharkhand's Prevention of Witchcraft Act in 2001, Chhattisgarh's Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act in 2005, Odisha's Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act in 2013, Rajasthan's Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act in 2015, and Assam's Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act in 2015. These laws criminalize practices like witch-branding, public humiliation, physical assault, and other forms of persecution associated with accusations of witchcraft. Assam's legislation is particularly notable for classifying witch-hunting as a cognizable and non-bailable offence and providing comparatively stringent penalties.

Mohanty mentions that, though the existence of legislation has not been able to eliminate the practice, pointing to significant difficulties in implementation and enforcement. Cases frequently arise in geographically remote areas where survivors may be reluctant to approach the authorities; witnesses may refuse to testify because of fear of social retaliation; or community pressure can further discourage victims from pursuing legal proceedings, allowing perpetrators to avoid accountability. Judicial proceedings also demonstrate the difficulties in establishing evidence in cases where witch-branding takes place within closely connected communities. In *Tula Devi v. State of Jharkhand*, for instance, the complainant was repeatedly branded a witch, subjected to harassment and eventually compelled to leave her village, yet the case failed in the absence of sufficient corroborating witnesses. In *Madhu Munda v. State of Bihar* also, inadequate witness testimony prevented a conviction. Such cases are proof of how conventional evidentiary requirements can be difficult to satisfy when persecution occurs within communities where witnesses may themselves be unwilling or afraid to testify.

Another limitation is the insufficient attention given to the rehabilitation and long-term protection of survivors. The consequences of witch-branding extend beyond immediate physical violence, as victims may experience social exclusion, displacement, loss of livelihood or property, and lasting psychological distress. Existing legislation primarily operates through criminal punishment after an offence has occurred and offers comparatively limited mechanisms for rehabilitation, compensation or reintegration. The killing of Mangri Munda and her family in Odisha following accusations of witchcraft shows how deeply embedded beliefs and social structures can continue to facilitate violence despite formal legal prohibitions. Witch-hunting therefore cannot be understood exclusively as a problem of criminality, but as connected to gender inequality, economic disputes, control over resources and established forms of social authority. Legal intervention consequently needs to be accompanied by community education, public awareness and measures capable of addressing the social structures sustaining witch-branding.

From the feminist perspective, the limitation of existing anti-witch-hunting legislation is that it primarily responds to the visible consequences of persecution without confronting the conditions that produce accusations. Criminalizing assault, intimidation, or killing is surely necessary, but such measures do not by themselves address the gendered relations of power, control over knowledge and resources, or patriarchal forms of social authority through which women come to be identified as witches. Addressing witch-hunting requires a broader

framework that combines legal protection with survivor rehabilitation, community-based education, gender-sensitive governance and sustained efforts to challenge the structural inequalities underlying the practice. A comprehensive national framework could provide greater consistency in legal protection. Witch-hunting is not merely an isolated criminal act but a form of gendered violence embedded within wider androcentric systems of social and economic power.

Conclusion

This analytical study understands *Daini Pratha* beyond the mainstream understanding of witchcraft in tribal communities as a custom born out of superstition or lack of education. Even in academia, this topic is mainly tackled from an anthropological or sociological perspective. Exploring *Daini Pratha* from a core philosophical lens, especially a feminist philosophical lens, is an under-explored domain; so, this paper explores the heavily gendered undertone of this violent custom through a feminist theoretical framework.

Through historical and ethnographic materials discussed, this paper discusses how the practice developed at the complex crossroads of Tantric tradition, intercommunal connection between indigenous communities and dominant societies, the patriarchal belief system within these tribal communities along with gender relations, kinship structures, economic tension, and religious institutionalism. There is no single origin story behind witch-hunting among indigenous communities. As popular belief suggests, colonialism did not create this practice, but it definitely affected the circumstances and forms through which witch hunting is practiced, though the gendered character remained throughout the timeline.

The gendered characteristic of *Daini Pratha* reveals that women are vulnerable, especially when they occupy forbidden spaces of knowledge, authority, property, or financial autonomy, domains manipulated by men. The male witch-finder versus the female *Daini* sets a distinct boundary between legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowledge. Women's knowledge of healing, herbs, reproduction, spirits and rituals challenged male authority and monopoly, and was thus represented as dangerous. Women's control over land, earnings and productive resources also came into conflict with male interests and patrilocality. Their attempts to practice political, religious, or economic autonomy became grounds for suspicion and, in some cases, witch-hunting.

Matilda Joselyn Gage's theory of witch-hunting provides the necessary framework for understanding these patterns. Though this comparison between medieval witch-hunting and *Daini Pratha* does not imply any similarity, Gage points out the repetitive mechanism through which women possessing knowledge, authority, and independence are villainized, and the violence against them finds moral ground. Her analysis shows us the potential to not view *Daini* merely as a supernatural evil woman, but as a carefully crafted socio-political category that helps patriarchy control and delegitimise female authority and standing.

The legal discussion is crucial in understanding that criminalisation alone cannot eliminate *Daini Pratha*. Surely, anti-witch-hunting laws are necessary, but their effectiveness is limited as long as the social structures producing accusations remain intact. Weak implementation, fear of community retaliation, lack of rehabilitation, and economic and social exclusion continue to create conditions in which women are vulnerable to derogatory customs like *Daini Pratha*, *Daini Pratha* is a violent belief system designed to act as the mechanism of social control for women. Reclaiming her does not romanticize witchcraft or the violence associated with it; rather, it asks questions: why female knowledge is dangerous, why women's independence is threatening, and why the protection of community morality costs women's mobility and integrity. This feminist interpretation of this taboo custom shifts the discussion of *Daini Pratha*

from superstition alone towards the hidden structures of knowledge, labour, property and power that together produce the figure of the “Daini”.

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