Witchcraft-related Cases in India during the Outbreak of Covid 19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In India, the belief in witches is a phenomenon linked to specific elements of both Hindu cults and the belief systems of some indigenous communities. The latter have retained specific characteristics, in which the magical elements and the relationship with evil powers, from which the belief in witchcraft practices derives, are of primary importance. In this paper, I aim to reflect on the historical-religious roots of witch-belief, without neglecting aspects related to the social dimension in which witch-hunting episodes occur. In doing so, I propose to highlight the power relations that are based on patriarchy (or the processes of patriarchalisation that have occurred in recent decades) and the phenomena of Hinduisation and indigenisation. Furthermore, I present an assessment of the incidence of the phenomenon in 2020, at a particularly dramatic historical moment, marked by the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic. The data presented are partial but significant as they are collected through the daily monitoring of India's leading English-language newspapers and some national and local Hindi-language newspapers.

KEYWORDS

Indian Witchcraft; Hindu Studies; Hindu Rituals; History of Religions; Indological Studies

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Introduction

On 21 November 2020, a 35-year-old woman living in the Bhilwara district, in Rajasthan, was accused of witchcraft and beaten with a grill; then, her wounds were cauterised with red-hot pliers. Members of the village took 5000 rupees from her to support the worship of a local deity and thus help the woman get rid of evil spirits (cf. Sharma, 2020). In the belief systems and folk tales of South Asia, the bodies of men and especially of women are considered a gateway for spirits to possess them, turning women into *dāyan*s or *churel*s (*cuṛail*s), that is witches.

The year 2020 was marked by the outbreak of the covid 19 epidemic, to which the Indian government responded with an extended lockdown, during which episodes of violence against most disadvantaged social groups multiplied. Among these, there were many women victims of witch-hunts, often belonging to the most economically and culturally disadvantaged social strata. The data presented in the first paragraphs of this paper were collected during 2020 by monitoring India's leading English-language newspapers, tabloids, and magazines and some (national and local) Hindi-language ones. Although partial, they are indicative of the historical moment, marked by the explosion of the Covid 19 pandemic. There does not appear to have been an exponential increase in witchcraft-related crimes and only a few of the incidents detected are explicitly connected to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, since in several episodes the witch-hunt is triggered by the appearance of a sudden illness, the possibility that some of them are connected to the spread of the pandemic cannot be excluded, although the authors of the articles have not explicitly emphasised these links.

In the last paragraphs, I attempt to trace some cultural coordinates in which these complex phenomena are embedded. The study of witchcraft-related practices and beliefs based both on an analysis of the power relations underlying these phenomena and on their historical-religious presuppositions, in some cases related to the increasing use of traditional indigenous healing methods, allows us to contextualise these phenomena within the systems on which they are built (cf. Kanato Chopy, 2020). Indeed, the dynamics associated with the relations between the power of words, representations, and individuals over other individuals only become meaningful against the backdrop of a network of social relations, within which they take place (cf. Tambiah, 1968: 202), i.e. the power structure within the village and the relationship between political, legal and religious power. This means questioning which individuals enjoy the right to attribute the evil words (the spells) to the witch, to perform the ritual performances and conduct the trial within the *panchayat* (*pañcāyata*, village council), and to exercise force and violence to carry out the punishment. Finally, the personal conflicts and torments that emerge from the narratives of the individuals involved cannot be overlooked in understanding the phenomenon (cf. Nabokov, 2000: 148). Thus, it seems possible to trace a series of elements that, due to their regular repetition, make it possible to hypothesise a theoretical model of the context, of how victims and accusers of witchcraft relate to each other and of the beliefs they refer to. The belief system in witchcraft is part of a discourse articulated over time, in which phenomena of contamination between Brahmanical and indigenous religiosity are reflected. In particular, the practice of witch-hunting brings out, in the contexts studied, aspects related to gender discrimination, subalternity relations, and socio-economic transformations taking place in contemporary communities. However, perhaps even these rational explanations may appear inadequate in the face of the non-predictability and irrationality inherent in episodes of witchcraft and witch-hunting. Bruce Kapferer (2002b) has described this lack of meaning with reference to the Sri Lankan context and summarised it in these words: 'Witchcraft and

sorcery may be symbolisations of processes or dynamics that, in fact, go beyond the limits of reason' (Kapferer, 2002a: 22).

Witchcraft and the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic

On 24 January 2021 in Shiv Nagar (Andhra Pradesh), a couple of teachers was convinced in the wake of the Covid-19 epidemic that the *kaliyuga* (the black age, the present era in which the *dharma*, i.e., the cosmic order, is decayed) as coming to an end and that they would be reborn at the beginning of *satyayuga* (the new "age of truth" when the *dharma* will be restored). In such a belief, they beheaded their two daughters in a ritual of witchcraft (cf. Pandey, 2021). A few months earlier, on 29th May 2020, at a time when the virus was spreading with greater intensity, in the rural village of Bandhahuda (Andhra Pradesh), the priest and witch doctor of Brahmāṇī Devī[1] temple beheaded with a billhook a farmer with whom he shared a room. The purpose of this human sacrifice was to put an end to the spread of the coronavirus. The *ojhā* claimed that the goddess herself appeared to him in a dream four days earlier, ordering him to carry out the ritual. Although the man later retracted his statement, citing trivial reasons for the act (cf. Mohanty, 2020) and alongside religious motives, other reasons emerge, which are part of the pandemic context and allow us to understand the climate in which the crime took place: the two had been having a dispute for a long time because of a group of mango trees, which the farmer allowed to grow to the point of occupying part of the temple area; in turn, the temple had not been visited by the faithful for months, due to the restrictions caused by the pandemic, with the consequence that the priest could not collect the fees to secure his subsistence.

Another episode where witchcraft beliefs and the Covid pandemic seem to be strictly linked was reported on May 2021, during the second wave. When Indian hospitals suffered a severe lack of oxygen, many people turned to traditional healers and witch doctors for treatment (cf. Giordano, 2021). Thus, in the rural district of Nandurbar, Maharashtra, the elderly Jawaharlal Dharma was branded by a witch doctor with a hot iron rod (cf. Wollen and Lateef, 2021). It is part of the traditional beliefs related to witchcraft that branding the diseased part of the body, as a form of purification (cf. Douglas, 1966: 103 ss.), will cure the 'illness'. About a year earlier in Cheranalloor, a suburb of Kochi (Kerala), Hajira Beevi was arrested on charges of practising witchcraft to cure Covid-19.[2] Indeed, the woman was known to practise traditional forms of medicine, consisting mainly of the recitation of magical formulas and the use of powders and mixtures belonging to the culture of the *mantravādi*s, 'experts of *mantra*s', i.e. the tantric exorcists or witches initiates into magic (cf. Tarabout, 1994; 2000). These cases highlight the importance of exorcistic healing practices in episodes of spirit possession/witchcraft and their prevalence among certain strata of Indian society (cf. Dwyer, 2002); moreover, they testify how the use of these practices is renewed in the face of the emergence of new diseases, providing answers that relocate two ancient cultural motifs: that of purity and ritual purification (cf. Douglas 1966; Dumont and Pocock, 1959; Torella, 2015), as well as that of illness conceived as a manifestation of possession by evil spirits (cf. Freed and Freed, 1964) in new contexts.

The data collected do not record an exponential growth in cases: only in certain territories, did the witchcraft-related violence and murder cases increase during the pandemic.

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[1] She is considered one of the Sapta Mātṛkas, i.e., the seven mothers who each represent a particular aspect of the female energy (*śakti*) linked with certain male deities (cf. Kinsley, 1988: 151 ss.; Hatley 2021: 83 ss).
[2] Cf. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/woman-held-for-occult-practices/article31110770.ece. On witchcraft-related beliefs in Kerala see Saletore, 1981: 93ff. and Tarabout, 1994.

Nevertheless, in some cases, a link can be detected between the pandemic and witchcraft practices because such beliefs and the performance of black magic rituals provide, particularly among some indigenous communities, a cultural model for channelling the fears of the communities involved[3], thanks to the identification of a scapegoat (cf. Girard 2011: 26; Chaudhuri, 2012, 2013). In India, too, the episodes of witch-hunts reproduce the device of an organic phenomenon aimed at maintaining moral and social order and through which social antagonisms can be resolved in a village context. Here conflictual relations between individuals (e.g., around land inherited and managed by women) cannot be resolved through appeal to state law, and illness and death have the importance of a fact that is not only natural but social (cf. Evans-Pritchard, 1976: 25). Moreover, the presence of a witch in the village allows for the resolution of gender conflicts, whereby the responsibility for extramarital sexual relations (or the denial of sexual favours) is shifted onto the alleged witches, often widows considered as afflicted by the impossibility of fulfilling their sexual desires within a legitimate marital relationship. Ritual practices and belief systems that are related to witchcraft often generate, and at the same time are influenced by, gender inequalities. The changes and conflicts inherent in the transfer of land tenure rights, especially in some states (cf. Carstairs, 1983 and Kelkar and Nathan, 1991), or in the business of moneylending, as in some peasant villages in Karnataka (cf. Epstein 1967 [1959]) have strengthened patriarchal-oriented community ties and gender violence.

Finally, regarding the equation between the spread of the pandemic and accusations of witchcraft directed towards women, it seems significant that a popular nickname for the coronavirus was already established in the early months: *dāyan*. The word 'quarantine', rendered in Hindi as *kvāranṭāin* or *kvāranṭīn*, was transformed in *korona daeen* (*koronā dāīn*), but 'due to its phonetic similarity, people in India have largely started referring to the infection as *dayan* (witch)' (Kavish, 2020). Thus, the virus was identified with the female witch either in social media or in newspapers (cf. Singh, 2021; Kavish, 2020). Furthermore, among the episodes dedicated to the figure of the *churel* on the YouTube channel Dream Stories TV, one was released on 21 February 2020 (cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qT46lhezTk) entitled *Korona vaayaras kee chudail* ('The witch of the Coronavirus'). These cartoons, mostly watched by adult male audiences, are often set in rural villages, and portray the *churel* as the stereotypical evil woman. In this case, gender stereotypes are joined by new elements related to the accusation of Chinese people of spreading the coronavirus. Such observations remind us of the social causes of the link between women, magic (and witchcraft) already highlighted by Hubert and Mauss (1902–1903: 23–24).

Analysis of collected data

The data collected are significant but partial for several reasons. First, the analysis is limited to those incidents that received media coverage. In addition, the pandemic situation and the restrictions imposed by the lockdown forced many villages into isolation for weeks. We can easily suppose that some incidents could not be reported in the media. Finally, it should be considered that often witchcraft-related violence or murders, especially in Indian States that have recently adopted specific laws to protect victims or that have not yet approved them, are not reported, partially because of the inertia of the local police, partially because the

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[3] Already in the first months of the spread of the pandemic, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights had drawn up a document highlighting the emergence of practices directed against people with albinism, such as scapegoating and accusations of witchcraft. See https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Albinism/COVID-19_and_Harmful_Practices.pdf.

victims, due to the absence of legislative protection, are forced to live with their accusers, who are often members of the same village or even relatives. The data collected lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Some episodes seem to be directly linked to the pandemic because the cases detected are mainly concentrated in the summer months, during which the infections and deaths due to Covid 19 have multiplied, reaching a peak in September. Nevertheless, one must consider the fact that the statistics for previous years confirm that during the summer months there is an increase in witchcraft-related episodes.

A first analysis of the data (Table 1) allows us an estimation of the number of witchcraft-related murders and a comparison with the latest available official data for 2019, released by the National Crime Records Bureau of India. Overall, homicides committed in 2020 (66) seem to have decreased compared to 2019 (102), approaching the results of the previous years: 2018 (63) and 2017 (73). In some States, the witch-hunt episodes seem to have decreased, even considerably (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh); in others, they have increased (Jharkhand, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh). In general, most of the incidents occurred in rural areas, involving members of disadvantaged social groups (Scheduled castes). Moreover, in most reported cases, the trigger appears to be an unexplained illness suffered by a member of the village or, more frequently, a relative of the 'witch'. In the forms of ethnomedicine specific to the cultures examined, illness is understood as a form of possession for which a witch is responsible. Now, although few of the incidents detected are explicitly connected to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, others, in my opinion, could be linked to it. In fact, in many episodes the trigger for the accusation of witchcraft are diseases, often mysterious or sudden, that affected members of the accused's family or village, leading to their death. Working on the data collected, I also elaborated a gender-disaggregated picture of involved individuals. This highlights how the incidents taken into consideration confirm that the phenomenon mainly affects women and often the witch is identified as a woman belonging to the accuser's family. As Epstein (1959: 136) already observed: 'an exorcist names the witch responsible only if he is well acquainted with the social relationship between the victim and the person he accuses of witchcraft. If he is an outsider, he usually points only to a category of people among whom the witch may be found, for instance, that the witch is a woman living in the same village as the victim'. It is even more worrying that the data also show the involvement of underage victims, often children.

Table 1[4]		M Males F Females U Underage	
States	Individuals involved in Witchcraft-related Cases including Murders 2020	Murders 2020	Murders 2019
Andhra Pradesh	5 (5M)	5 (5M)	2
Assam	10 (3F 4M 3U)	3 (1F 2M)	2
Bihar	4 (4F)	0	15

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[4] By the time this study was completed, the Indian Government (see https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-in-india-table-addtional-table-and-chapter-contents?field_date_value[value][year]=2020&field_select_table_title_of_crim_value=All&items_per_page=All) released the official figures of witchcraft murders in 2020. The numbers, as expected, are higher than the cases that had been counted by working exclusively with media sources. The total turns out to be 88 murders. The discrepancies can have several explanations: cases that initially led to the hospitalisation of the victim may have ended in the victim's death; complaints initially registered as witchcraft may have been changed to other crimes after the facts were established, and vice versa; finally, some cases, particularly in Chhattisgarh, probably did not find coverage into the media consulted.

Chhattisgarh	5 (2F 3M)	3 (3M)	22
Gujarat	10 (9F 1M)	1 (1F)	3
Jharkhand	34 (23F 10M 1U)	25 (17F 7M 1U)	15
Madhya Pradesh	3 (2M 1U)	2 (2M)	16
Maharashtra	5 (2F 3M)	5 (2F 3M)	2
Meghalaya	10 (10M)	2 (2M)	1
Odisha	20 (9F 8M 3U)	14 (6F 6M 2U)	13
Rajasthan	1 (1F)	0	1
Telangana	3 (1F 2M)	3 (1F 2M)	1
Uttar Pradesh	1 (1U)	1 (1U)	9
West Bengal	5 (3F 2M)	2 (2M)	0
TOTAL	116 (61F 55M)	66 (32F 34M)	102

The phenomenon and regulatory responses

*Dāyan*s and *churel*s, commonly identified as witches, are female entities, halfway between the corporeal and incorporeal dimensions, similar in some respects to other figures in the religious imagery of Greek and Latin traditions (such as *lamiae*, *empusae*, and *succubi*), as well as Persian and Muslim cultures. They are mostly considered to be the spirits of women who died during pregnancy or childbirth,[5] or who have suffered violence at the hands of their relatives, particularly members of the male branch. The witchy female spirits return to the world of the living, possessing women (or more rarely men), to take revenge on the men who oppressed them or to unleash their jealousy against pregnant women.

In recent years, the stories and figures that populate Indian imagery related to witchcraft beliefs have become increasingly popular, mixing feminist readings and pop revisitations, particularly in film and television productions, and in digital animation (cf. Spanò, 2021). This growing popularity of the witch figure seems to be linked to a significant increase in witch-hunting cases in recent years and has led to a growing interest among scholars (cf. Alam and Raj, 2017). Therefore, according to official reports, from 2000 to 2015, about 2,500 women have been victims of witch-hunts, so witchcraft-related murders seem to have peaked between 2005 and 2011 (cf. Kelkar and Nathan, 2020: 47-48). In recent decades, Indian states where these phenomena are most virulent have passed *ad hoc* laws against witch-hunting to stop these practices, while the central government has been slow to give the country a unified national law. In particular, the laws of Assam and Karnataka incorporate the ban on witch-hunting into a broader law aimed at combating the spread of superstitions and black magic. Among the states with a high number of witchcraft cases, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat are the only ones that have not yet passed a law to combat the phenomenon.[6]

The power of words. An analysis of the terms denoting the witch from a historical-religious perspective

Evidence of the belief in forms of black magic or witchcraft (in Sanskrit *abhicāra*, cf. Ferrara, 2021: 225–226) and in human agents practicing it dates back to the Vedic age: in the *Atharvaveda* (*AV*) several hymns strive to counter and destroy the power of the *yātudhā́na*

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[5] Sterility, as well as pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation, are traditionally considered to be contaminating. During childbirth or marriage, the woman is particularly exposed to the gaze of other women and of those who practise evil eye (cf. Babb 1975: 206).

[6] Cf. https://ahmedabadmirror.indiatimes.com/ahmedabad/cover-story/widows-branded-witches-need-shield-of-specific-laws/articleshow/80607639.cms.

('the one who does magic', evil spirit, sorcerer) and *yātudhā́nī* (female evil spirit or witch, cf. Spanò, 2019 and 2021). Another term to identify the witch is *kṛtyā́*, 'the one who acts, whose action has precise (negative) consequences'. As an effective action or 'material action' (cf. Hubert and Mauss, 1902–1903: 14), the term *kṛtyā* also defines the effigy used in magical rites to transfer the curse (cf. e.g., *AV* IV, 17).[7] From these Sanskrit words, they derive today's terms such as *kālajādū* or *jādūṭonā* ('black magic', 'witchcraft').[8]

Contemporary Indian cultures provide various terms (cf. Saletore, 1981: 121–122) to denote the witches. However, despite the differences and specificities that each folkloric tradition highlights, we can try to identify some of the most common ones: *churel, dāyan* or *ḍāini, ṭonhī,* and *bisāhī*. In particular, the term *dāyan* (or *ḍain* in Bengali) derives from the Sanskrit noun *ḍākinī*, which denotes a demonic female being already referred to in some Atharvanic hymns (cf. Spanò, 2020: 171). In modern traditions, the *ḍākinī*s, often assimilated into the *yoginī*s, are believed to attack children casting on them the evil eye and consuming their livers (cf. Platts, 1884, *s.v.*). Their characteristics, reflected in contemporary beliefs around witches (cf. Young, 2018: 143ff. and Herrmann-Pfandt 1996), include both the ability to fly, for which it has been proposed that the noun *ḍākinī* derives from the verbal root *ḍi-* or *ḍai-*, 'to fly', and the ability to announce their presence by making a loud noise, for which another etymological hypothesis derives the term from the root *ḍam-*, 'to resound' (cf. White, 2006: 204 ff.). Regarding the term *bisāhī*, it derives from the noun *bis*, 'poison' (cf. Peterson, 2009, *s.v.*), closely related to the Sanskrit *viṣa*. Moreover, regarding the recurrent humiliation of the 'witch' forced to ingest excrement, we recall that in Sanskrit the feminine noun *viṣ* means 'dung, excrement, feces'. In the Oraon language, the term *bisī* (lit. 'poisoned morsel') indicates a knotted hair or a fragment of poisoned bone that the witch throws into the victim's food (cf. Grignard 1924, *s.v.*).

From the Sanskrit verbal root *kṛ-*, 'to do' (whence *cāra*, 'remedy or cure' and 'preparing a remedy, curing') probably derives the term *churel*. The *churel*s are described as female spirits with a youthful appearance, whose charm subdues men. In the most ancient Indian religious tradition, this characteristic refers both to the Apsaras, beautiful water nymphs bewitching men (cf. *AV* II: 2, 5) and to the demonic Arāti, 'Rancour', who during the night takes the form of a naked woman and visits men in dreams, upsetting their minds (cf. *AV* V: 7, 8 and *AVP* V: 26, 3). Linked to magical contexts (cf. Olivelle 1998; Obeyesekere 1984), a significant element of the narratives around them is the role of their dredd or ruffled hair, which they wear styled in a long braid (*cotī*); they can use it as a kind of additional limb, either by lengthening or retracting it. The *churel*s have long black nails and crooked eyes, and mostly, feet turned backwards. This is perceived both as the distinctive sign by which they can be recognised, and, according to popular belief, the witch's tool for deceiving men: when they meet her footsteps, run away, believing they are getting away from her, but are inexorably drawn in. The feet turned backwards disturb men's imagination as early as the Vedic period (cf. *AV* VIII: 6, 15) because they subvert the clear distinction between front and back and symbolically the gender roles. *Churel*s and *dāyan*s dwell in the trees, like the *yakṣiṇī*s, charming and sensual nymphs, who make men fall in love with them (cf. Coomaraswamy, 1993: 83–87). They are indistinguishable from other women by day;[9] at

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[7] See Henry, 1909: 159–160, Oldenberg, 1988 [1912]: 132–133, Saletore, 1981: 55ff. and Orlandi and Sani, 1997: 92; 142–143. On the negative meanings of the root *kṛ* cf. Renou, 1939: 173. For a discussion of the terms see Parpola 2015: 132–133.

[8] On the overlap between magical thinking and witch hunts, cf. Girard, 1989: 48 and 52 ff. On the contemporary debate concerning the notion of magic, see Noegel et al. 2003: 9 ff.

[9] Although women with social skills are the most suspect. 'Witches' are often the women with the strongest personalities, the most quarrelsome and problematic, as Skaria (1997, p. 120) points out about the Bhīls. Among the Bodos, the witches are often identified as those women who maintain a code of conduct that is at odds with widespread communal norms (cf. Borah, Das 2019, p. 109).

night they can transform themselves into cats or other animals (cf. Joshi *et al.* 2006: 147–148; Dey, 2019) and gather naked in the cremation grounds (cf. Babb 1975: 203–206 and Mac-Machado 2010: 194), where they consume raw meat, according to a *topos* that dates to the Vedic literature (cf. *AV* V: 31, 1; VIII: 4, 1). When a man succumbs to their charms and is possessed by them, certain signs make it evident, such as a high fever and a constant terror expression on the face, accompanied by an uncontrollable shaking of the head (cf. Perez, 2004: 139). Witches are also imagined as women hungry for their victims' blood or life force (*prāṇa*),[10] who are mainly chosen from among the males. Behind witches' folk tales, we have some evidence of the social and psychological dynamics that have shaped historical representations of women in Indian culture. The fear of witches' gaze[11] and the preoccupation with food are two constants in witches' narratives (cf. Desai, 2008). The power of the gaze is extended in the belief that witches can cause paralysis by shooting invisible arrows. From a psychological perspective, Malgorzata Sacha, drawing on Jaspers' theories, has pointed out how the phenomenon of paralysis linked to episodes of witchcraft in India can be traced back to a quasi-psychotic mental condition or transient paranoia that reactivates delusional ideas or fantasies (Sacha, 2021: 185). Thus, on 24 Jun 2020, in the village of Been (Jamtara district, Jharkhand) a 62-year-old woman was found dead near the village pond, killed by her relatives, with whom she had a dispute over land ownership after one of the family members suffered paralysis.[12]

The victims of witchcraft accusations are mostly elderly women, often widows,[13] or young women who are believed to threaten men to suck their sexual vigour, involving them in extramarital affairs. This fear finds mythical expression in the episode of the illicit relationship between Indra, the king of the gods, and Ahalyā, wife of the wise Gautama. As a punishment, Indra undergoes a process of feminisation. Depending on the versions, it consists in the loss of his testicles or in the fact that his body, subjugated by the lust of possessing Ahalyā's vagina (*bhaga*), will be covered with a thousand openings like vaginas (*sahasrabhagavat*), while his genitals will fall out.

However, the physiognomy and powers of the witches were defined during the evolution of Indian religious history, In the middle of the 1st millennium CE new forms of worship and new rituals began to spread with the rise of the two currents of Tantrism and Śaktism (cf. Davidson, 2017), from north-eastern regions towards the central ones, leaving mostly excluded regions located south (cf. Lorenzen, 2002: 26). This leads to the hypothesis that witch-related beliefs represent a set of convictions that originated quite recently, grafting onto the religious systems of the various communities taken into consideration, thus shaping a set of beliefs with strong similarities. Compared to the various figures in charge of the administration of the sacred in these populations, the 'witch doctors' have appeared more recently (cf. Rahmann 1959: 720–721 and 728 ff.).

Some scholars (cf. Gonda 1965: 66) have assumed that the belief in witches derives from the spread of Śaktism beliefs, especially centred around the terrifying aspect (*raudrarūpa*) of feminine Energy or Power (Śakti), in western Assam and Bengal. The emergence of these

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[10] Already in *AV* VIII, 2, 26 witchcraft (*abhicāra*) was associated with the loss of the vital spirit (*ásu*).

[11] See Fuller, 2004: 237 and Thurston, 1912: 109–120. Among the Bhīls, see Mac-Machado, 2010: 199. Already in the Vedic world, the gaze and the eye assume in some cases a sinister value, cf. Gonda, 1969: 33ff.

[12] Cf. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/elderly-woman-killed-over-witchcraft-suspicion-in-jamtara/articleshow/76737203.cms

[13] Among the many episodes registered, see https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ajmer/woman-beaten-for-witchcraft-case-registered/articleshow/80088095.cms.

currents, which might have connections with the female cults ascribed to the Indus Valley cultures (cf. Parpola, 1999: 102 ff., 2002, 2015), influenced the evolution and spread of belief in witchcraft. Traces of cults of the Goddess figure have been hypothesised in those communities that were later influenced by Hindu religiosity. In this phylogenetic perspective, the emergence of Tantra and Śākta religious systems may have been determined by a process of cross-contamination and mutual lending between Brahmanical religiosity and an ample range of autochthonous local magical beliefs and practices (cf. Sarkar 2017: 137 ff.; Lorenzen, 2002; Padoux, 2002). Thus, in Assam the spread of the Goddess' cult could be linked with the religious environment influenced by the beliefs of populations of Mongolian and Sino-Tibetan origin (cf. Gonda, 1965: 67), so that Kāmākhyā, the goddess of Desire, is often linked with black magic practices, and her *yantra* is largely used in witchcraft rites (cf. Urban, 2001: 778 and Lussana, 2015). Actually, some forms of celebration in honour of the goddess can be interpreted as genuine witchcraft rituals, and the goddess herself, when manifesting as Kālī, displays several characteristics, such as flight and the ability to change her appearance at will, that are peculiar to witches in the Indian traditions (cf. Sarkar, 2017: 52 and 130). Within tantric beliefs, magic and witchcraft rituals centred on the use of diagrams (*yantra*s), magic formulas (*mantra*s), and hand or finger gestures (*mudrā*s, lit. 'seals') became central (cf. Roy, 1927–28; Gonda, 1963: 265; Saletore, 1981: 8ff.). Witches are said to use these ritual means as weapons to subjugate and control the spirits. On 21 December 2020 in Kandali village (Maharashtra), a witchcraft accusation was registered against unknown persons. They were accused of practising black magic (*karnī pūjā*) with the purpose of destroying the harvest of an onion field. The proof was the finding of a sheet of paper with some magic formulas written on it, lemons, eggs, coconuts,[14] and costume jewellery, smeared with *haldī* (turmeric) and *kumkum* (vermilion).[15]

Although belonging to different linguistic groups, the belief systems of the indigenous communities (*ādivāsī*s), particularly of some regions of North-Eastern and Central India (the so-called Tribal Belt), share similar ideas and practices about various female beings and specific figures in charge of witches' recognition. Although their functions are not perfectly overlapping (cf. Rahmann, 1959: 704–705; Smith, 2006: 143 and 528), 'witch doctors' and 'witch detectors' are variously referred to, according to the communities and languages of reference, by the terms *ojhā*, *baiga*, *janguru*, *bhagat*, or *sokha.* They are mostly men (but also, as in Assam, women) and take part in the *panchayat* (village council). Having the task of recognising witches, witch doctors can thus cure those who have been cursed or ascertain whether a person has died as a result of witchcraft. Once the witch has been identified, in most cases as responsible for infant deaths or the illness of her relatives (particularly the male axis), the public trial by the *panchayat* follows: the accused is asked to admit her guilt and sometimes a penalty is imposed, consisting of the payment of a fine or an order to leave the village. Nevertheless, most of the time the 'witch' is tortured, beaten, and not infrequently killed. Certain forms of torture are inflicted almost exclusively on women: the witch is often forced to parade naked or half-naked through the village streets or to drink urine and swallow faeces[16], and her hair is shaved in the belief that her powers must be neutralised. The coercion to coprophagy can be related to the folkloric imagery that links the witch's repugnant appearance with illness and, therefore, with faeces: for example, among the

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[14] On coconut and religious/magical practices see Uchiyamada, 1998: 178. On the ritual use of lemons cf. Mills *et al.* 2003: 639 and Babb, 1975: 136-137. Among the Bodos cf. Dey, 2019: 62, among the Oraons, see Joshi *et al.* 2006: 148.

[15] They also spread weedkiller over part of the field! See https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/rural-cops-probe-witchcraft-allegations/articleshow/79830409.cms.

[16] For instance, on 4 May 2020 three women, related to each other and suspected of being *dāyan*s, were forced to drink urine and eat excrement in the village of Dakrama, in Bihar (cf. Pandey, 2020).

Santals witches are believed to eat their excrement, so as a form of humiliation/purification witches are forced to eat excrement. To 'cure' sterility, a 'disease' that is commonly assigned to the evil gaze of a witch, the *ojhā*s force the women to eat the umbilical cord of a child (or a black kid) mixed with human and animal excrement (cf. Carrin-Bouez, 1991: 55; 64).

Therefore, today's belief in witchcraft and the representation of witches in the popular imagination are the results of a complex process. They derive from myths, figures, and beliefs linked to Vedic and Brahmanical religiosity, which have found new meanings through contamination with the belief systems of indigenous communities. Moreover, the common background of a set of ideas spread in a geographical area stretching from the Middle East to India should not be forgotten. This genetic complexity implies a whole series of difficulties in establishing the moments of contact and borrowing that have occurred both horizontally from a geographical point of view and vertically from a historical point of view in different directions.

Elements for a unified reading scheme: The setting and the victims of witch-hunting

Rituals, torture, and murders related to witchcraft mostly affect some specific areas of the Indian territory, such as the Chota Nagpur Plateau area, with a strong presence of indigenous subaltern elements. These territories[17] are inhabited with a certain continuity by groups united by beliefs and practices related to witchcraft. Nevertheless, these communities belong to different linguistic groups: Muṇḍa, of which the two main groups are those of the Kharias and the Santals (cf. Konow, 1942: 160ff); Draviḍic: Oraons or Kurukhs (cf. Babb, 1975; Joshi et al. 2006; MacDonald, 2005 and MacDonald, 2021), Gonds (cf. Sundar, 1997, 2001 and Bhagvat, 1972), Baigas;[18] Indo-Aryan: Bhīls (cf. Ram, 1965: 26–27; Kumar, 1997; Skaria, 1997; Snodgrass, 2008; Mac-Machado, 2010; Sinha Kapur, 2020); Sino-Tibetan: Bodos, Rabhas, and Misings (cf. Mosahary, 1983; Charan, 2012; Das, 2018; Borah and Das, 2019: 106ff.; Dey, 2019; Konwar and Swargiari, 2015). Geographical and territorial continuity partly explains the similarities between beliefs and the reasons why cases of witchcraft are mostly concentrated in these regions, even considering the differences not only regional but also between human groups present in the same geographical area (cf. Khanato Chopy, 2020).

Most of the documented witch-hunting episodes occur in small rural villages characterised by a social structure strongly linked to traditions and community ties, and economically depressed.[19] These communities have been affected by modernisation and globalisation, with the consequence that groups of economic migrants have emerged,[20] but processes of indigenisation (cf. Mukherji and Sengupta, 2004) have also taken place. It seems that, due to the absence of men forced to migrate, patriarchal structures were strengthened within the

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[17] On witchcraft beliefs of the Jharkhand communities, see Roy 1998. See also Suresh 2020 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmZV371th3M. On Chhattisgarh see the video realised by New Delhi Television, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSNKuIArnbk. On West Bengal cf. Baruya 2005.

[18] Due to the central role within the Baigas' belief system of practices and rituals aimed at combating witchcraft, for many indigenous groups *Baigas* means 'witch-doctors'. In Madhya Pradesh Baigas are also known by the name of Pandas (which also designates the magician-shaman with divinatory powers). See Mohanty, 2004: 24 ff.; Rahmann 1956: 700 ff.; Fuchs, 1978.

[19] In Andhra Pradesh, most of the cases reported in 2020 occurred in Vizianagaram district (with the lowest literacy rate in the state) and in Srikakulam district (with the highest rural population rate in the state). For the connection between capitalist globalization and gender bias in witchcraft accusations see Federici, 2018.

[20] See Nath, 2014 for economic migration processes involving Oraon people,

villages, leading to a widening of gender inequalities and an increase in witchcraft accusations. The latter especially involve women who devote themselves to the care of their family of origin,[21] 'neglecting' the time expected for the care of their husband and children (cf. Kelkar and Nathan, 1991: 98). These phenomena are also supported by the process of "Hinduisation" of indigenous societies. This has resulted in a weakening of the position of women within these communities and their greater exposure to violence by men (cf. Mullick, 2000: 339–340; Das, 2018; Fernandes, 2006). Yet, these episodes may also be connected to the belief, for example among the Santals, that the bride, after marriage, can be followed by the *bonga* (spirit or power) of the parents' house. The *bonga*, if not appeased and sent back, is said to be responsible for mysterious illnesses or may even cause the death of the husband and the husband's family (cf. Konow, 1942: 171). These episodes confirm the role that the woman is intended to play within the traditional Indian family. She must abandon her ties with her family of origin and devote herself entirely to the care of her husband and her new family members and children. The changes that have affected the so-called *ādivāsī* communities have pushed some groups to defend their culture and traditions. Far from urban centres and therefore limited in their access to health services, villagers often turn to traditional therapeutic practices (cf. Jalan, 2021), whereby anything that cannot be explained is immediately perceived as the result of black magic or witchcraft. The Sanskritisation and Hinduisation phenomena also explain the contemporary spread of witchcraft manuals among subaltern social groups that draw on the cultured Brahmanical tradition linked to Tantrism. These manuals, defining 'witchcraft' as *indrajāla*, 'Indra's net', or *indrajālavidyā*, 'science of magic art', explain the techniques for acquiring magical powers (*siddhi*s) and gaining "money, wisdom, fame, offspring, victory over the enemy – whatever you want, everything will come true" (cf. Karp, 2019: 15).

Suspicions and accusations arise when there is an unexpected event within the village, such as illness or death involving domestic animals or persons (most often male); the accusers, in turn, are almost always male and members of the family of the 'witch'. The victims of the accusation may be men or the whole couple, especially if elderly, but more often, they are women, widows, or old. In the course of the religious history of South Asia, widows have been progressively stigmatised as being responsible for the death of their husbands, or as impure and bearers of bad luck. They were forced to live isolated in the *āśrama*s, devoting themselves to asceticism; however, as they were excluded from inheritance, without means of support, they were often forced into prostitution (cf. Bosch, 1995: 184ff.). The passing of laws to protect them means that widows have gradually become eligible to inherit their husband's estates. In this way, they can enjoy the property, often land. However, the acquirement of a means of economic subsistence that makes them autonomous and independent from their husband's families, gives rise to gender conflicts within patriarchal or patriarchalised cultures.[22]

Conclusions

In a 1975 essay, Obeyesekere, noting the low percentage of premeditated violent crimes committed in Sri Lanka, interpreted the use of witchcraft as a form of premeditated violent crime, which allowed to channel anger and aggression, providing a functional and cultural,

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[21] On 17 August 2020 Geeta Devi was accused by her father-in-law and bludgeoned to death in the Jahrkhandi village of Khesnaro, while returning to the house of her acquired relatives after staying in that of her family of origin (cf. https://www.livehindustan.com/jharkhand/story-jharkhand-a-woman-who-reached-her-in-law-house-by-her-maternal-uncle-was-called-a-witch-and-beaten-to-death-in-front-of-her-brother-3425696.html).
[22] Nevertheless, conflicts about land are also linked with indigenous religious beliefs, e.g., in Jharkand (cf. Proietti, 2021: 176).

ultimately 'rational' alternative, which allowed to procrastinate the outbreak of violence. However, it seems that a distinction must be made between witchcraft as a belief system and witch-hunting episodes as such. As we have seen, there are elements of 'rationality' in the practice of witchcraft and in general in the belief systems connected to it, which can be traced back to precise historical causes and can be declined on several levels (religious, gender, social, etc.). And yet, in many of the cases taken into consideration, as already stated by Skaria (1997), 'gratuitous violence' seems to prevail. It is linked, rather than to the reciprocity, to the unpredictability inherent in the aggressiveness unleashed by the 'witches'. Unpredictability concerns the perception of those who are within such belief systems, and it is followed up, in an equally 'gratuitous' manner, by the episodes of witch-hunting. The accusation of witchcraft is made through the authority of the *ojhā* and the involvement of the village members. It is followed by the immediate outbreak of a series of violent acts against the accused person, representing the culturally legitimised instrument to proceed to the elimination of the cause (the 'witch') of the problems that endanger community cohesion. In this way, witches are the personification of hostile actions or events, the occurrence of which often cannot be predicted. This lack of meaning in witch-hunts, already highlighted by Kapferer, is intertwined with a dynamic that has strong cultural connotations. As already posited by Mauss, witch practices are almost always attributed to women and the terms denoting witches are always feminine: 'Even a male ghost attacks his victim in a feminine guise. The concept of witchcraft seems distinctly feminine in its associations' (Babb, 1975: 203). In India, witchcraft has been and is still in some cases associated with the terrifying aspects of Feminine Energy (Śakti) that permeates tantric religiosity and rituals. Thus, there are intersecting factors between the magical elements of Tantrism and those belonging to other local belief systems on which they are grafted, which impose themselves in the periods of insecurity theorised by Girard and demonstrated by Skaria (1997).

In the reported cases, where a connection has emerged between the spread of the pandemic and witch-hunting episodes, a phenomenon that has been witnessed in the past seems to be repeated. In fact, the impact of cholera pandemics - which occurred several times during the first half of the nineteenth century – either on the belief system and healing practices of some indigenous populations generated numerous witch hunts (cf. Harrison, 2020: 517; Arnold, 2020, 2022). The recent acts of violence related to the accusation of witchcraft can be seen as 'immediate' reparative actions, to exorcise the spread of the pandemic. All these elements have generated the episodes of violence that we have seen unfold in recent months.

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