EVIL EYE:
WITCH-HUNTS, GENDER RELATIONS, AND COVERT RESISTANCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY COLONIAL INDIA

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"I have cut the plantain grove,
I have taken off my clothes.
I have learnt from my mother-in-law
How to eat my husband.
On the hills the wind blows,
I have cut the thatching grass,
I have grown weary,
Weary of eating rice."[1]

INTRODUCTION

Spiritualism was central in Adivasi culture and was inexorably linked to gender relations.[2] Transgression against the norms of feminine behavior within a patriarchal society could result in persecution of these women by way of violent witch-hunts and execution. The term for "witch" varies from rural regions in the subcontinent, but for clarity, this paper will

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[1] Shashank Sinha. *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters: Situating Tribes in Gender Studies.* (Kolkata, India: Bhatkal and Sen, 2005), 60.

[2] Adivasi: collective term for tribes of the Indian subcontinent (Dip Kapoor. "Human Rights as Paradox and Equivocation in Contexts of Adivasi Dispossession in India." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 4 (August 2012): 416)

use the Bhili dialect's vocabulary to refer to the image of the Adivasi witch as *dakan*.[3] Gendered violence, gender as a colonizing tool, and resistance to British authority are all predicated on dimensions of power. The choice to subvert these structures through passive resistance against the oppressor resulted in the oppressed gaining marginal power for themselves. The *dakan* was a metaphor for obtaining a subversive form of authority with which Adivasi women could contest the power of their domineering patriarchal society, and resistance to civilizing legislation in the mid-19th century gave Adivasi men an avenue to express their frustrations caused by increased social tension and anti-colonial sentiment.

Before discussing the nature of power relations between Adivasi men and women and those between Adivasi and British colonizers, the shortcomings of the colonial archive must first be addressed. The British Empire was prolific in collecting knowledge about its colonies, and this knowledge always carried with it dimensions of power. The type of knowledge produced and disseminated was strictly controlled, so as to promote the British civilizing mission and justify the further subjugation of their colonial subjects.[4] The colonial archive was created to intentionally create a specific kind of knowledge, one that produced a one-dimensional image of the colonized. Certain perspectives were either never recorded in the first place or have not survived; the sources that have endured are not as accessible as the British archive. Therefore,

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[3]In Vasavi or Bhili dialect, the word *dakan/dako* means a woman who is regarded as a witch. In their worldview, certain women are stimulated by negative emotions, mainly by envy, causing harm, sickness, misfortune, economic loss, and death by casting the evil power. (Robert Gabriel Mac-Machado. "Witchcraft and Witchcraft Cleansing among the Vasava Bhils." Antrhopos 105, no. 1 (2010): 192)

[4]Thomas Richards. *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*. (London: Verso Books, 1993), 4-7.

the incompleteness of the archive means that one cannot take Imperial sources as the final word on what life was like in India during the mid-nineteenth century.

We must consider the evidence we do have, as well as can be inferred about power structures from the colonial period from the absence of evidence we do not have access to.[5] For our discussion, there are few records from the Adivasi perspective that are easily accessible; many are held in rural Indian libraries or are not digitized or translated. There are quotations from indigenous individuals in a few of the British sources, but the accuracy and selectivity of these must be questioned. Instead, this research relies on the decades of work conducted by scholars like Ajay Skaria and Shashank Sinha who were able to study original documents.

Acknowledging the lack of Adivasi sources in this paper is a necessary responsibility. If historians attempt to create only one version of the truth, other possible perspectives are silenced and eventually lost.[6] The effects of British attempts to promote a narrative through the regulation of knowledge collection and dissemination in India and the obstacles faced during this research process are evidence of this phenomenon. Guided by scholars who interpreted data that I do not have, my examination of power relations within gender and colonization is an attempt to augment knowledge of witch-hunts and their implications despite the limitations of the British archive.

NATURE OF SPIRITUALISM IN ADIVASI TRIBES

Contact between the physical and spiritual words was believed to be commonplace among rural populations in India

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[5] Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 18.

[6] John Arnold. *History: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 116.

where traditional Brahmanism was not observed. All misfortune in a village, such as diseases that affect humans or animals alike, was credited to be the cause of one of two sources; the rage of an evil spirit or the work of a witch or sorcerer. An evil spirit can be appeased through ritual, but a witch must be punished or driven from the village.[7] Magical spiritualism was not always accredited to the evil power of a witch. *Ojha*, or individuals who practiced white magic, was associated with being both socially and psychologically beneficial. Black magic practitioners, or *dain*, were associated with the maleficent will of the spirits whom they evoked.[8] The acceptance of certain individuals who were in regular contact with the spiritual realm was a cornerstone of traditional beliefs in Adivasi groups. Magic that was harnessed by the authority of spiritual entities for the use of male-centered activities, such as hunting, was encouraged in tribal communities. Male practitioners of magic, known as *dakinos* and *bhagats*, were accepted and even celebrated in Adivasi groups.[9] *Dakinos* and *bhagats* were permitted to contact the spiritual realm as their actions were often sanctioned by powerful male villagers. Since their abilities were recruited by men and for the purpose of serving male interests, there were few if any repercussions against the practice of magic by men. However prevalent contact with spirits was, acceptable access to spiritual power was segregated on the basis of gender and there existed a powerful taboo against women's interaction with the supernatural world. The gendered nature of spirituality in Adivasi religious practice precipitated the violence suffered by women who crossed the boundaries of this male-constructed taboo.

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[7] Shashank S. Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye': The Construction(s) of Witches in Colonial Chotanagpur." *Indian Historical Review* 33, no. 1 (January 2006), 128.
[8] Ibid, 129.
[9] Ajay, Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India." *Past & Present*, no. 155 (1997), 115.

The subordinate social and political status of women in Adivasi communities was reflected by their specific exclusion from the ritual sphere, as it was believed that direct female participation in religious activity would be destructive. Women were believed to take away the power of men who engaged spiritual assistance. For example, it was known that a man possessing supernatural powers would lose his abilities if he came into contact with a menstruating woman.[10] Furthermore, women were kept from personal participation in the spiritual sphere due to the belief that they were superior to men in the recitation of mantras and incantations, and therefore could win the favor of spirits more easily than men. Adivasi men feared the power women might gain from spirits would be used to the detriment of society or might threaten their authority. Women who refused to abide by religious taboos, or who were suspected to be in conversation with the spiritual realm, threatened the established patriarchal order of Adivasi society.[11] Though gendered elitism of the spiritual sphere predated British colonialism in India, the presence and policies of the colonizer would prove to complicate and deepen the tensions between men and women that would lead to continued violence against unruly women.

FEAR OF FEMALE SEXUALITY AND DAKANISM

The exclusion of women from the spiritual sphere was directly related to Adivasi fears surrounding the power of female sexuality. There prevailed a view that women could seduce evil spirits to wreak havoc on the lives of their enemies, therefore justifying the ban on female participation in all sacrifices or public religious expression. The taboo against women's participation in the spiritual sphere was meant to establish certain modes of acceptable feminine behavior and used gender

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[10] Ibid, 132.

[11] Sinha. *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters*. (Kolkata, India: Bhatkal and Sen, 2005), 57.

as an essential tool of discrimination.[12] While *dakino* and *bhagat* magic could be positively utilized and there were few sanctions against male practitioners of magic, *dakans*, or female witches, were seen to be evil women who used their power for violent ends. Additionally, *dakans* were supposed to work in secret, adding to men's fears about the power of female sexuality.[13] The mythology surrounding *dakans* supports Adivasi men's fear of women using their sexuality for evil. Maran Buru, the Supreme Being in Adivasi cosmology, was teaching witchcraft to men, but women received magical power as the result of trickery. Women are believed to possess strange, mysterious powers that allowed them to fool the Supreme Being, which was accredited to their compelling sexual allure.[14] Due to the perceived power of divine female sexuality combined with the secrecy surrounding it, men did not understand, and therefore feared, the actions of women who did not abide by their established patriarchal structure. Women who utilized their sexuality were subverting the power structure of Adivasi culture as it was one of few forms of power that men could not have access to.

Accusations of witchcraft and witch-hunts were a violent expression of men's fears surrounding female sexuality and were a reflection of gender tensions in Adivasi society. Witch-hunts came to serve as an institutional method of excreting social control over nonconformist women who refused to abide by the gender norms ascribed to them by the patriarchal structure of their communities. Violence against women accused of witchcraft was an attempt by males to reestablish masculine dominance of religious rites, norms of behavior, and other forms of societal power. Women who were suspected to or claimed to be in communication with spirits were seen as a great danger to the community and therefore were targeted by

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[12] Ibid, 55.

[13] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 117.

[14] Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 130-1.

men who feared a loss of masculine authority.[15] The 'evil influence' of women and their deviant intimacy with the spiritual realm was met by brutality and violence at the hands of men who wished to maintain control over community power and resources.[16] *Dakans* were believed to have an unquenchable sexual lust, even considered by some to be nymphomaniacs. Women sexually perverse by Adivasi standards were feared, because they were believed to inherently be evil and capable of black magic.[17] Driven by anxiety of losing their distinctly male power combined with a desire to keep women in physically and spiritually subservient social positions, witch accusations and persecutions became an essential method of gender control.

WITCH-HUNTS: IDENTIFICATION AND PUNISHMENT

Upon being persuaded that a *dakan* is practicing in their midst, indigenous village leaders must proceed to identify and punish the witch. However, due to their secretive nature, it could prove difficult to find a witch, as those engaged in dark magic are "extraordinarily good at public relations," indicating that a *dakan* was at her core a manipulative and deceptive woman.[18] As they were unlikely to catch the *dakan* in the midst of performing magic, witch-hunters therefore, had to rely on other indicators to uncover the threat within their village. The characteristics that raised or confirmed a community's suspicion of a particular woman being guilty of witchcraft were determined by the ideas of what constituted proper womanhood for Adivasis. Certain aspects are shared with the

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[15] Shamsher Alam and Aditya Raj. "The Academic Journey of Witchcraft Studies in India." *Man in India* 97, no. 21: 128.
[16] Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 140.
[17] Robert Gabriel Mac-Machado. "Witchcraft and Witchcraft Cleansing among the Vasava Bhils." *Antrhopos* 105, no. 2 (2010): 197
[18] Ibid.

European traditions of witchcraft, as seen in a reported instance of witchcraft in 1852; the suspected witch was "an elderly woman, of witchlike aspect and grotesque costume."[19] Factors such as age and physical abnormality often raised suspicion of witchcraft, though marital status nor economic position held significant influence in accusations. A woman's personality, more than her appearance or social standing, had the most impact on whether she would be rendered suspect of practicing dark magic. *Dakans* were identified as "the most notorious, quarrelsome, and troublesome woman in the family, or the one gifted with the longest broadest and sharpest tongue in the family"; independent and expressive women were most likely to be accused.[20] Accusations were centered around problematic behavior of certain types of women. Those who were outspoken or exhibited any personal autonomy posed a threat to males who sought to completely dominate women in all areas. Proper womanhood was decided by the patriarchy and perpetuated through violence against those who failed to fulfill their prescribed womanly obligations.

The type of women that were accused of witchcraft reveals the tension between genders and conflict over how women were meant to behave. The sight of a woman out at night "where she had no business to be," or examples of behavior in which a woman has not abided by patriarchal standards of a woman's proper place were enough to garner suspicion.[21] Physical deformities often indicated the presence of magical powers provoked fear in villagers, instead of serving as the trustworthy mother image that women were meant to occupy. Due to the nonconformist activities and appearance of accused witches, witch-hunts can be interpreted as an institu-

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[19] NA, "Witchcraft in India," *The Globe* (London, England): Oct. 29, 1852

[20] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 120.

[21] Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 138.

tionalized method of discrimination aimed at punishing divergent behavior in women. The attempt to purge 'evil influence' in the village via violent persecution demonstrates an effort to control women by punishing nonconformist activity.[22] These deviant women represented such a threat to the patriarchal structure of Adivasi communities and were viewed as even more dangerous due to their propensity for vindictiveness, that they had to be hunted and exterminated so that other women would learn to accept their subordinate position to men.[23] Essentially, those persecuted under the guise of practicing witchcraft were made examples of what could happen if a woman failed to perform her gender according to the rules decided by Adivasi men.

Once the presence of a *dakan* was suspected, a *bhagat* would be tasked with finding her identity and bringing her to the village officials for judgement. *Bhagats* were male spiritualists whose purpose was to find and exterminate witches.[24] A specific position within the community whose primary duty was to suppress unruly women is further evidence of male fear surrounding the power of female sexuality and the risk of female denial of their ascribed gender roles. The *bhagat* would go into a trance during which a spirit would take possession of him to expose which woman is guilty of performing witchcraft.[25] The accused woman would then undergo a series of tests to determine her guilt, the most common of which was swinging. The eyes of the *dakan* would be covered in a cloth containing chilies, as the glance of an enraged witch, or her 'evil eye,' was believed to cause serious bodily harm to whomever she looked upon. Also, it was believed that a true *dakan*

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[22] Ibid, 140-141.

[23] Mac-Machado. "Witchcraft and Witchcraft Cleansing among the Vasava Bhils," 196.

[24] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 109.

[25] Rudolf Rahmann. "Shamanistic and Related Phenomena in Northern and Middle India." *Anthropos* 54, no. 5/6 (1959): 689.

would not feel the pain of the chilies. She would then be strung by her feet over a lit fire for up to three days, or until she admitted to being a *dakan*. In one case, eight women were declared by a *bhagat* to be witches after an outbreak of cholera ravaged their village. Each of the women, some of whom were very young girls, underwent similar ill-treatment until they admitted to their charge and agreed to remove their spells.[26] There was no discrimination of punishment in accordance with age; the sentence of those suspected of subverting their ascribed femininity to claim illegitimate spiritual power from men was ubiquitous.

The swingings were not meant explicitly to kill the witch, as a *dakan* who died by swinging could become potentially even more powerful after her death and would be less likely to release her victim from illness. Instead, the purpose of the swingings was to test and punish a suspected *dakan* for her transgression against the victim as well as for unacceptable expression of femininity.[27] If a woman failed this test, she would then face execution at the hand of her neighbors. Even if a woman passed the test and was found to be innocent, the rage of the community about her insolence that led to the accusation remained. In one instance, when suspected *dakan* Kunku was released following her swinging, a relative of the victim refused to accept the judgment and killed her anyway.[28] Death in spite of proved innocence is symptomatic of the extreme gendered tensions between Adivasi men and unruly women who threaten the established order. Despite their innocence, the failure to perform their gender correctly caused such anger among the men in their community that they are still at danger of persecution.

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[26] Edward Tuite Dalton. *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. (Calcutta, India: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872), 200.
[27] Skaria. “Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India,” 124-5.
[28] Ibid, 129.

FEMININE ACCEPTANCE OF DAKANISM

Upon traveling throughout colonial India in 1864, Irish geologist Valentine Ball observed a strange phenomenon among the Adivasi women accused to be witches. In his book originally published in 1880, Ball writes, "It is a peculiarity here that the belief is so thorough that even those who are accused of being witches or sorcerers do not deny the impeachment, but accept the position readily with all its pains and penalties." [29] Accepting the role of *dakan* and therefore the subsequent punishment of murder by their fellow villagers raises the question of why women chose to identify with witchcraft even when the repercussions for being perceived as a witch were so severe. The exclusion from spiritual practices that were essential to Adivasi life, coupled with other gendered restrictions such as limited land rights, strict control of sexuality, and repressive taboos led to a societal devaluation of women. Exclusion and discrimination based on gender left Adivasi women with limited options to exercise any autonomy or power over their own lives. Participating in magic or accepting the position of *dakan* was one of few ways tribal women could gain agency.[30] The image of the *dakan* provided Adivasi women with a covert form of resistance to the exploitative, male-dominated society in which they lived, serving as "a fault-line along which social tensions could be articulated."[31] The existence of *dakans* in traditional beliefs as well as the violent reaction of men to suspected witches was proof of acknowledgment of power only women could hold, though it was illegitimate and unacceptable.[32] Acceptance of the title of *dakan* was a method of non-confrontational resistance to

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[29] Valentine Ball. *Tribal and Peasant Life in Nineteenth Century India.* 1880. (Darya Ganj, New Delhi: Usha Jain, 1985), 115.
[30] Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 133.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 132.

the patriarchal restrictions of Adivasi society and was a way for women to gain powerful agency in their communities, though it would most likely result in their violent death.

Religion was essential for Adivasi communities, but it was a man's religion. Women could only communicate with spirits through a male conduit. Adivasi women, for purposes evil or good, wanted to have equal access to the spiritual realm with men. In order to practice, women were forced into secrecy.[33] Furthermore, male control over female sexuality and women's lack of control over their bodily autonomy coupled with their exclusion from religious practice represents the total dominance of Adivasi men and the complete subordination of women.[34] The image of an otherwise powerless woman who could simply look upon an enemy and cause them bodily harm through the power of their evil eye was simultaneously a terrifying idea for men and a potentially empowering image for women.[35] Some women would claim the authority of the *dakan* by wearing ornaments or symbolic jewelry that openly indicated their authority independent of the patriarchal structure that dictated every aspect of their lives.[36] The display of their identity was a passive form of resistance to the practices that sought to expose, humiliate, and punish or murder subversive women. The public nature of their punishments compounded the ignominy of their accusation, and the acceptance of the role of *dakan* was a means to negate that indignity.[37]

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[33] Sinha. *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters.* (Kolkata, India: Bhatkal and Sen, 2005), 61.
[34] Ibid, 64.
[35] NA, "Survival of Superstition in India," *The Star* (Guernsey, England), Nov. 28, 1893.
[36] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 135.
[37] [37] James C. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1990): 113.

Dakans were regarded with fearful respect, and fear drove their persecution. However, the respect of their power garnered a type of marginal legitimacy that other women did not possess. As only women to be *dakans*, there existed a belief that women are inherently inclined to evil actions. These women were not weak or powerless against men. In some traditions, *dakans* gained their power by eating men, explicitly drawing the dimensions of divine feminine authority on the gendering of evil.[38] Since *dakans* had the capacity to harm men, they needed to be controlled through violence. Male preoccupation with the existence of *dakans* in these communities and fear of their distinctly feminine abilities is indicative of an acknowledged marginalized legitimacy of power exercised by specific types of women who gained authority by drawing on the metaphor of the *dakan* in a society which gave them few opportunities to exercise agency.

BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND INDIAN WITCHCRAFT

A central aspect of British involvement in India was criticism of Indian society's 'barbaric' customs and the subsequent legislation aimed at civilizing the subcontinent.[39] Views on Indian witch-hunts as observed in English newspapers from the mid-nineteenth century demonstrate the opinion held by those enacting and upholding the legislation regarding witchcraft in the colony that it was a British responsibility to serve as an example of civilized society. In 1858, the *Surrey Comet* commented that "The pretence (sic) of supernatural powers was a source of great evil in India, not only as a means of extortion

[38] Govind Kelkar. *With-Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy, and Structural Transformation.* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 182.

[39] Partha Chatterjee. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India." *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 622.

and intimidation, but also by numerous murders perpetrated on persons suspected of practicing…by magical arts."[40] Towards the end of the nineteenth century, *The Star* reported that "Witchcraft, as the records of the criminal courts occasionally reveal, is still as common a belief among the lower strata of the natives of India as it was in England in the Middle Ages, and even, as we saw the other day (says the Times of India), the educated Baboo is not wholly free from this ignorant survival of primitive animalistic faiths."[41] The views reflected in these newspaper articles demonstrate the metropole's vision of itself as a civilizing force in colonial India, enacting legislation that would protect the native from the dangers of their "primitive animalistic faiths"; the British believed that the subjugated population in India must come to terms with the inferiority of their culture and embrace the rational order of Western customs in order to form a new, civilized Indian society.[42] So-called civilizing legislation was passed, often with the justification of protecting Indian women from what the British saw as barbaric traditional practices. Therefore, gender became a central fault line upon which the British would enact their civilizing mission of India.

Differences between colonial and indigenous populations were established consciously to create dynamics of domination and subordination in colonized territories.[43] Furthermore, colonial spaces are inherently gendered, as seen by the tensions that resulted in witchcraft-related persecution of Adivasi women. The gendered nature of colonial spaces allowed for

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[40] NA, "On Infanticide, Burning of Widows, and Witchcraft in India," *Surrey Comet* (London, England), Feb. 27, 1858.
[41] NA, "Survival of Superstition in India," *The Star* (Guernsey, England), Nov. 28, 1893.
[42] Chatterjee. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women," 623.
[43] Catherine Hall. *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.

sexuality and gender to be utilized by the colonizer as a tool for exerting control over indigenous groups.[44] The British government had already established a precedent for using gender as a tool of eradicating traditional practices in 1829 when the colonial government banned sati.[45] The 1847 anti-witch-hunt proclamation claimed to protect tribal women against the 'evil practice' by declaring that the killing of a supposed witch would be considered, for the first time in rural India, as murder and would be punished as such.[46] By disguising the anti-witch-hunting ban as a means to curb gender-related violence, the British government used this legislation as a method to establish further domination of the native population. Officials and missionaries recorded and investigated instances of witch-hunts and witchcraft-related murder that they often did not witness first-hand as proof of barbarity to further justify strict regulation of indigenous populations.[47] The evidence garnered by Westerners of cultural violence was intertwined into modernizing, nationalist projects of the British in India.[48] By framing the British suppression of traditional practices under the rhetoric of protecting women, indigenous women themselves became the grounds for interaction between native populations and British officials.

From the British perspective as reported in domestic newspapers, the ban of witch-hunts was effective legislation,

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[44] Margaret Strobel. "Women's History, Gender History, and European Colonialism." In *Colonialism and the Modern World* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2002), 54.
[45] Lata Mani. "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India." *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 152.
[46] Ball. *Tribal and Peasant Life in Nineteenth Century India*. (Darya Ganj, New Delhi: Usha Jain, 1985), 115.
[47] Alam and Raj. "The Academic Journey of Witchcraft Studies in India," 126.
[48] Cooper and Stoler. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 16-17.

protecting accused witches from violence at the behest of a savage and backward tradition. The *Surrey Comet* reported, "These acts of fancied retaliation have been, with a gentle but powerful hand, repressed, and great progress has been made towards their extinction. The fraudulent pretence (sic) is now punished as a substantitive (sic) crime."[49] Another newspaper reports justice won for "an elderly woman, of witchlike aspect," by a colonial magistrate when she was robbed. The thief received six months imprisonment with hard labor as a consequence for stealing from the witch.[50]

Journals from the time reveal similar views about the cultural practice of witch-hunts. William Dunbar wrote in 1861 that, "this belief, so common among all savage nations, often leads them to the commission of the most dreadful crimes."[51] The rural group he focuses on, the Coles, has a history of resisting the British Government in their region as they are resistant to sharing their land with outsiders. Dunbar writes with optimism that the Coles "will gradually be weaned from their savage and predatory pursuits and that the blessings of civilization will make sure progress among them."[52] However optimistic these authors depict the hopes of success for the ban in India and the upholding of the law for the punishment of transgressions against perceived witches, the effectiveness of the prohibition of witch-hunts was not ubiquitous due to Adivasi resistance and lack of British enforcement.

Adivasi assumed that the British would aid them in the extermination of witches during the initial years of British rule, but these hopes were dashed when the first anti-witch-

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[49] NA, "On Infanticide, Burning of Widows, and Witchcraft in India." *Surrey Comet* (London, England), Feb. 27, 1858.
[50] NA, "Witchcraft in India," *The Globe* (London, England): Oct. 29, 1852.
[51] William Dunbar. "Some Observations on the Manners, Customs, and Religious Opinions of the Lurka Coles." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 18 (1861): 374.
[52] Ibid, 375.

hunt ban was imposed in 1847 in the rural Dangs.[53] Similar bans were soon implemented in Rajputana in 1853 and Udaipur in 1862. However, the areas in which traditions of witchcraft and therefore witch-hunts were most common were areas which the British struggled to maintain control of.[54] Though British rule was stronger by the mid-nineteenth century than it had been prior in rural areas where witch-hunts thrived, their control remained limited; for example, the Dangs were managed by a few British officials who made visits to the region only during the winter to avoid malaria.[55] The rural nature of Adivasi communities made them practically inaccessible to the type of British rule implemented in other parts of the subcontinent. In addition to limited direct control of Adivasi groups, there was not a consensus amongst British magistrates on how to prosecute those who participated in witch-hunt related violence against women. One man received only three years imprisonment for the murder of a witch following the 1847 ban in the Dangs.[56] The ban was hindered by the disagreement of how to address the pervasive belief in witchcraft as well as the interference of witch-finders or *bhagats*.

Colonial officials at times claimed they found it difficult to prosecute witch-killers to the degree they were mandated by law to do because the natives did not believe themselves to be committing a crime.[57] A British ethnological study from 1868 describes the dissonance the British felt about sentencing the men who carried out these witch-hunts. The task of upholding the ban was described as "melancholy," as magistrate would be sentencing men "who in their examinations detailed the

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[53] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 135.
[54] Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 147.
[55] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 112.
[56] Ajay Skaria. "Shades of Wildness tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (1997): 726.
[57] Ibid, 727.

most marvellous (sic) effects of imputed sorcery, were sincere believers in all that they narrated."[58] The retributive task of upholding the law was considered to be a disheartening job because of the pity magistrates took upon the native men, whose belief in sorcery was strong and could not be diminished by a few pieces of British civilizing legislation.

Furthermore, the role of *bhagats* in witch-hunts and their esteemed place within their communities were a particular challenge for British prosecutors. One official proclaimed, "were it not for these pestilent *bhagats* we should soon see an end to witch-torturing and killing."[59] However, some scholars argue the limited documented instances of the ban's success are more indicative of Adivasi society than of British efforts to prosecute accordingly, as the ban provided supporters of supposed witches with more resources to protect the accused. If a woman accused of practicing witchcraft was attacked in any way, her supporters could complain to the British and therefore increase the likelihood of justice being served. This process was the primary way British officials found out about most witch-hunts at all.[60] Regardless of the identity of those who aided in the effectiveness of the legislation and despite newspapers' claims, the ban on witch-hunts was hindered by limited control of rural areas where the tradition persisted and the judgments of individual magistrates.

The criminalization of traditional practices contributed to the already extensive impact colonial rule had on tribal social structures. Communal modes of production that were replaced with private land rights, commercial deforestation, and intrusion of Western capitalists to previously inaccessible regions are a few of the changes Adivasi tribal communities faced

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[58] E.T. Dalton. "The 'Kols' of Chota-Nagpore." *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 6 (1868), 31-32.
[59] Skaria. "Women, Witchcraft, and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India," 136.
[60] Ibid.

upon British colonization.[61] Specifically, the change in women's traditional land rights intensified the preexisting social tensions between men and women. Under the traditional system, land was given to male descendants of the deceased. British changes to the law made it possible for a widow to legally maintain ownership of her deceased husband's land. This meant that the male descendants would not have access to the land rights until the woman's death, potentially prompting widows to be accused of witchcraft so that their land could be inherited by male family members after their persecution. The fundamental change to traditional land inheritance rights contributed to ritualized violence of women by effectively breaking down the 'ecological moral economy' of Adivasi tribes. Though the witch-hunt ban was promoted as a means to protect women, other policies implemented in colonial India diminished the social safeguards of Adivasi women, making them even more vulnerable to violence.[62] British administrators did not intend to make the lives of Adivasi women safer and more equitable with men. Instead, they imposed regulations that ultimately made women susceptible to the violence that the British claimed to be protecting them from. This reveals that the efforts of the British to 'protect' Indian women were simply a guise for their colonizing and civilizing project in the colony.

EXPLANATIONS FOR CONTINUED ILLEGAL WITCH-HUNTS

The colonial government banned the practice of witchcraft in the 1830s and began to enforce the ban on witch-hunts on a regional basis in the mid-1840s-1850s. The persecution of supposed witches was now considered illegal for the first time in Adivasi communities, and the local population responded to

[61] Sinha. "Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 142.
[62] Ibid, 143-44.

the enforcement of the ban with antagonism. There occurred a resurgence in witch-hunts during the mid-nineteenth century that is partly due to anti-colonial sentiments, much like the Sepoy Revolution and similar anti-colonial movements of this era. However, unlike these other movements in 1857-58, women in tribal Adivasi communities were the victims of violence rather than active participants in the struggle against the British.[63] Valentine Ball, who traveled throughout India in the 1860s, connected the resurgence in witch-hunts to other anti-colonial insurrections. He writes that as law and order were suspended during 1857-58 when officials were preoccupied with the Sepoy Revolution, the Adivasi felt they were free to "make a clean sweep of the witches and sorcerers who had accumulated in their midst, under the benign influence of British authority."[64] E.T. Dalton, an ethnologist who studied the rural tribes in India, observed a similar phenomenon after the 1857 mutinies. He describes the southern tribes of the Singbhoom district who found themselves free from the limitations of British rule at the time of the mutinies. Taking advantage of the "restraint they had never been very patient under," the Ho tribe also took the opportunity of British preoccupation to uncover witches who had amassed since the ban was enacted. The violence was staggering, as it is suggested the witch-hunters went from home to home, "until before the morning dawn they had succeeded in extinguishing, as they supposed, the whole race."[65] The administrators of the ban on witch-hunts had failed to realize the extent to which witchcraft was embedded in Adivasi traditions. This fact, coupled with the Adivasi belief that witches were thriving under "the *benevolent power* of the British," indicates that the rise of

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[63] Shashank Sinha. "Witch-Hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chotanagpur." *Exonomic and Political Weekly* 42, no 19. (2007): 1672.
[64] Ball, *Tribal and Peasant Life in Nineteenth Century India*, 116.
[65] [65] E.T. Dalton. "The 'Kols' of Chota-Nagpore." *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 6 (1868), 31.

witch-hunts was the direct cause of anti-colonialist sentiment among tribal communities in rural India.[66]

Increased social tensions resulting from new colonial policies like annual visits by a colonial commissioner, regular payment of taxes, and a formalized system of written oaths contributed to an expression of these stressors in the trialing and murder of witches.[67] By effectively breaking down traditional practices through the implementation of 'civilized' methods of rule, the British contributed to increased ritualized violence against women as the Adivasi viewed the new diseases, deforestations, and other social issues caused by colonialism as the handiwork of witches in their communities.[68] These ideas grew stronger as external pressure on tribal society increased, and as deforestation made it difficult to acquire medicinal plants and alternative types of protection against evil spirits. Deforestation and increased social stress from colonial activity caused many Adivasi groups to ascribe the cause of their struggles to individual women, and accusations of witchcraft thus increased. Women therefore became the targets of widescale violence in an attempt to remedy the growing social and ecological crises facing Adivasi communities under the British. Witch-hunts were known to increase during 'hunger-months,' or at other periods of increased stress or the community.[69] It is therefore a logical conclusion that external pressures caused by colonial policy could also contribute to increased rates of witchcraft-related violence.

The civilizing mission of the British government in India resulted in social insecurity within Adivasi communities, and specifically the change in traditional womanhood. The British used Indian womanhood as the grounds to interact with the

[66] Sinha. "Witch-Hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chotanagpur", 1674-1675.
[67] Alam and Raj. "The Academic Journey of Witchcraft Studies in India." 125-6.
[68] Sinha. ""'Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye'," 143.
[69] Ibid, 144-5.

local populace as the colonial state. The social reforms instituted by the British in the early nineteenth century with the aim of 'civilizing' India, such as the ban on witch-hunts, effected varying ideas of what proper Indian womanhood should be. The new patriarchy created by British reforms threatened to change the status and role of Indian women from the cultural norm. There was a sense among these communities that no matter the external change of their situation under colonialism, women must maintain their core feminine values. Women serve as the keepers of tradition, and reactions of indigenous communities against civilizing legislation represented a "straightforward defense of tradition and outright rejection of the new."[70] Meanwhile, Adivasi groups had already been forced to give ownership of their lands and forests to the British, causing fundamental disruption to their way of life.[71] In order to resist further Westernization, customary practices were clung to more fervently in spite of the British efforts to stamp out the culture they viewed as barbaric. In the struggle to maintain cultural identity, the ritual aggression of exterminating witches continued in order to struggle against the changes facing Adivasi community and to reinforce their traditional view of proper femininity.

Scholars tend to view these reasons for continued witch-hunts following the ban as separate, isolated contributors. However, it might be more accurate to interpret the increased social tension and desire to maintain tradition as cumulating to anti-colonial sentiment, resulting in a resurgence of witchcraft-related violence. Subjugated groups rarely contest established power structures of domination directly, but rather "behind the scenes [...] they are likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of

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[70] Chatterjee. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women," 627.

[71] Mac-Machado. "Witchcraft and Witchcraft Cleansing among the Vasava Bhils," 191.

power relations may be voiced."[72] Resurgence in witch-hunts following the British regional bans in the early to mid-nineteenth centuries is indicative of this form of hidden critique to colonial power. The continual observance of traditional practices, even those as violent as witch-hunting, is a form of resistance to the dominant's condemnation of the subordinate culture as barbaric and uncivilized. The integration of Adivasi groups into colonial rule through the civilizing tool of gender and ultimately forcing indigenous populations to abide by British cultural mores inevitably involved systemic social subordination of their traditional practices. The indignity experienced by the Adivasi because of this process of appropriation and suppression of their way of life caused frustration to grow, manifesting itself in refusal to abide by colonial regulations.[73] Specifically articulated anti-colonial sentiment itself may not be the cause of increased violence against women but rather the consequences of colonialism were attributed to the work of malevolent spiritualism, thus effecting persecution of supposed witches.

The issue of witch-hunts despite the colonial ban can be explained in terms of power and covert resistance. Contact with the spiritual realm was a cornerstone of Adivasi traditional life, and women's exclusion from it is indicative of the distrust of women's potential power by the existing patriarchal structure. Retaliation against women seizing subliminal power by claiming individual spiritualism was punished by gender-based violent persecution in the form of witch-hunts. The increased British presence in previously inaccessible rural communities during the mid-19th century effected fundamental change to the Adivasi lifestyle as land rights and power structures were altered, and traditional practices were criminalized in a civilizing effort. The elevated social stress because of this threat to indigenous identity resulted in the continued practice

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[72] Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts,* xi.
[73] Ibid, 111-113.

of illegal witch-hunts. The refusal to abide by the British mandate through maintaining the traditional punishment of non-conformist women via witch-hunts therefore represents a form of discreet anti-colonial resistance by Adivasi tribes.

Both the persecuted women and the men who persecuted them are attempting to reclaim agency from their oppressor via concealed denial to follow their appointed roles. Women who refused to abide by proper Adivasi womanhood resisted by adopting the metaphor of the *dakan*; Adivasi men contested the changes to their way of life caused by British interference by refusing to cease witch-hunts. Ultimately, the choice to be subversive to the dominant, either by acceptance of the role of *dakan* to exploit the power of femininity or by the denial to relinquish cultural identity to the colonizer, is perpetuated by a desire to claim illegitimate, marginal power through forms of passive resistance.

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