

Prevalence of Sorcery and Animistic Ontologies among the Mal Pahadiya Tribe: An Ethnographic study

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Abstract

This paper examines the continuing practice of animistic witchcraft among the Mal Pahadiya tribe of Jharkhand, its perceived connection to disease, and the social conditions that foster these beliefs. Traditionally, male religious leaders perform animistic witchcraft based healing, in this community. Tribal members often attribute illness to evil spirits and seek witchcraft for relief. The practice remains prevalent in regions lacking access to basic amenities, education, and scientific knowledge, leading to superstition and social stigma. The government's initiatives and legal measures to eliminate witchcraft are discussed, with particular focus on how innocent women are branded as witches and the underlying motivations for the practice. According to the 2011 Indian census, tribal communities constitute approximately 8.6% of the nation's population, often referred to as Adivasi, Girijan, or Vanavasi, and regarded as indigenous or autochthonous peoples. These groups typically reside beyond mainstream Indian religious traditions, venerating nature as animists who attribute misfortunes to malevolent spirits, with some adopting Hinduism or Christianity.

1. Introduction

The *Mal Pahadiya* is one of the most vulnerable tribal groups within the Pahadiya community living in Jharkhand. They mostly reside in the Rajmahal Hills, located in the Santhal Pargana¹ region of Jharkhand, as well as parts of West Bengal and Bihar. These hills are known to the Pahadiya people as “Saba Lakh Pahad” or sometimes “Saba Lakh Ekkes Pahad”² as they believe that in this mountain range there are One Hundred Twenty Five Thousand or One Hundred Twenty Five Thousand and Twenty One big and small hills are present. The government classifies them as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). They primarily speak two languages: Mal Pahadiya, which is an Indo-Aryan language, and Maudi or Maudo³, a Dravidian language. Language plays a crucial role in preserving their history and culture. While many communities write down their stories, tribal groups like the Mal Pahadiya pass their heritage orally through folktales and traditional stories. Though some stories may be similar across cultures, the language and style in which they are told make them unique. Today, their culture and

¹ An administrative division in Jharkhand, India

² सबा लाख पहाड़/सबा लाख एक्केस पहाड़

³ मौड़ी या मौड़ो

traditions face the risk of disappearing. Low literacy rates, lack of awareness, and a history of invasions by Marathas, Mughals, British, Santhals, and other settlers have made the community vulnerable.

1.1 Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore the prevalence of sorcery and animistic beliefs among the Mal Pahadiya tribe in Jharkhand. It aims to understand how these beliefs influence their daily life, social practices, and decision-making. The study also seeks to document their rituals, oral traditions, and cultural worldview, and to analyse how these animistic ontologies shape the community's interactions, health practices, and responses to natural and social events.

1.2 Methodology

A research on the Mal Pahadiya can use ethnography and fieldwork methods to understand their culture and daily life. In ethnography, the researcher lives in the community, observes their routines, and participates in festivals, rituals, and storytelling to get a close view of their traditions and social practices. Fieldwork involves visiting villages of Pakur district Jharkhand, India i.e., Mahagama, Barhait, and Taljhari, conducting interviews with elders and storytellers, recording oral histories, and noting language use, occupation, and education. Surveys can also collect basic information on health, literacy, and livelihoods. Throughout the study, it is important to follow ethical practices by taking consent, respecting customs, and preserving their cultural knowledge.

1.3 Area of Study

The Mal Pahadiya people live in the Rajmahal Hills of Santhal Pargana in Jharkhand, especially in Pakur, Godda, Dumka and Sahebganj district of Jharkhand. A study on them can look at where they live, their total population, and their daily to day life, including jobs and education. It can also focus on their languages, Mal Pahadiya and Maudi/Maudo, and how they keep their culture alive through stories, songs, and traditions. Their history shows that invasions and settlements by others affected their life and identity. They are recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), and face challenges like low literacy, poor healthcare, and limited jobs. The study can include visiting villages, talking with elders, recording stories, and noting daily life, while respecting their culture and traditions.

2 Animistic witchcraft among the Mal Pahadiya

Animism serves as the foundation for various magical and spiritual practices. Animism encompasses the understanding that all entities possess life and are infused with spirit. This belief extends beyond humans and other "living beings" such as animals, plants, and insects, to include rivers, lakes, rocks, mountains, the wind, the sky, and even human-made objects like tools and buildings. Although this concept may appear implausible, for the majority of human history, animism was a common belief. As indigenous faiths worldwide have been overshadowed by prevailing monotheistic religions, these belief systems have been diminished in numerous regions. In contemporary society, animism predominantly persists within the traditions of Indigenous communities. If we define an animist as an individual who recognizes that all things possess a spirit, then an animistic witch is one who engages in magical practices aligned

with that perspective. Witches utilize a variety of tools: candles, crystals, herbs, bones, runes, knives and scissors. However, for an animist witch, these tools transcend their functional roles they are entities deserving of reverence and a proper relationship. These entities are not simply "objects" to be manipulated or exploited; they are sacred spiritual allies with whom witches can cultivate relationships and collaborate actively. For instance, consider a scenario where I am conducting a straightforward candle spell that entails anointing a chime candle with oil, rolling it in herbs, and subsequently lighting it while concentrating on my intention.

Numerous spirits are available for collaboration to enhance the effectiveness of that candle spell. I may invite the ancestral or collective spirits associated with the herbs. I am utilizing into my sacred space, requesting their assistance in sharing their powers with me whether it is the power of abundance, or good fortune. Additionally, I might invite the spirit of fire into my sacred space, expressing gratitude for Fire's transformative abilities. Finally, I may softly tap the candle and murmur, "Awaken, candle!" Just as humans can be dormant, other spirits may also lie inactive and may not be prepared for engagement at all times. Awakening the spirits of your tools prior to their initial use can enhance the efficacy of your magic. Ultimately, I recognize that the powers of these spirits are inherently theirs; they do not belong to me, and thus I cannot take, utilize, or exert control over them without their consent. Although our society's inclination towards imperialism might lead us to believe otherwise, animists possess a deeper understanding. This embodies the essence of a proper relationship: it involves acknowledging the sovereignty of all spirits, being attentive to and respecting their boundaries, and expressing gratitude for the gifts they opt to share with us. One method of showing appreciation to the spirits you engage with is through offerings. Similar to how one might present offerings to ancestors or deities, offerings can also be made to the plants in your garden prior to harvesting them, or to the spirits of planets when engaging in planetary magic. Offerings need not be costly or intricate.

Once the collective power of spirits is regulated instead of being collaboratively utilized, this power is frequently employed for malevolent purposes such as revenge, vengeance, and torture. Subsequently, the offerings made to spirits transform into sacrifices involving living beings. At this point, animistic witchcraft dissipates, leaving only malevolent witchcraft behind.

Religious specialists among tribes perform rituals to appease evil spirits, while witchcraft perceived as a magical intervention during calamities, deaths, or epidemics is predominantly associated with women. Accused women face severe trials, including branding, rape, burning, or murder, a practice colonial British authorities sought to regulate amid property disputes and superstitions. Tribal view witches (e.g., "*Dain/Kichhin*"⁴ among Mal Pahadiya) as part of secret societies meeting at sacred groves, wielding supernatural powers via Mantras⁵; initiation involves rituals with spirits, while purification rites like consuming polluted mixtures aim to strip powers.

Accusations of witchcraft and the violence that often followed formed a troubling strand of social life in British India, with women disproportionately targeted. Colonial administrators pursued inquiries and introduced regulatory measures in an effort to restrain the cruelties associated with witch-finding and popular justice. Although British authorities proscribed practices linked to witchcraft, including those

⁴ Terminology used for Witch is डायन/किचिन

⁵ मंत्र

that culminated in the killing of widows and other vulnerable women, the cosmologies that sustained such accusations endured.

Drawing on Mallick (2008), “*Adivasi* communities frequently interpreted illness, crop failure, or familial discord through a supernatural frame, attributing misfortune to hostile spirits or witches rather than to material or environmental causes”⁶. Yet Mallick also demonstrates that these charges were neither universally accepted nor uniformly applied within tribal society. Accusations could be and at times were mobilized instrumentally, serving as vehicles for settling property disputes, asserting factional dominance, or even targeting men when expedient.

3. Naturalism and Religious Cosmology of the Mal Pahadiya

The Mal Pahadiya understands the world as a layered, living cosmos where deities and spirits animate the land, guide social life, and support personal well-being across connected realms. This shared view nurtures a strong sense of community and belonging, and it also invites more detailed, respectful study of each being’s traits, ritual roles, and the patterns that link the whole cosmology together.

01. Pahad Thakur – *Pahad Thakur*⁷ is a male deity revered by the Mal Pahadiya community for safeguarding them against wild animals, venomous snakes, scorpions, and other insects, as well as during journeys or special tasks. For instance, they seek protection from moneylenders, enemies, and for their livelihoods; thus, they are required to worship this deity before embarking on a hunt. In every village, a “*Pahad Thakur Than*⁸,” a stone resembling a *Shivling*⁹, is placed beneath the *Sal or Sahada*¹⁰ tree. Previously, the worship of “Pahad Thakur” was conducted collectively. However, in contemporary times, the Pahadiya people also engage in personal worship of “Pahad Thakur.” This worship is predominantly performed collectively during the festival in the month of “*Asadh or Magh*¹¹” each year. The offerings for worship include *Pochai*¹² made in a new *earthen pot*, *Batasa*¹³, *Arva rice*, *Vermilion*, leaves from the *Wood-Apple tree*, *Milk*, *Incense (Dhumna)*¹⁴, a pair of *Pigeons*, a *Sheep or a Goat (Patha)*, and *Weeds*. Recently, “*Janeu*¹⁵” has also been added to the list of worship items. The worship is conducted by *Dehri Baba*¹⁶. Additionally, a “*Kanjadi*¹⁷” (an iron rod bent upwards with five bangle-shaped iron rods attached), a “*Trishul*¹⁸” on the right side, and a horse crafted from mud or stone are placed on the left side of the “*Pahad Thakur*.” During the worship, all these items are presented again by the Mal Pahadiya community to *Pahad Thakur*, as he is believed to protect the village from various enemies, predatory animals, venomous snakes, and scorpions. It is thought that he rides a horse and uses the *Trishul* to vanquish all village foes; therefore, these offerings are made to him by the Mal Pahadiya

⁶ Mallick, A. (2008). Witch-Hunting 1857, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 39, (Sep. 27 - Oct. 3, 2008), pp. 118-119

⁷ पहाड़-ठाकुर- माल पहाड़िया समुदाय के भगवन जिनका वास् स्थान जंगल में होता है।

⁸ पहाड़-ठाकुर थान- वह स्थान जहाँ इनका मंदिर होता है तथा जहाँ इनका पूजा किया जाता है।

⁹ शिवलिंग- भगवान शिव का एक प्रमुख प्रारूप।

¹⁰ *Shorea Robusta*, the *Sal tree*, *Sala*, *Shala*, *Sakhua*, or *Sarai*, is a species of tree in the family *Dipterocarpaceae*.

¹¹ असाढ़ और माघ- हिन्दू धर्म या विक्रम संवत् के अनुसार महीना का नाम।

¹² Rice Beer

¹³ बत्ताशा- Traditional Indian Sugar drop Candy

¹⁴ Indian Frankincense

¹⁵ जनेऊ-मुख्यतः ब्राह्मण द्वारा शरीर पर धारण किया जाना वाला पीला धागा।

¹⁶ Priest in Mal Pahadiya who performs sacred rituals

¹⁷ कंजड़ी- पहाड़ ठाकुर बाबा का प्रतिक चिन्ह।

¹⁸ त्रिशूल- भगवन शिव का प्रमुख हथियार।

community. Before participating in a mass hunt, *Dehri Baba* requests and recites the following mantra in front of *Pahad Thakur*;

“O Pahad Thakur! Today we are going to hunt in your kingdom, in which today there should be no harm to any of us, no animal should injure us. Elephants, Horses, Tigers, Bears and other violent animals which are your soldiers, take care of them and protect us from them. And you give us the animals which are edible for us, so that we do not face much trouble in hunting. For this kind act, after returning safely from hunting, we will give you Weeds, Liquor (Mahua).”

Only after this request does *Dehri Baba* instruct all the men engaged in hunting to commence their activities. Prior to initiating farming, the Mal Pahadiya community makes a similar request to *Pahad Thakur*.

Before leaving the village, Pahadiya takes the time to personally visit the *Pahad Thakur Than* and offers prayers for his health and success, as detailed below;

“O Pahad Thakur Baba! Today, I am going abroad in the search of livelihood for me and my family. Bless me with success, victory in my work. Bless with that I do not get trapped in any trouble, stay safe, come back safely and see the face of my child. For this I will worship you with “Dhull Pairo”¹⁹, after seven days, after a month or after six months. And as per his wish, he does the worship of Pahad Thakur.

02. Dhull Pairo: -On returning to the village, they first perform the puja at the *Pahad Thakur Than* in promised manner, only then they enter their respective house. Pahadiya pleads with *Pahad Thakur Baba* for "Dhull Pairo" way of worship only for a very urgent, serious task.

03. Chor Danu: - His location is close to *Maa Dharti or Dharti-Basumati*²⁰. *Chor Danu* safeguards the village against thefts in both farms and homes. He is venerated as a community. It is said that he reveals information about thefts through the direction in which a star falls in the sky. Specifically, the village where the star appears to fall is at risk of theft, prompting all villagers to be vigilant in protecting their community and farmland. A red cock and Pochai, is offered to him.

04. Van Shakti: - Van Shakti²¹ supports the *Chor Danu and Pahad Thakur*. Worshipping *Van Shakti* protects crops from birds.

05. Dhani Mal Jog: - *Dhani Mal Jog*²² lives on a Shemal ²³tree or in a stream. He is the guardian of the mountain, and crops cannot be harvested from the fields without his blessing; otherwise, the harvester faces harassment from Tigers, Bears, Snakes, and Scorpions in various forms, and that individual becomes vulnerable to these wild creatures. It is said that the hair of *Dhani Mal Jog* touches the ground, creating an auspicious symbol, which is why even today, Dehri, Jaan-Guru, and Pujahar keep long hair on their heads.

¹⁹ धुल-पैरो

²⁰ धरती माँ/धरती बासुमति - धरती माता के विविहिन नाम।

²¹ वन शक्ति

²² धनि माल जोग

²³ सेमल का पेड़ (बॉम्बेक्स सीइवा), जिसे रेशम कपास भी कहा जाता है

05. Mahadan: - The location of *Mahadan* is situated close to the *Dharti-Basumati Than*. It signals a significant disaster in the village, heralded by the dreadful cries of a jackal or the sound of a shovel during the night preceding the incident. Occasionally, owls emit frightening sounds at night, which the Pahadiya interpret as a warning from *Mahadan* that a death or epidemic is imminent in the village. So, the Mal Pahadiya gets ready for their communal worship. It is thought that *Mahadan* also safeguards crops and animals.

06. Karudanu Jakh Baba²⁴: - His place is next to goddess Kali Maa. And their worship is done with a pair of pigeons.

07. Rangadhari Baba²⁵: - His place is inside the house or in the backyard. He is worshiped by offering a red chicken for self-defense from enemies by Mal Pahadiya.

08. Aanchay Kudbi²⁶: - His place is inside the house or in the village itself. He is worshiped with a Black Goat. By worshiping those Mal Pahadiya take vengeance on their personal enemies.

09. Mada Modpa²⁷: - He is the ancestral fathers of the Mal Pahadiya community, which each Pahadiya establishes as a symbol of five vertical line or lines drawn from Vermilion in a safe holy corner of their home. In every Pahadiya family, after the death of an adult person, that person is also established as *Mada-Modpa* after his funeral.

10. Teen Mundiya Jarav or Teen Ankhiya Jarav²⁸: - Their place is respectively inside the house or in the backyard. There is a superstition that they are established by witches (women practicing black magic) and their eyesight is very evil. By interrupting them, the one who interrupts gets into serious trouble and problem.

11. Gaon Rakhwar²⁹: - This male deity and is the guardian of the village and his place is nearby *Basumati Mata Than*. The *Gaon Rakhwar* guards the entire village and he is collectively worshiped by Mal Pahadiya community guided by *Dehri Baba*. Even if there is a personal wish, only *Dehri Baba* does the worship. *Gaon Rakhwar* is offered a red Chicken, Pochai, Arva rice, Batasa, Vermilion, Incense (Dhumna), Milk, Wood-Apple tree leaves at the time of worship.

12. Baagh Thanwar, Moda Thanwar³⁰: - This a sacred place which protect them against ferrous animals and poisonous snakes, scorpions, these places are worshiped with a Red Goat (Patha) or a red chicken.

13. Kichin Janani³¹: - Her habitat place is Mountains, Rivers, Streams or Trees. *Kichin Janani* can marry Pahadiya boys, so after tying a knot at the time of marriage, Pahadiya boys and girls do not roam alone.

²⁴ करुदनु जख बाबा

²⁵ रंगाधरी बाबा

²⁶ अंचय कुद्धि

²⁷ माड़ा- मोड़पा

²⁸ तीन मुण्डिया जरव या तीन मुखिया जरव

²⁹ गांव रखवार

³⁰ बाघ थानवार, मोड़ा थानवार

³¹ कीचीन जनानी

14. Jokh Devta³²: - He can marry the Pahadiya girls; his residence is also on Mountains, River, Stream or Trees. Therefore, at the time of marriage, it is forbidden for a Pahadiya girl to climb a tree after engagement till marriage.

15. Patalpuri Kichin³³: - According to Mal Pahadiya, she is the Goddess of water. Every year, the Pahadiya people honor their water sources to ensure they remain plentiful, to prevent anyone from falling into springs or wells, and to guarantee that if someone does fall, they can safely escape. This ritual involves offerings of sugar or Batasha, incense (Dhumna), leaves from the Wood-Apple tree, Kajal, and various decorative items.

16. Akashpuri Kichin³⁴: - He is the God of trees; he lives on trees, especially on Palm trees. Before extracting the Neera/Tadi³⁵ (Palm tree juice) from the Palm trees, all the Neera/Tadi extractors worship Akashpuri Kichin under the leadership of *Dehri Baba*. A pair of Pigeons, a Red Chicken is offered to him and this mantra is recited by *Dehri Baba*;

"O Akashpuri, Kichin, protect us from falling from the tree, the hand should not be cut with a Sickle and the Neera/Tadi should also be in plenty amount." On that day everyone takes out the Neera/Tadi and drinks it, and from the onwards they can take off the Neera/Tadi from the palm trees fearlessly.

At present, Mal Pahadiya's also celebrate *Durga Puja*, *Laxmi Puja*, *Karma Puja*, *Vishhari Puja*³⁶ all of which are gradually being adopted by the Mal Pahadiya people due to acculturation of Hindu religion. *Vishhari Puja* is performed collectively by Mal Pahadiya community only at the time of *Durga Puja (Dashai)*³⁷. The *Vishhari Puja* is led by a guru in which only the male members of the village (children, young, old men's) are involved. *Vishhari Puja* continues for five consecutive days and on the day of *Dashami*, this puja is completed with the drowning of *Maa Mansa Devi* in water bodies like River, Ponds established in the form of an earthen body. In this puja, Arva rice, Vermilion, Incense (Dhumna), Milk, Wood-Apple tree leaves, a pair of Pigeons, a pair of red Chickens are offered to *Maa Mansa Devi*. In this worship, the Guru teaches his disciples the mantra to remove the venom of snakes and scorpions, gives information about popular medicinal herbs. In the evening, there is group dancing, singing and fun. Guru can be of *Santhal*, *Pahadiya*, *Ghatwal*, *Kamar* or of any community. The members involved in *Vishhari Puja* dance and sing collectively in villages other than their own villages and in return they happily get Corn, Money as gift from the villagers.

4. Witchcraft Accusation as Social Control

In contemporary tribal societies, accusations of witchcraft function as a mechanism of social control, disproportionately impacting women. These accusations, frequently rooted in political motivations such as land acquisition or intergroup rivalry, manifest as violence, including torture, expulsion, and even death. This phenomenon observed in regions like Jharkhand and mirrored globally, highlights how beliefs in witchcraft can be manipulated to perpetuate gender-based violence and maintain power

³² जोख देवता

³³ पातालपुरी कीचीन

³⁴ आकाशपुरी कीचीन

³⁵ Palm tree juice, commonly known as Tadi or Neera, is a sweet, nutrient-rich sap harvested from the inflorescence of Palm trees

³⁶ विषहरी पूजा- माँ मनसा देवी का पूजा अर्चना किया जाता है। ऐसा मन्त्रा है की माँ मनसा देवी की पुजा करने से किसी भी जानवर के विष से बचा जा सकता है।

³⁷ दशई- दशैरा/दुर्गा पुजा का स्थानीय नाम।

structures within these communities. The Indian legal system's attempts to address this issue through legislation and judicial intervention are ongoing, yet persistent challenges remain in eradicating the underlying socio-cultural factors that contribute to this form of violence.

During fieldwork in Hirudih village, an incident of alleged witchcraft accusation was observed, resulting in significant social disruption. The accusation, while based on local beliefs and traditions, led to a breakdown of communal harmony and individual well-being within the village. This situation highlights the detrimental impact of unsubstantiated accusations and the importance of understanding the socio-cultural context in which such events occurs.

Despite the passage of time, many residents of Mal Pahadiya villages still attribute the deaths of children and young adults to the malevolent gaze of witches. Under this superstition, elderly, widowed, or otherwise vulnerable women are frequently branded as witches, subjected to persecution, even killed, and their homes and property destroyed. At times, entire communities find themselves entangled with the criminal justice system because of such blind faith. A stark illustration unfolded in Hirudih, a village in Block Kathikund, District Dumka, in July 1967, where entrenched beliefs in witchcraft, exorcists, and spiritual practitioners ignited a grave and violent chain of events.

4.1 An incident of alleged witchcraft

Even today, the belief persists that the witch's evil eye is the cause of the deaths of children and young people in the village of Mal Pahadiya. Often, elderly, widowed, and defenseless women are accused of witchcraft, leading to their execution and the destruction of their homes and possessions due to this superstition. Occasionally, the entire village becomes a captive of the blind faith in the witch. One such event occurred in the village of Hirudih, situated in Block Kathikund, District Dumka, Jharkhand, in July 1967. In that month, a dreadful and serious incident unfolded in Hirudih village, driven by the evil practices of witchcraft and the superstitions surrounding witches, exorcists, and spiritual leaders. A total of eleven families of Mal Pahadiya reside in Hirudih village. The infant son of Sukwa Dehri from the same village had been unwell for a prolonged period. One day, Sukwa Dehri and his wife organized a meeting in the village headed by Manjhi (Headman of the Mal Pahadiya Village), stating before all the villagers that a witch was tormenting their son with black magic. They urged everyone to accompany them to the “Jaan-Guru” (Priest performing magic) for a diagnosis. Manjhi and the villagers present agreed to visit the Jaan-Guru the following Saturday at Durgapur Hatia (Block Gopikander). The next Saturday, all the villagers at Durgapur Hatia approached their Jaan-Guru to discover the cause of the child's illness by presenting the sick child. The Jaan-Guru, showcasing his magic and tricks, informed Sukwa Dehri that a relative had poisoned his child in secret. Additionally, the Jaan-Guru directed his gaze at Dehri's step-brother, Sundara Dehri, and his wife, accusing them of administering poison. He then glared at Sundara Dehri's wife, insisting that she confess to poisoning the child, threatening that his stick would reveal the truth if she did not comply. Overcome with fear, Sundara Dehri's wife confessed to the act of poisoning. The exorcist then demanded RS. 15/- from Sukwa Dehri. Sukwa Dehri sought this amount from Sundara Dehri, who replied that he currently did not have the money. He requested Sukwa Dehri to pay the amount to Jaan-Guru at present, promising to reimburse him the amount after reaching his home.

In this manner, by providing Rs. 15/- to the Jaan-Guru, Sukwa Dehri, along with the entire village, departs for their home. In Durgapur Hatia, the expenses incurred for food, beverages, and other transportation were also placed upon Sundara Dehri. The following day, under the guidance of the Manjhi Nakul Rai of the neighboring village of “Chichro”, both brothers convened a meeting in Hirudih village to resolve their ongoing dispute. During this time, Sundara Dehri and his wife consistently faced death threats from Sukwa Dehri and his spouse. At the meeting, Manjhi, after hearing from all involved parties, ruled that Sundara Dehri should immediately pay RS. 25/- to Sukwa Dehri. Upon hearing this ruling, Sundara Dehri promptly hands over RS. 25/- to Manjhi. Subsequently, Manjhi transfers the full compensation amount to Sukwa Dehri. Thus, the meeting concludes with the reconciliation of the two brothers. On the following day, Manjhi (from the village of Chichro) Nakula Rai visits Sukwa Dehri's residence to request RS. 10/- as his share, but Sukwa Dehri outright refuses to provide the amount. In retaliation, Nakul Rai, along with Sundara Dehri and his wife, files a joint complaint against Sukwa Dehri, two women, and eight other men at the Kathikund Police station the very next day. To bolster their case, Sundara Dehri pays a bribe of RS. 30/- at the police station. The next day, the constables and watchmen from the police station arrive in Hirudih village, gathering all the villagers and falsely accusing them of assaulting Sundara Dehri and vandalizing his home. Upon hearing these claims, the villagers assert that the allegations are entirely unfounded. They point out that Sundara Dehri is right there; he appears unharmed. They urge everyone to inspect his house. All the villagers proceed to Sundara Dehri's home. The house was intact. After witnessing this, the constable and the watchman acknowledge that everything seems fine, but since a case has been filed at the police station, everyone must now go to the police station.

Then the constable announced that a case had been filed against two women, Lakhi Maharani and Soni Maharani close relatives of Sukwa Dehri. However, he stated that if they could provide RS. 50/- immediately, they would not need to go to the police station. The women quickly handed over RS. 10/- along with two chickens to the constable's team. The constable's team, now displaying their anger, insisted that since they had traveled a long distance, they required the full RS. 50/- right away; otherwise, all the men would have to accompany them to the police station. In a rush, the villagers collectively managed to gather RS. 20/- for the police team. Subsequently, the police team departed from Hirudih, instructing the young men to report to the Kathikund police station the following morning. They reassured the villagers that there was no need for fear, as their matter would be resolved at the Kathikund police station, but warned that failure to appear would result in beatings. The next day, all the young men, along with the two women, arrived at the police station. Upon arrival, the women were ordered to return home, while the nine men were detained in a lock-up. Before they were locked up, the Sub-Inspector of the police station, Sundara Dehri, along with his wife and Nakul Rai, engaged in a private conversation, during which a bribe was exchanged. He then informed the remaining villagers that they could return to Hirudih at ease, as he would arrange for the men to be sent to jail for seven years. On the second day, all nine villagers were brought before the Chief Judicial Magistrate in Dumka, and after the necessary proceedings, they were sent to Dumka Jail. Following this incident, members of the Agrarian organization Dumka³⁸ learned about the situation from a village boy. Immediately, “Shanti Tudu and Alok”³⁹ arrived in Hirudih. The scene was one of despair, with women and children sitting in

³⁸ Agrarian Organization is NGO working for welfare of Pahadiya Tribes in Dumka district of Jharkhand

³⁹ Social worker in Agrarian Organization, Dumka, Jharkhand

tears, expressing their sorrow and concern, all echoing the same sentiment: all the adult men in their families were imprisoned, leaving them to wonder how their farming would continue and how they would survive. Both social workers offered them comfort, and the very next day, they left for Dumka to closely understand the whole incident.

Before arriving, both individuals conveyed their distrust of the witch, Jaan-Guru, to the villagers present, motivating Sundara Dehri and his wife to seek treatment for their sick child at Dumka Hospital. The couple assured that they would take their sick child to Dumka Hospital the next day; however, neither they nor their child appeared at the Dumka hospital. They sent their child to maternal-father's home. On the second day, both social workers arrived in Dumka accompanied by two rural youths and gathered information about the case. Section 387 was applied to these nine villagers. The villagers' lawyer informed their relatives that bail would require 18 men and RS. 180/-. The villagers expressed their inability to meet this requirement, and as a result of the lack of a hearing, bail was denied. Subsequently, the NGO (Agrarian Organization) communicated with the Deputy Commissioner of Dumka regarding this issue, leading to the release of all nine individuals on bail two days later. The following day, Shanti Tudu and Alok returned to Hirudih village and inquired of the women about the substantial amount of money they had spent on the constable team at the police station for bail and other expenses. Everyone responded that they had managed to gather the money with great difficulty by taking loans, selling household items, and mortgaging their farms. They lamented that they would never again escape the clutches of moneylenders. Ten families have taken loans under the following conditions and sources.

- Ms. Durgi Maharani, daughter of Sukwa Dehri, mentioned that she has pledged her silver necklace at "Kharauni Hatia" for RS. 20/-, with a weekly interest of RS. 02/- to be paid.
- Mrs. Dharmi Maharani, wife of Ramesh Dehri, has mortgaged her cow for RS. 20/- and is required to repay RS. 30/- Rs. next month.
- Mrs. Rani Maharani, married to Chanda Dehri, has put her farm as collateral for RS. 20/-, needing to return RS. 30/- Rs. upon harvest.
- Mrs. Saraswati Rani, spouse of Mangala Dehri, has pledged two steel plates and a steel pot for RS. 20/-, with a repayment of RS. 30/-0 next month.
- Mrs. Lakhi Maharani, married to Deva Dehri, borrowed RS. 20/- Rs. from another Pahadiya family in Belbani village, incurring an interest of RS. 01/- per RS. 10/- each month.
- Mrs. Shanti Maharani, wife of Arjun Dehri, has taken a loan of RS. 20/- from her mother at an interest rate of RS. 01/- per RS. 10/- monthly.
- Mrs. Sumitra Maharani, married to Sonai Dehri, has mortgaged her silver necklace in "Kharoni Hatia" for RS. 20/- Rs., with a repayment of RS. 30/- Rs. the month of "Aghan."⁴⁰
- Mrs. Soni Maharani, wife of Bhadu Dehri, has mortgaged a bull for RS. 20/- Rs., needing to repay RS. 30/- Rs. in the month of "Aghan."

⁴⁰ Hindi calendar month

- The families of Sukva Dehri and Keya Dehri have also borrowed RS. 20/- Rs. each by mortgaging utensils and a silver necklace, with a repayment of RS. 30/- next month.

Tragically, Sukwa Dehri's child passed away three days after his release from prison. Prior to this, Sukwa Dehri's step-brother, Sundara Dehri, and his wife fled the village to Bengal. About a month later, Sundara Dehri arrived at the Kathikund police station and filed a Section 107 against the villagers. The remaining villagers were frightened, as they have neither assaulted nor threatened anyone to leave the village. Despite this, Sundara Dehri and his wife continued to harass the villagers without cause.

We even found ourselves imprisoned because of superstition, and we also became victim to the schemes of moneylenders. However, the exorcist, the Jaan-guru, the constable-watchman and Nakul Rai continue to live in tranquility. Consequently, the entanglement of superstition and self-serving individuals has devastated an entire village both socially and economically, while the enterprises of these selfish individuals, exorcists, and Jaan-gurus thrive both day and night.

4.2 Witchcraft Accusations as Social Control

The persistence of witchcraft beliefs in Mal Pahadiya villages continues to result in the persecution of vulnerable women, often leading to violence and community disruption. This phenomenon is illustrated by a 1967 case in Hirudih village, where a child's illness was attributed to witchcraft, triggering a chain of events involving a spiritual diagnostician, accusations, and extortion. The incident reveals the interplay of superstition, economic pressures, and the manipulation of the legal system. A dispute between two brothers, fueled by accusations of poisoning and demands for payment, escalated into a police complaint, highlighting the vulnerability of the community to exploitation and the potential for abuse within the criminal justice system. This case underscores the urgent need for interventions that address deeply entrenched beliefs and promote equitable access to justice within these communities.

5. Conclusion

The ethnographic landscape of the Mal Pahadiya tribe in Jharkhand reveals a socio-cultural framework where *animistic ontologies* and the institutionalized belief in *witchcraft* functions as primary explanatory mechanisms for existential phenomena. For this Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), animism is manifested through a naturalistic cosmology, characterized by the veneration of the several deities and the ritualization of ancestral spirits. Concurrently, witchcraft serves as a socio-magical construct used to rationalize systemic misfortunes, such as morbidity or agricultural failure, often resulting in the marginalization and victimization of women through "witch-branding." Despite modern legislative interventions, these practices persist, underpinned by high levels of geographic isolation, socio-economic deprivation, and limited engagement with formal pedagogical or healthcare systems. The *Mal Pahadiya* tribe's socio-cultural framework is defined by an *animistic cosmology* and a persistent belief in witchcraft, both of which serve as primary ontological mechanisms for explaining misfortune while frequently resulting in the systemic marginalization of women through "witch-branding" practices. In contemporary tribal societies, accusations of witchcraft function as a mechanism of social control, disproportionately impacting women. These accusations, frequently rooted in political motivations such as land acquisition or intergroup rivalry, manifest as violence, including torture, expulsion, and even death. This phenomenon observed in regions like Jharkhand and mirrored globally, highlights how

beliefs in witchcraft can be manipulated to perpetuate gender-based violence and maintain power structures within these communities. The Indian legal system's attempts to address this issue through legislation and judicial intervention are ongoing, yet persistent challenges remain in eradicating the underlying socio-cultural factors that contribute to this form of violence.

This entanglement of belief, social hierarchy, and economic interest complicates any linear narrative of Government reform. It exposes the limits of punitive bans in the absence of efforts to address structural vulnerabilities and epistemic frameworks that legitimated violence. Sustained interventions combining legal protection, equitable resource allocation, public health initiatives, and culturally grounded education were and remain essential to protect those most at risk and to undermine the conditions that allow witchcraft accusations to function as tools of coercion and control.

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