



# The Women Betrayed

Script and Direction: Sehjo Singh

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**T**HIS short documentary film starts with a dedication to the people of Purulia, Bengal and indigenous people elsewhere in tribute to their courage in the face of the crushing onslaught of modern civilization, with the belief that they shall soon recognize and fight the enemy within and without.

The opening shot is that of a man lying on the ground, writhing in convulsions, surrounded by a crowd. The man is a tribal, supposed to be possessed by a 'witch. In the next shot, cute little children from a public school in Jamshedpur, sitting pretty in their neat uniforms, have this to say about tribals: "tribals are very orthodox and backward; they are not aware of modern things; they do not mix with outsiders." The scene moves to a group of tribal women and children going to the forest to collect leaves for their livelihood and the public school pronounces that tribals have an inferiority complex.

Then there are scenes from a street play in which the 'civilized men' are trying to civilize the barbarian tribals. The narrator's voice asks, "Why am I a witch?" and answers, "because I am a woman." Khurko, a tribal woman from Mahato village 83 kilometres from Jamshedpur, tells in her interview how she was tortured after being branded a witch and how

the villagers had even dug a ditch to burn her. "I am a widow; that is why they call me a witch," she says. She would not, however, leave the village. "Where else will I go," she asks?

The narrator's resolute voice is now The Voice of The Tribal as it intones about the misery modern civilization (with its towns, factories and quarries) has brought to the tribals and castigates it for all the ills. "We thought witches had brought it all," it says, "but it really is modern civilization."

From the witch to the witch doctor now. This particular ojha, with a fur cap, dark glasses and black shirt, looks like a common political hoodlum (and is perhaps one) and is all seriousness as he explains the finer points of witchcraft, before he drives away in his jeep. There is a series of interviews: with the policeman, who says in a matter of fact manner that there was the murder of a witch, but the culprit has not been apprehended; with the lawyers, who feel that the administration does not consider tribals worth bothering about; and with the pastor of the local church, who would not want to be directly involved with such cases. The witch's daughter, who might herself meet the cruel fate one day, says: "We live by the sun-god's mercy."

There are some activists, however. The woman tribal worker of the CPI explains that witch-hunting cases go

up when mines close down and there is unemployment or when crops fail when there is no rainfall. There is also the Anti-Witch hunt Movement in Purulia led by the venerable old man Sharda Prasad Kisku, who is interviewed.

The film offers no solution, except when the Voice says: "The answer we shall find within." It cuts to a statue of tribal leader Birsa Munda and the Voice adds: "We shall find your answer again from the depths of history." The film ends with tribal children singing, "Birsa, be born again."

If the film sought to interpret the phenomenon of witch-hunting in tribal villages, it has failed miserably. It

does not explain why some women are considered witches, whether there are any motive behind it (such as grabbing women's land). Despite the invectives in the narrator's comments, the film does not bring out how modern civilization is responsible for the institution of witchcraft. Nor is it clear how Birsa Munda's memory is going to be its solution. Instead of diatribes against modern civilization for all the ills it has brought to tribals, the film would have done well to stick to its main theme of witch-hunting — analysing the causes, the economic factors, the social customs and the popular beliefs leading to the betrayal of these Women. □