

Because They Were Women

— Witchkilling In Bihar

ON March 28, four women were accused of being witches and were beaten to death in village Jharwar, Lakhisarai thana, Munger district, Bihar. Two days after Holi, Anandi Paswan, a young man of village Jharwar, had developed pains in his chest and abdomen and had subsequently died. His family and some other villagers suspected that this was the doing of witches. Certain women were already suspected of being witches. Yet the villagers thought it better to consult an *ojha* before killing the women.

On March 25, a public meeting was called in the village. Subelal Paswan presided. Only men were present at this meeting. A decision was taken that an *ojha* would be called to detect the witches, and that his verdict would be implicitly accepted. The women declared witches by the *ojha* would be tortured and killed under his instructions. No one would oppose this, not even the women's family members. Every household in the village would contribute towards paying the *ojha's* fees.

On March 27, an *ojha* came from Saharsa. He performed some rituals and ceremonies. Then he announced that each woman of the village was to come out of her house and approach the tent that he had set up. She must eat the ash that he would give her. Any woman who did not do this would be declared a witch. Any woman who developed certain symptoms after eating the ash, who,

for instance, felt sick, got a headache, got upset, would be declared a witch.

Immediately after eating the ash, four women, Sarni Devi, Dularwa Devi, Meghni Devi, and Sakhi Devi began to feel giddy and nauseous. When they



developed these symptoms, they became upset and started screaming and crying in fear. As the preparations for their torture were set afoot, they naturally began to scream and cry more. Their screams were taken as evidence of their

guilt and of the *ojha's* skill. Since the decision taken earlier had been a "democratic" one nobody had the right to protest. Anandi Paswan's family felt that justice had been done, the women victim's families were covered with shame, and the enthusiastic young men of the village were eager to begin.

The women were surrounded by men. First, they were stripped. Then their bodies and faces were blackened and their heads shaved. After that, they were made to run naked round the village while the men beat them with burning brands, sticks, thorny plants and other weapons until they died. The beating continued for seven hours. The men and women of the village and even passers by were much entertained by the screams and writhings of the victims.

The men who were most active in the entire proceedings were Rajkapur Paswan, Subelal Paswan, Shyamali Paswan and Bano Paswan. On March 29, the police filed a report and seized two corpses. Rajkapur Paswan was arrested but the others and the *ojha* are absconding.

This particular *ojha* has been practising his trade for quite a while. He makes a good living, and also earns repute and respect. About a year ago, he organised a big ceremony at Saharsa.

He said that all witches in the town and from nearby villages would, of their own accord, gravitate towards the ceremony. Since the ceremony was going on in a public place, a crowd began to gather. It was natural for men, women and children to approach out of curiosity. But for a woman to go there was to declare herself a witch. Fortunately, somebody reported to the police who forbade the *ojha* to conduct the ceremony in a public place. He then conducted it in a friend's house. Even though he is so well known the police profess inability to trace him. It is alleged that the four accused in the Jharwar case have connections with the Congress(I) and have a powerful patron within the party. However, it is unlikely that all witch killing cases are politically instigated.

Another such incident took place on April 8 in Baghmasti village, Gomia thana, which is about seven kilometres from Giridih. There, four men, Rameshwar Gop, Hari Gop, Madan Gop and Gaurishanker Gop, poured boiling liquid on a widow,

Samundari Devi. She was badly burnt and is now in hospital where she is not yet out of danger. All the accused absconded.

On April 21, a pregnant woman was killed as a witch at Bahiyar near Phudkichak village in Gogri, Khaga-riya. A case was filed against seven men. One was arrested but the other six are absconding.

These are not isolated incidents. In many villages in India, women still undergo the anguish of being declared witches. It is usually difficult to identify the accused and even more difficult to get them punished.

After getting news of the killing, I visited Jharwar. It is a small village. Except for a few artisan families, such as a goldsmith, a blacksmith and a barber family, most of the other inhabitants belong to the Dusadh caste and work as agricultural labourers. They also dance and sing to provide entertainment at functions in upper caste homes. The village has no provision for any kind of formal education. There is no hospital. Both those who killed and those who died were poor and belonged to a suppressed caste. There was only one difference between them, a fundamental difference—those who killed were men and those who died women.

A 12 year old child of the village said to me : “The witches are women and the *ojha* is a man. Witches kill but *ojhas* give life.” The implication is that women are responsible for evil and men for good. This analysis, offered by an innocent child has a long and bitter history.

From my interviews with different villagers, I managed to get some background information about the case. All the four women who were killed were married. Dulakha Devi, aged 26, was the daughter of Sakhi Devi, aged 45. Meghni Devi was 60 years old, a mother and a grandmother. Sarni Devi was 50 years old.

Parmeshwar Paswan, son of Sakhi Devi, seemed upset and alleged that his mother and sister had been poisoned by the *ojha*, as a consequence of which they died. The families of the other women said they were not grieved by the deaths.

Though Parmeshwar Paswan and Mohit Paswan, father of the young man Anandi, whose death sparked off the witch hunt, are relatives and neighbours,

there is a longstanding enmity between them.

Some years ago, Dulakha Devi was accused of having cast a spell on Anandi’s uncle and caused boils to erupt all over his body. It is alleged that the boils could not be cured until Dulakha was threatened and forced to recant her spell, after which the .medical treatment took effect. Also, a few days before Anandi died, Sakhi Devi had cursed Mohit for stealing some bricks from her kiln, and had said: “May your son die.” However, this kind of abuse is very common in the villages of Bihar.

Some other villagers said that the families of these four women were the only ones in the village who were under the influence of the CPI(M). All the other families are supporters of the Congress

When I talked to the women, they brought forward Anandi Paswan’s child widow and said : “Look at her. What will become of her now? He had not even received a glass of water from her hands. He never knew what it is to be served by a woman. How long can we silently suffer such doings?” So deep was their blind faith that they felt no sorrow at the murder of the four women. They felt that the women had to die for the good of the village.

Today, a handful of people have control over all the knowledge made available by scientific research, over all inventions and discoveries. The poverty stricken majority, continue to search for their own solutions to illness and pain, being deprived of scientific solutions. Remote villages have neither electricity



(I). The main accused is an activist of the Congress (I) and the coordinator of the harijan cell in the area. It is also alleged that former president of the block Youth Congress, Rajkumar Singh, and former chief minister, Vishwanath Kesan, are patrons of the accused men. However, whether this particular case reflects political tensions or family enmities, what is significant is that those who died in agony were women.

nor water, neither schools nor hospitals, not even transport facilities linking them to towns.

It is understandable that when scientific knowledge and medical care are not available, people should attribute illness and death to the anger of supernatural forces and should think that those forces act through human agents. But the assumption that evil forces act through women and good

forces act through men cannot be attributed to superstition or religion or to a lack of knowledge. This assumption is the product of a male dominated culture. It is generally found that the powerful sections of a society profit from prevalent superstitions and religious beliefs, while the weaker sections have to bear the burden of these beliefs. When I asked the women of Jharwar: "Why do only men attend the meetings when the

decision primarily affects women?" They replied: "if women also start holding meetings, what will become of the *mahattam* (greatness, importance) of the men? After all, only one who is wise and knowledgeable can attend a meeting and give an opinion." This bears witness not only to a culture of violence but also a culture of self deception and self hatred.

The culture in which we live allows violent use to be made of every situation.

A person's knowledge or ignorance, experience or inexperience, sensitivity or insensitivity—all become instruments of violence. Men have made violence a form of entertainment. Undoubtedly, stripping, shaving, and beating the four women to death must have provided entertainment to the men involved. Such deaths have also become a means of livelihood for many, such as the *ojha*.

(translated from Hindi)

Nina and Ahelam

—A Duet In Paint

FROM April 14 to 17, Nina Shah and Ahelam Momin exhibited their pictures at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Ahmedabad.

This was the first time women students of fine arts put up such an exhibition in this city.

Nina and Ahelam are fourth year



students at the local C.N. Art College. Their acquaintance as fellow students blossomed into friendship and awakened the desire to do something new. They began to do work other than that prescribed in the course, and collected money by doing various odd jobs such as running art classes for children, making and selling painted handkerchiefs, frocks and clothes.

By dint of hard work they saved up enough to hold the show. Both of them work in mixed media—sketches, poster colours, pastels, oils.

Deep blues and greens with white spaces dominate Nina's paintings and her preoccupations are philosophical as the titles indicate: *Where Is Thy Fire?*, *Your Soul, Self, Concepts Of Mind*. Bars and prisons recur in her work, also flames and the sun as symbols of hope. In one painting, a stairway ascends past a wall and on the top-most step is a woman's shadow, Nina is 21 years old. She writes poetry and many of her paintings are accompanied by some lines of verse.

The work of 19 year old Ahelam is permeated by a deep sadness but also shows a desire to break out of suffocation. The moon is omni-present in her pictures as the sun is in Nina's. One picture, *Step By Step To The Moon* shows a stairway leading to a door through which the moon is visible. In another, deep shades light up and gradually take shape as sprouting branches of flowers. When I talked to her, Ahelam said: "You could call it a picture of my mind. Like flowers and leaves, I too will be able to emerge from inner suffocation and depression."

—Sushila Joshi

(translated from Hindi)

Women's Book Fair In London

The first international feminist bookfair opened in London to the public on June 5, 1984. Women editors, publishers, librarians, book-sellers from over 23 countries attended the fair, which was organised by a small group of women in the book trade in England. The moving spirit behind the venture was Carole Spedding, an activist of the women's movement in England. Carol was on the *Spare Rib* collective for some years and then went on to found a feminist publishing house.

The fair was funded by the Greater London Council, and the organisers laid great stress on the need to make feminist writings commercially viable in the book market.

Apart from the display and sale of books, various events such as workshops, poetry readings and storytelling sessions, discussions, meetings, film shows, were organised over a couple of weeks in London and also in several counties of England and Ireland.

The organisers had made a special effort to give space and visibility to the writings of third world and black women who were also prominent among the guest speakers. Among the better known writers, novelists and poets present were Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Nawal el Saadawi, Alifa Rifaat, Susan Griffin, Toni Cade Bambara, Zoe Fairbairns and Mary Daly.

In Search Of Answers, a collection of significant writings from the first five years of Manushi, published by Zed Books, London, was released at the fair. □