

Special Issue Research Article

Encountering the *Dain*: Space-Time, Witchcraft Anxiety, and Gaddi Tribal Belonging

Nikita Simpson

SOAS, University of London

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2023.7809>

Abstract

Outwardly, most Gaddi people refute the relevance and danger of witchcraft in present times. At another level, however, rumors of *jadu* (witchcraft, or spells and curses performed by a witch) and *opara* (black magic, or curses that may be performed by anyone) circulate in particular places, caste neighborhoods, and households. This article argues that the study of the discourses of witchcraft—anxieties, rumors, suspected afflictions—provides a window into the changing shape of tribal belonging in the Gaddi community. Drawing on the theory of witchcraft developed by Nancy Munn (1986), the article suggests that witchcraft is an intersubjective practice that generates and manipulates space-time. In the Gaddi case, this manifests in a temporal split. On the one hand, Gaddi people eschew their reputation for witchcraft, rooted in British colonial stereotypes, to break from stigmatizing and marginalizing assumptions about their religious and social practices as they strive for tribal dignity. On the other, the persistent rumors of witchcraft within the Gaddi community articulate a struggle over the contours and values of tribal belonging as it is bound with caste distinction, class mobility, and gendered generational change. Focusing on the complexities of the Gaddi case, this article suggests that witchcraft—when understood through a politics of space-time—remains a valuable tool for South Asian anthropologists as they investigate the nexus of tribe, caste, and class relations.

Keywords

Witchcraft; tribal and caste politics; space; time; India

Recommended Citation

Simpson, N. (2023). Encountering the *Dain*: Space-Time, Witchcraft Anxiety, and Gaddi Tribal Belonging. *HIMALAYA* 42(2): 70-85.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Dain Maas

My first encounter with a witch was in the basement reading room of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library. It was a bright winter day in 2016, and I was flipping through a dogeared copy of Horace Arthur Rose's *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and the North West Frontier Province*. The thousand-page tome, published in 1919, was the product of a fourteen-year ethnographic survey that Rose conducted during his time as Superintendent for Ethnography for the province and District Judge in the court of district and sessions in Punjab. The Gaddis feature heavily in the glossary. I found mentions of them practicing Shaivism in the Chamba and Kangra hills of the Himalayas, offering prayers to secure safe passage over the high passes, and channeling the seductive powers of local gods to tempt fair maidens while passing through villages.

I also found them inhabiting the lands where witches roam.

Every year on the night of the 16th Bhádon [monsoon month] all the *deotá* [local deities] congregate at Dhár Kambogir in the Mandi State. The four *jogní* [female witches] from the east, west, south and north also come and a battle rages between them and the *deotá*, until one party defeats the other. If the *deotá* win, the land yields a good harvest that year, but the victory of the *jogni* is calculated to bring famine (Rose 1919: 473).

My next encounter with a witch was in the summer of 2017, as I prepared to leave for Kangra to conduct ethnographic fieldwork by reviewing the ethnographic record of writing on the Gaddis. More than half a century after the 1919 publication of Rose's *Glossary*, the meeting of witches in the high hills of Kangra appears again, this time in Peter Phillimore's 1982 study of kinship and marriage among the Gaddi in Karnathu, a village on the southern slopes of the Dhaula Dhar range. Again, we hear of witches battling the local gods, but this time

they are portrayed as overtly sexualized women.

The link between *dain*'s (witches') power and their all-consuming sexuality emerges most strongly in an annual battle they fight with the local gods atop a ridge of hills close to Karnathu, partly in Kangra and mostly in Mandi. This takes place at the start of Bhadron (August-September), and victory for the *dain* is achieved and symbolized by the sorceresses lifting up their dresses and taunting the gods (obliging the latter to withdraw) (Phillimore 1982: 308).

My third encounter with a witch occurred sometime after my fieldwork began, in the monsoon of 2018, in a village some four hours' drive from Karnathu. This time, I met the witch in the story of a child told to me around a fire:

On one night each August, there is a great annual war between the *dain* and the god Indru Nag, a manifestation of Indra Devta. On this night, witches congregate in an area behind the Dhaula Dhar passes called Kukururakanda, and together channel their black magic. They are naked as they fight, so the Indru Nag will not look at them. He fights with his back to them. If the *dain* win, there will be only light rain. If the Indru Nag wins and the *dain* are defeated, it will pelt down with rain and hail in the following days and weeks to come, ruining the crops.

The event, here called *dain maas*, was popular among Gaddi children, who became very animated waiting for rain at the beginning of the monsoon. The sexually deviant figure of the *dain* persisted, but she was pitted not against local deities but against the single god Indru Nag, who was seen as the god of rain. It was an inversion of the usual worship of the Indru Nag, who was seen as a benevolent figure praised



Figure 1: A Facebook post from a young Gaddi man (screenshot by the author).

even through social media posts (see Figure 1).

On one level, the *dain maas* could be read as a children’s tale of the battle between good and evil and between darkness and light that plays out in a mythical realm far from the rhythms of the urbanizing Himalayas. Some might see the story as relic of a time when the Gaddi community—who inhabit the foothills of the Dhaula Dhar in Kangra and Chamba—still subsisted on a pastoral livelihood, practiced a form of animistic Shaivism, and attributed illness and misfortune to malign forces. Indeed, some of the interlocutors that I encountered during 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2017–2018) in Kangra refuted the relevance of *jadu* (witchcraft, or spells and curses performed by a witch) and *opara* (black magic, or curses that may be performed by anyone) in the present. To them, it was anachronistic—as the Gaddi community have transitioned away from pastoralism toward waged work, mainstream Hindu

practices, and aspire for upward class mobility. A straightforward explanation might suggest that the discourse of witchcraft is now seen as superstitious in a “modern” age. However, a deeper excursion into Gaddi life reveals that, in the opinions of most people, witchcraft had not bowed its head for good, such that the story of *dain maas* is not just a relic but indicates the persistent fear of witchcraft in the Gaddi community.

How can we account for the persistence of witchcraft anxieties among the Gaddis? Is it even interesting for an ethnographer to keep picking at this old bone? In this article, I argue that studying discourses—anxieties, rumors, and suspected afflictions—of witchcraft provides a window into the changing shape of tribal belonging in the Gaddi community. The Gaddi people of the Western Himalayas—and especially those who reside in Kangra—have experienced a rapid shift in livelihood over the past century from agropastoralism to military

or government service or waged work in the slate mining, tourism, hydropower, and construction sectors (Wagner 2013; Axelby 2016). This shift is driven by the infeasibility of shepherding as a livelihood, as pastures and properties are enclosed and the hardship of a nomadic life becomes less appealing. As Hindu nationalist politics sweeps the country, they too seek to move away from traditional Shaivite animist religious practices and toward a mainstream Hindu religiosity.

However, at precisely the moment where their distinctive livelihood is slipping away, Gaddi people are showing renewed interest in proving their tribal identity. This is driven by appeals for Scheduled Tribe status—awarded in Kangra to upper-caste Gaddis in 2002—for the purpose of reservations and by ethnonationalist ideologies of autochthony. This collective aspirational project requires a reframing of “tribalness,” unyoking it from perceptions of savagery, primitivism, or religious mysticism and bringing it firmly into a modern present. This process of reconstituting tribal identity, however, is fraught, such that the question of who counts as a Gaddi is up for grabs (Christopher 2021).

Where others have examined how Gaddi tribal belonging is being reconstituted along the lines of state categories (Kapila 2008) and of religious affiliation and spirituality (Christopher 2022a, 2022b), I turn here to the ways in which it is reconstituted, and contested, through discourses of witchcraft. In one sense, such an approach has deep roots—where much anthropological literature on witchcraft in India has focused on its perceived prevalence in tribal groups. Indeed, since the colonial period, tribal, or Adivasi, groups have been cast as both fervent believers in witchcraft and as “witch-killers” (Skaria 1997a; 1997b). More recently, scholars have shown how accusations of witchcraft against and within tribal communities, primarily in Central and North-Eastern India, index a wider existential uncertainty in tribal life (Bailey 1996; Sundar 2001; Macdonald 2021) and articulate with changing land rights regimes and

structures of patriarchy (Kelkar and Nathan 1991).

In the Himalayan region, studies of witchcraft have tended to focus on the ways in which such existential uncertainty and relational disruption is steadied through the ritual healing processes that follow rumors of witchcraft (Sax 2009). In line with this genealogy, witchcraft has acted as an important window for anthropologists into the spiritual and social life of the Gaddi people vis-à-vis the colonial, then postcolonial, state. Reflecting on their writings also reveals the changing textures of the ethnographic gaze. For colonial ethnographers, like Rose, the persistent belief in witchcraft on the part of the Gaddi people, and indeed across the Himalayan region, was proof of their marginality to the colonial project and their “primitivism.” This perspective changed with postcolonial anthropologists. Scholars like Peter Phillimore (2014) have shown how beliefs in witchcraft, and their declining intensity, reveal the ways that Gaddis strive to be thoroughly “modern.” More recently, Stephen Christopher (2022a, 2022b) has shown how those marginalized within the Gaddi community by persistent caste stigmas use their belief in witchcraft as “idiom of distress” to express agency.

To this rich conversation, I contribute a particular approach to the study of witchcraft that focuses on its politics of space-time. I draw on the spatiotemporal approach to witchcraft pioneered by Nancy Munn (1986) in her seminal monograph, *The Fame of Gawa*. Before Munn, space-time had been elusive in the study of witchcraft. Classical anthropological studies tended to look at witchcraft as an atemporal mechanism of social structure rather than a dynamic and historically generated discourse (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Marwick 1970). Cultural Marxist accounts engaged with histories of coloniality and extraction but the residues of functionalism, and a Marxist-Hegelian teleological time, prevailed in the presentation of witchcraft, such that time was still considered external to its practice (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Munn established witchcraft as a

practice of *making or manipulating* time rather than a belief or practice *in* time. While other aspects of Munn's work have been extremely influential in anthropology, her analyses of witchcraft have not been taken up with as much fervor.

Munn foundationally argued that all bodies and beings are "intrinsically spatio-temporal" (1986: 268). This conception of socially made time has profound implications for the study of witchcraft. For Munn, the Gawan witch can be understood as encompassing a form of negative value, or "antivalue," the opposite of the values that are most lauded in a society. Their symbolic formations often crystallize the social values that society wishes to eschew or condemn (Graeber 2001: 84). This anti-value manifests in a number of ways—the witch embodies negative emotions like anger, jealousy or destructive autonomy; unequal or nonreciprocal relationships; and the violation of "spatiotemporal control (in the ability to fly, for instance)" (Munn 1986: 219–226).

As such, acts of and rumors about witchcraft create a subversive "spatio-temporal underworld" wherein the positive values of society are reversed. The establishment of boundaries against witches—such as in violence leveled against them, or in particular ritual practices—allow for the creation of a "protective separation rather than an expansion of connectivities" ultimately "counterposing oneself to the destructive other" (1986: 220). As such, building spatial, temporal, and ritual boundaries against witches becomes a means by which people attempt to deal with social change—attempting to "work on and positively transform their negative value outcomes" (1986: 216).

As I go on to show, this approach to witchcraft is productive when read alongside the Gaddi context for two reasons. First, because it emphasizes witchcraft as an intersubjective practice, a means by which people evaluate and transform social relationships in the context of politico-economic change. Second, because it highlights that such a practice of transforming social

relations involves the expansion and splitting of space-time. In this article, I will show how rumors and speculations about witchcraft critically involved this politics of space-time.

Associating Gaddis, or places where Gaddi people reside, with witchcraft works to lock them into a primitive slot, a prior time immemorial outside of the flows of modern time. This association has its roots in the colonial representation of tribal groups and it persists in the stigmatizing ways by which some "outsiders" such as the Gaddis' neighbors refer to them. Hence, the will to distance themselves from witchcraft or to contest its danger is a means to distance themselves from their "primitive" past.

However, and perhaps more interestingly, the persistent circulation of witchcraft rumors—between castes, neighbors of the same caste, and even between generations in a household—reveals a more subtle negotiation of tribal belonging at play where forms of social distinction were unsteady. This unsteadiness is experienced in a fraught present where the potencies and potentialities of people are no longer tied to their caste, class, age, or gendered positionality. Witchcraft here works as an intersubjective practice that occurs in a "spatiotemporal underworld" (Munn 1986) whereby people seek to negotiate the content, tensions, and boundaries of Gaddi tribal identity.

The Persistence of *Jadu*

"There is more witchcraft now than there was ever before," a *chella* (ritual healer) told me as we sat eating a meal of rice and potato curry in the empty courtyard of his home. The courtyard comes alive every Sunday when the *chella* has visitors who seek his healing. Most of these visitors are Gaddi women, but some are Gaddi men too. They harbored unsettling feelings or bodily complaints like dizziness, fainting or "low BP [blood pressure]." These experiences were attributed—after lengthy consultation with the *chella*—to either *sariri* (natural) bodily concerns or to the supernatural forces of *jadu*, *opara*, and *nazar* (evil

eye)—supposedly more common these days than ever before according to the *chella*.

Attacks of witchcraft or black magic were said to “leave the mind and the boundaries of the body *kamzor* (weak),” allowing malign forces, dark thoughts, and negative sentiments like jealousy to prevail. Witchcraft was said to cause psychological ailments—like insomnia, hallucinations, trance, or rumination—and bodily ailments such as dizziness, unidentifiable pain or ache, fever, menstrual problems, and high or low BP. These afflictions more commonly affected women, and particularly women at liminal stages of the life course—like when they were going through puberty, just married, or entering menopause. Often, if a woman experienced one of these symptoms, she would first go to a medical doctor to check if it was a *sariri* problem. If no such diagnosis or treatment was found, she would begin to speculate on the *opara* causes of such distress and consult a *chella*.

If people were experiencing more existential, emotional, or physical distress due to witchcraft, or attributing such distress to it, surely more people were perpetrating it, or those skilled in witchcraft were more prolific? The answers to this question were usually framed in terms of time and space. As a low-caste Hali man from the neighborhood in which I lived put it to me:

The mind these days is more mischievous, for it is *kali yug*, so there are many more *dain* (female witches). There are women here in this neighborhood who practice *jadu tona* (black magic, witchcraft) and some men too are *dagi* (male witches). I won't tell you the names because I don't want to spread rumors.

The *kali yug* is the fourth and final of an endlessly repeated cycle of epochs, characterized by intensifying moral decay. It comes to stand for present time and explains many dilemmas of everyday existence (Pinney 1999: 78). While this sacred temporality does explain the persistence of witchcraft to some extent, it does not

explain the specifics of who practiced it, where, when, and to what gain.

Witchcraft was associated with spaces that were underdeveloped, lacking in new projects of construction, unreachable by roads, or underpopulated. It was suspected that one was more vulnerable to *jadu* in certain spaces, such as liminal jungle areas that bordered the village, low-caste colonies, or the homes of those around whom much misfortune hung. The people associated with witchcraft were those who did not display cleanliness and hygiene or propriety and those who were considered to practice older forms of Gaddi religious ritual or labor. Primarily women around whom misfortune abounded—women who were widowed or reclusive or who had lost children—were said to practice *jadu* and labeled *dain*.

Particular clan groups within the Gaddi castes, such as the Mogu clan, had a reputation for their knowledge of tantric practices. Most of the men considered to practice witchcraft were from the Mogu clan and labeled *dagi*. The *dain* and *dagi* were considered to harbor negative emotions or affects that countered the collective interest, such as jealousy, envy, anger, tempestuousness, sexual deviance, greed, or miserliness; their behavior was considered to run counter to collective values such as the will for wealth redistribution, generosity, and sexual propriety. However, such figures were only ever *suspected* of being *dain* or *dagi*, they were never actively accused—for witchcraft worked as a “plastic and indeterminate” discourse, as Peter Phillimore (2014: 176) has observed, in “the currency of whispers, unspoken suspicions, anxiety, and avoidance.”

Here, Nancy Munn's theory of witchcraft is pertinent in conceptualizing the transformative effect of such witchcraft rumors and the way they work to manipulate time and space. Munn's careful attention to the way in which witchcraft transforms space, time, and value is largely unseen in Indian scholarship. Indeed, as Peter Phillimore so aptly puts it, witchcraft in India is dominated by studies that either

emphasize “the constitutive or restorative potentiality of such practices (like [William] Sax) and those who emphasize the destructive, exclusionary force of occult affliction (like [Isabelle] Nabokov)” (2014: 172). In both these threads, witchcraft is seen as a functional social mechanism rather than an intersubjective practice that creates spatiotemporal worlds. It is this creative potential that I wish to focus on in this article—the way in which witchcraft allows Gaddi people to make, create, or manipulate spatiotemporal worlds through intersubjective encounters.

What is particularly interesting here is the creative duality of the witchcraft discourse. On the one hand, some Gaddi people deny the prevalence and danger of witchcraft in the modern present. On the other, they state there is more witchcraft now than ever before. As I will go on to show, we see that witchcraft creates time in two ways. The denial of witchcraft works to distance Gaddi people from stigmatized mystical practices and create a “modern” spatiotemporal world on the one hand. On the other, rumors of witchcraft constitute a “spatio-temporal underworld” wherein the contours of tribal belonging, and its intersections with caste, gender, class, and age are negotiated.

A Gaddi Genealogy of *Jadu*

“They used to sacrifice humans”—a Pahari businessman whispered to me one day, when I asked him if he does business with any of his Gaddi neighbors—“but this was replaced by goats.” Indeed, wider stigmas against the Gaddi community prevailed in the eyes of their Pahari, Punjabi, and Tibetan neighbors. Some associated their pastoral livelihood and Shaivite ritual practices with mysticism, savagery, and primitivism. Rumors of witchcraft were not far behind. These perceived associations between Gaddi tribal groups and witchcraft are reflected in colonial discourses. In the *Punjab District Gazetteer*, the District Commissioner, Barnes writes:

[T]he hill people are very superstitious. They firmly believe in

witchcraft, and one of their most constant reproaches against our rule is that there is no punishment for witches. Every incident at all out of ordinary course, such as the death of a young man, or the cessation of milk in a buffalo is ascribed at once to supernatural causes (1885: 154–155).

For the colonial administrators, the belief in witchcraft was a backward mode of “primitivist” belief that prevented Gaddis from joining in the civilizing project of British rule. The association of Gaddi people and the wider Himalayan frontiers with occult beliefs aligned with a wider colonial push to civilize deviant religious and sexual practices, as Indian historians have shown.¹ For instance, in the colonial period, as Ajay Skaria has argued (1997a), the association of tribal people with witch-killing and their subsequent prosecution under colonial law was an instrument used to represent tribal people as “wild” or “primitive” and to formalize the distinction between castes and tribes. Referencing specifically colonial witchcraft prosecution among the Bhil, Skaria shows how British archival accounts suggest that it took the values of “nobility, mildness, sagacity, and inbred gentlemanliness of colonial officials to subdue the Bhils,” who were construed as savage witch-killers (1997a: 735; 1997b). Skaria points out that the association of tribal groups with witchcraft exists within an anachronistic, orientalist politics of time, and suggests that the figure of the witch and of the tribal witch-killer was used by colonial administrators to plot and rank social groups according to how much “behind the time of Europe” they were, ascribing to them the values of primitivism, savagery and wildness against British notions of Enlightenment and modernity.

Turning to later records of Gaddi witchcraft, and particularly to the work of Peter Phillimore published from 1982, we see a change in the temporality of witchcraft. Drawing on more than 30 years of ethnographic connection, Phillimore (2014) observed that during his last visit in 2009 the idea of witchcraft as a potent, malign

force was losing its old persuasiveness. Phillimore worked in a Gaddi-speaking village that he calls K, more than four hours' drive along the foothills of the Dhaura Dhar from the village in which I worked but organized according to similar patterns of caste and tribe.

Phillimore charts how K had a reputation for being a particularly dangerous *jadu* village. Indeed, this reputation was still remembered by my older interlocutors who told tales of old *dain* who lived there. Phillimore suggests that K had this reputation from well before the 1970s right through until the early years of this century due to its enclosure from Gaddi networks of exchange caused by relative geographic isolation, unusual practices of village endogamy, and a high concentration of shepherding families. As the forces of education, migration, and transport opened K up to the rest of the Kangra valley and beyond, the village shed this reputation. Phillimore observes that in the 1970s K was considered “backward” in time and hence associated with the “backward” practice of witchcraft. In 2002, the last time he heard of *jadu* spoken as a current threat, his interlocutors described it in contradictory ways. On the one hand, they suggested that “modern life” may have been intensifying the urge to use the malign powers of *jadu*. On the other hand, they said that *jadu*'s grip over K had weakened. By the time he visited in 2009, the village's reputation for *jadu* was but a memory—“that used to be a famous village”—a Gaddi taxi driver told him. Phillimore contends that “[it] would be very hard to argue for the ‘modernity’ of *jadu* in this particular Kangra village” (2014: 173).

Interpreting Phillimore's research in light of the stigmatizing colonial association between Gaddi and wider tribal groups with witchcraft, we begin to see the ways in which the association of the village with witchcraft on the grounds of its isolation, endogamy, and shepherding livelihoods reveals a temporal split. Denying that this village is associated with witchcraft is to unyoke the qualities of “backwardness,” primitivism, and mysticism from the Gaddi

present and to locate these qualities firmly in a Gaddi past. As the village has opened up and roads built, and as people take up new professions, the persuasiveness of *jadu* does not hold.

However, when I myself visited K in 2023—still relatively isolated for those from the periurban outskirts of Dharamsala—I was still warned not to drink the water or eat the food that might be offered to me lest it was cursed by *jadu*. It was clear that *jadu* had not bowed its head for good but instead existed as a “spatio-temporal underworld,” wherein the qualities of “Gaddiness” and the contours of tribal belonging were still being negotiated. Let us now turn to my own field site, a village some four hours' drive from K, where another set of particular circumstances have caused a resurgence of fear of witchcraft.

Another *Jadu* Village?

On a clear night, sitting on the slate ledge of the *dhar* (shepherding hut) in the lower mountain foothills, the whole village of, what I will call, T opens like a map in front of weary eyes.² The house I lived in lies at the center of a low-caste colony. Unlike below in the Brahmin area, this colony looks more cramped than other colonies, as the houses are built at close quarters and are not surrounded by vast fields. However, there were no other obvious indicators of its inhabitants' caste. In fact, the colony seemed quite wealthy in some parts, and its Hali and Dogri inhabitants insisted,

We are not backward ... in the past, people of lower “community” would wear a black dot on their shoulders, we wouldn't share the same water tap. But this is no more, we have rights now.

In the pastoral economy, caste roles were structured through relative rights to graze and farm the land and a ritual division of labor in the relationship to animals. Where Brahmins owned farming land, the upper castes (Rajputs, Ranas, and Thakurs) owned flocks and the lower castes (Sippis, Dogris, and Halis) performed ritual and

practical roles such as shearing, ritual healing, or dealing with animal carcasses. Developments over the past century—the unraveling of the pastoral economy, change in land ownership regimes, and the rise of work in the slate mining industry—have intensified caste divisions within the Gaddi community and unyoked caste classifications from economic roles (Kapila 2008; Wagner 2013; Christopher 2020). When I arrived in Kangra, and came to settle in the village of T, caste groups were nominally referred to as “communities” and they were no longer necessarily ordered along the lines of occupation.

At this point, however, a new set of changes had swept through the village. Narendra Modi had recently been elected prime minister and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were in power both nationally and in local politics. While electoral support for the BJP was concentrated among the upper castes, the lower-caste Halis voted primarily for the Congress Party. All the same, the form of masculine respectability, modernity, and dignity signaled by the Hindu nationalist movement appealed to all caste groups. The appeal profoundly impacted tribe-caste relations: the lower-caste Hali who aspired to upper-class status and tribal belonging expanded their claims to Gaddi-ness, and their upper-caste neighbors sought to curtail their claims and consolidate the boundaries of Gaddi belonging along the lines of upper-caste endogamous groups. These boundaries were threatened by the economic success of low-caste businessmen in particular—many of whom resided in the village of T, having made their money from selling valuable land to developers who sought locations for hotels and campsites close to the Dhaula Dhar foothills. Lower-caste groups posed a new kind of existential threat to upper-caste Gaddis in T and its surrounding villages. Without formal discriminatory rubrics through which to cast their stigmas, upper-caste Gaddis came to speculate about the polluting qualities of such groups through the idiom of witchcraft. They sought this means to claim social precedence, assert the respectability of

their own caste group, and bind such caste identity with tribal belonging.

In T, the architectural constitution of the low-caste colony was mixed. While the Hali and Dogri inhabitants had settled or bought land there for its proximity to the slate mines, the houses they had come to build over the years told a different story of class divides.³ Crumbling mud houses, with only slivers of fields surrounding them, were set between palatial concrete homesteads, consisting of multiple household spaces or rooms rented out to foreigners and tourists. Three grand hotels were being built on prime riverside land at the center of this area.

Brokered by Hali and Dogri entrepreneurs, this kind of outside influence is desired for its financial capital—the entrepreneurial opportunities it brings for young unemployed men—and for its spiritual capital, testament to the importance of this place on the map of the Hindu nation. But it is also feared, for developing the land like this is considered to poison its fertility with the immoral ways it brings. Indeed, a huge landslide rocked this area a decade ago, bringing down a whole hamlet with it. Villagers told me that this was because developers had built a new Airtel phone tower in the area. In order to build the tower, a sacred lake inhabited by an old widow was covered over. This widow could, herself, have been a *dain*. It was whispered that the widow had protested and prophesied the landslide, but no one listened. It was she who brought down the tower and the whole village with it, leaving families homeless and the tower to rust in the rubble and clay. It is visible from high in the shepherding hut, resembling a huge scar.

The widow’s curse was not an isolated incident. In fact, this whole hamlet, like Phillimore’s K village, had a reputation for *jadu*. But unlike K, this reputation could not be put down to endogamy, geographic isolation, or a high concentration of shepherding families. This part of the village was highly connected to both the slate mines and the urban center of Dharamsala, and not a single family still practiced shepherding or

even assisted a shepherd. This reputation for *jadu* emerged through rumors told by Rajput and Brahmin friends as they visited me in my new home. I came to realize, through whispered warnings and overheard conversations, that this place was considered “dangerous” by my upper-caste Gaddi interlocutors for a “young girl” like me (Simpson 2019).

“You know you are living in a kind of red light district,” a Gaddi Rajput friend told me. He explained that living in a low-caste area was dangerous because women still brew alcohol at home and, sometimes, sell sex. Today, Brahmin and Rajput families rarely venture into this area. Historically, shepherding families had no such aversion because their flocks grazed on the fodder on the wastes and small steppe farms of all cultivators that surrounded the village. But now the stigmatizing qualities of sexual transgression, envy, and uncleanness associated with low-caste people are considered dangerous and a potential cause of illness through the vectors of witchcraft and black magic. They were associated with an older form of Gaddi life, one which had no place in upper caste visions of tribal belonging.

This is not to say, however, that witchcraft rumors did not abound in Rajput and Brahmin hamlets, and that *dain* did not come from other castes. However, the reputation for sexual transgression, and for the brewing and consumption of alcohol, in low-caste neighborhoods spilled over into increased anxiety about the presence of malign forces in these particular spaces. Upper-caste people feared that if they spent time in this part of the village, and especially if they consumed foods provided by low-caste people, they might become susceptible to witchcraft or black magic and become ill or possessed themselves by malign forces.

For example, one Gaddi Rajput interlocutor explained to me that she had been plagued by headaches and stomach pain since she slept in the house of her foreign friend, a house that was leased from a low-caste landlord. In another instance, I had come down with a chronic stomach flu that had

caused me discomfort for some months. Gaddi Brahmin interlocutors told me that might have been caused by the jealous and malign gazes of my low-caste neighbors. I was particularly warned against eating in the house of a female neighbor who had recently separated from her husband and was rumored to be having an affair with a colleague.

Evidently, the fact that caste divides were no longer discussed explicitly did not mean that they did not exist. Instead, I came to realize, rumors of witchcraft leveled by upper-caste Gaddis against their lower-caste neighbors worked to *create* a spatiotemporal world that distinguished communities along the lines of caste. In fact, witchcraft rumor bounded space such that avoiding the low-caste community was consistent with rejecting the negative values or qualities ascribed to it and constituting oneself in line with the positive values that oppose it.

***Jadu* in the Neighborhood**

Rumors of witchcraft ran not only between castes but also within caste neighborhoods, I came to realize as I spent more time in T. The fears of witchcraft that I encountered were often held by those from the Hali and Dogri castes who had succeeded in an economic sense. The diversification of economic roles within the Gaddi community has introduced inequalities in employment and educational opportunities that cut across families. The families able to accumulate wealth also seek to improve their class status, often articulated through the appeal to a middle-class femininity where women aspire to withdraw from work and to become housewives (Simpson 2023). This is possible only for families who have stable incomes, for instance from military or government salaries and pensions. Those who have these opportunities hope to curtail the demands of credit and care made by their kin and affines to concentrate wealth in the nuclear family. The wealthy and their kin experience such inequalities across domestic networks through forms of psychic and relational injury, often expressed by both parties in bodily

disruption and suspicions of witchcraft and black magic.

I encountered one such set of witchcraft rumors at the home of Pravesh, a Hali man who had served in the military for some thirty years. Pravesh lived in one of the highest outcrops of the village of T, in a palatial compound that also houses his two sons and their wives. Pravesh's military salary allowed him to accumulate wealth and add to this compound successively. His wife did not work. She was a homemaker, and now she was cared for by her daughters-in-law.

When I met Pravesh, his second son, Billu, had recently married and his daughter-in-law, Tara, was expecting her first child. Having tea with Pravesh, the hope that this child would be a son was all he could talk about. He even encouraged his daughter-in-law to rest when she hurried to fetch us tea when I arrived in his living room. I left that day cooing over Tara's swelling belly and wishing her the best in the hard months to come.

But bad news came too soon: Tara had miscarried the child and had to be rushed to the hospital. At first, the tellers of this tragedy put it down to her "dry womb"—unable to carry the child. But a few days later, these rumors fermented into fears of witchcraft. Pravesh worried that this had happened to Tara because they had been doing better than others in their caste community.

The tale resonated with mutterings from other members of the Hali community who cited their steady accumulation of wealth as the reason they were targets for witchcraft. A Hali businessman explained, "[People] want to do things quickly in these days." After the suspicions of witchcraft began to circulate, Pravesh's family took steps to protect themselves from witchcraft: they went to a *chella* who prescribed them certain ritual restrictions, including abstaining from heating foods like alcohol, garlic, onion, and meat; and certain ritual acts, including the wearing of particular thread. Pravesh's neighbors also took steps to avoid his compound, and whispered that

it was not safe to visit, eat, or drink the food in his house.

As Munn observes in the Gawan case, these speculations about how people like Pravesh had accumulated wealth or who was jealous are made through forms of figurative speech. Importantly, individuals are not accused or mentioned; instead, a wider sense of communal unease prevails and the "community at large remains the diffuse locus of witchery" (Munn [1986] 1992: 218). The rumor that witchcraft is at play in Pravesh's home reveals the intimate, embodied experience of class anxiety experienced within caste groups. The rumor signals a struggle over the collective values of a caste community felt at the level of the body; it signals a potential breach of communal interest at the fulcrum of caste and tribal belonging.

Witchcraft rumor works in both directions. Members of the lower classes suspect their upwardly mobile kin of individualism or selfishness. The upwardly mobile suspect their lower-class kin of jealousy or envy. Both qualities are corrosive of collective relations, and bounding space and bodies against witchcraft is an attempt to regain control over collective interests without directly accusing any party of malpractice. Witchcraft in either direction signals, as Munn states, "self-aggrandisement ... expanded to the level where the actor transcends the spatiotemporal structures limiting ordinary human transactions and becomes the active controlling principle of spacetime" (1986: 232). In other words, the will to "do things quickly" signals individualism and moral ferment. Framing such qualities as witchcraft locates them in a spatiotemporal world beyond ordinary agency. The adoption of ritual behaviors prescribed by the *chella*, and the avoidance of Pravesh's house, both work to create protective separation and control this spatiotemporal underworld that threatens the communal interest.

In this case and the previous, we have seen how rumors of witchcraft work across the Gaddi community to bind negative values such as self-interest, jealousy, and sexual

impropriety to certain groups, places, and people. In avoiding or building boundaries against such people or places, Gaddi people generate and affirm the positive values and qualities of tribal belonging such as respectability, cleanliness, sharing, and communal interest.

Jadu at Home

In this final section, we turn to the third, and perhaps the most intimate way, in which rumors of witchcraft circulated in T—at home. Women—primarily elderly Gaddi women—who are widowed or around whom much misfortune prevails are most often suspected of witchcraft, though never actively accused of it. The rumor often centers on their relationship with their daughter-in-law. Let us take the case of Rukmini Devi as the first example.

Rukmini Devi is an elderly Hali widow, who lived in a compound high up in T with her son and daughter-in-law and their three children. The rumors that she practiced witchcraft were associated with her “regressive” religious practices and her tendency to become possessed during religious rituals. Rukmini lost her husband some ten years ago and presided over a house that included her alcoholic son, Sorab, and sexually transgressive daughter-in-law, Saakshi. The couple were always fighting—theirs had been a love marriage across castes; Saakshi came from a Gaddi Rajput family. While their marriage was accepted by her father-in-law, it was condemned by her mother-in-law. “My mother-in-law is a horrible woman,” Saakshi said. She had suffered immense horrors at Rukmini’s hands. Saakshi spoke of how she would be beaten and locked in the house, how she would watch her children play from the window. Rukmini’s reputation as a willful, angry woman spread through the village. Soon, misfortunes began to be attributed to her. A neighbor’s dog died after running through Rukmini’s fields. When Saakshi’s children whispered these rumors to her, she would merely raise her eyebrows, but neither confirm nor deny them.

According to the hegemonic ideals of Hindu femininity, elderly women are meant to disentangle themselves from worldly life and eschew sexuality when they enter old age, especially if they are widowed (Lamb 2000). However, and as I have examined elsewhere, many of the elder generation of Gaddi women are cynical about conjugal intimacy and patriarchal deference (Simpson 2022). They crack sexual jokes and do not practice, for instance, *Karwa Chauth*, a day of ritual fasting for one’s husband. Many elderly Gaddi women laugh at their daughter-in-law who did so for their “useless, drunken fool” of a husband. The younger generation of Gaddi women, which seeks a disciplined femininity as part of their aspiration for upward social mobility, finds the overt sexual references and troublesome nature of elderly women dangerous, and widows’ behaviors and attitudes even more problematic.

Widows sit outside, or are marginal to, the structures of patriarchal kinship. They are stigmatized for their economic dependency on their sons and resented for their dependency on the care of their daughters-in-law, and they are considered dangerous because their sexuality is not contained by a male influence (see Harlan and Courtright 1995). In a new regime of property rights that allows women to claim their husband’s property, and where Gaddi people no longer practice *karewa* (a widow marries her husband’s brother), widows level a new threat against patriarchal inheritance practices (Kapila 2004). In a kinship system that is moving toward nuclear households sustained by conjugal intimacy and framed by an aspiration toward middle-class domesticity (Simpson 2023), widows are rendered even more marginal. Against a model of Gaddi femininity that privileges sexual chastity and docility, and promotes cleanliness of body and home, the figure of the willful elderly woman becomes dangerous.

Indeed, witchcraft rumors leveled against elderly Gaddi women often wove together negative emotions with perceptions of sexual impropriety or transgression. We

can see these particularly fraught qualities at play in perhaps the most vivid and horrifying story of witchcraft that I encountered—that of Suman Devi, a Gaddi Sippi widow suspected of being a *dain* by her own family. The stigma of misfortune and widowhood was compounded by whispers of her suspected sexual impropriety. “Everyone in the village knows that she practices *jadu*,” a Gaddi Rajput friend told me one day as we walked past her house in the Sippi colony of the village. “I heard that she goes at 3 am, completely naked and without wearing shoes, to wander the streets.” He went on, “Once somebody saw her holding a burning hot coal in her hand. As a result of her black magic, her son and grandson have HIV.”

Suman Devi’s family lived in the lower part of the village. It was known that both her son and eight-year-old grandson were living with HIV. The friends of her son or grandson I spoke to felt they were victims of her witchcraft and that they were also troubled by their constant need to care for her as she went wandering at night. Another friend from the village told me:

Once I went to her house, it was for the wedding of her other son. I went into the living room, and I felt a strange sensation, like chills down my spine. Then I turned around and I saw a chair moving on its own. I’m sure it was witchcraft. I’ve never been back into that house again.

Suman Devi was said to be able to move certain objects across the boundaries of time and space, through the use of mantras and other spells. “There are other languages, tantric mantras, that these witches know for doing something bad.” Another Gaddi companion explained:

They learn it from other witches, and so much fear comes from it. In modernity more people know these mantras, because there are more bad ideas and less good ideas in people’s minds.

In Suman’s case, we again see the more-than-human spatiotemporal agency

displayed by witches—indicating an underworld where the positive values of society are threatened—but in this case her potency is explicitly libidized. Instead of directly disciplining these women or complaining about their dependency, witchcraft rumors work to associate elderly women with negative social values, ascribing to them the potential to threaten the wider social order. Younger generations experienced the threat posed by undisciplined or temperamental elderly women as emotionally unsettling and potentially deleterious to their physical health. Witchcraft rumors allowed younger generations of women to build boundaries against an older tribal femininity by excluding women who embodied its signifiers. They also worked relationally to stigmatize certain women and to sanction acts of avoidance or neglect from neighbors and the younger generations. Indeed, we see that the memory of the tribal past is experienced in the entanglement of supernatural forces, aggression, and sexuality.

Conclusion, (Un)fixed in Time

The Gaddi people have been associated with witchcraft since before the colonial period. These stigmas have persisted, and even strengthened, as the Gaddi people seek inclusion in the Indian nation state, give up their pastoral livelihoods, and leave behind mystic and animistic religious practices. Part of this project of reframing tribal identity has involved, as Peter Phillimore has charted, the attempt to shed their reputation of witchcraft. To do this is to refuse to accept the historical stereotypes that others level at them. However, at another level, such stereotypes have been inevitably internalized such that rumors of witchcraft persist within Gaddi communities.

I have shown in this article how such rumors run along three “moral fault lines” (Roberts 2016: 6–7) of Gaddi identity, in each case used to contest and rework forms of social distinction within the tribe-caste-class nexus.

First, the upper castes use rumors of witchcraft to associate lower-caste spaces and individuals with the negative values of

sexual impropriety and uncleanness, thus excluding them from the contours of tribal dignity.

Second, witchcraft rumor is used within caste groups in struggles over upward social mobility as people speculate about the self-interest and jealousy of their kin and neighbors and attempt to stabilize newly unequal relationships.

Third, witchcraft rumor is used within homes to stigmatize and “other” elderly women, and especially widows, in the will to institute a new form of feminine respectability and eschew an older Gaddi sexuality and ritual practice.

Each of these cases involves a struggle over the values and contours of Gaddi tribal belonging. In each of these cases, the intersubjective act of speculating about witchcraft seeks to generate a new spatiotemporal world for the Gaddis, one that is bounded against the negative values—“backwardness,” sexual impropriety, uncleanness, jealousy, self-interest—that threaten tribal dignity. In witchcraft, these values are repressed in what Nancy Munn has called a “spatio-temporal underworld,” where the *dain* reign.

Nikita Simpson is a Lecturer in Anthropology at SOAS, University of London. She has conducted fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh, with the Gaddi community, since 2014. Her writings on Gaddi life appear in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, and *Focaal*, amongst other venues. She is preparing a manuscript titled ‘Tension: Mental Distress and Modern Time at the Himalayan Frontier.’

Research for this article was made possible by an LSE Doctoral Studentship (2016–20), the Alfred Gell Research Proposal Prize (2017, with thanks to Dr Jonathan Oppenheimer), the Rosemary and Raymond Firth Prize (2021), and the Firth Prize (2021). It has benefited from engagement with fellow Gaddi scholars at an SOAS Workshop in July 2022; from comments by Sam Wilby; from the editorial support of Stephen Christopher and two anonymous reviewers; and from the consistent guidance of Peter Phillimore and Kriti Kapila. Over and above, it is indebted to the companionship and insight of Soujanya Boruah and Shyam Lal.

Endnotes

1. However, the Gaddis did not easily fit into the wider colonial template of a tribe, and enjoyed favourable treatment, especially by the Rajas in Chamba.
2. All places and names are pseudonyms.
3. Due to sporadic urban development and landslides, the village topography in this area did not necessarily mirror the associations between caste purity and elevation indicated by Baker (2005) and Christopher (2020).

 References

- Axelby, Richard. 2016. "Who Has the Stick Has the Buffalo": Processes of Inclusion and Exclusion on a Pasture in the Indian Himalayas. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 13: 1–16.
- Bailey, Fred. 1996. *The Witch-Hunt*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Baker, Mark. 2005. *The Kuhls of Kangra, Community-managed irrigation in the Western Himalayas*. Seattle, University of Washington Press.
- Barnes, G.C. 1855. *Report of the Summary Settlement of Kangra District*. <https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/s348aedb8880cab8c45637abc-7493ecddd/uploads/2018/03/2018032983.pdf>.
- Christopher, S. 2020a. 'Scheduled Tribe Dalit' and the Recognition of Tribal Casteism. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 6 (1): 7–23. [doi:10.1177/2394481120945824](https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481120945824).
- . 2020b. "Scheduled Tribe Dalit" and the Recognition of Tribal Casteism. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 6(1): 7–23.
- . 2022a. "Black Magic and Hali Spirituality in Himachal Pradesh." In *Inclusion and Access in the Land of Unequal Opportunities: Mapping Identity-induced Marginalisation in India*. Edited by R.K. Kale and S.S. Acharya. Delhi: Springer, 38–61.
- . 2022b. Critique of the Spirit: Vernacular Christianity in the Dalit-Tribal Margins. *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts*. 13(1): 63–90.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff. 1999. Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction, Notes from the South African Post-colony. *American Ethnologist* 26(2): 279–303. [doi:10.1525/ae.1999.26.2.279](https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1999.26.2.279).
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Abridged Edition. (Ed) Eva Gillies. London: Oxford University Press.
- Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an anthropological theory of value, the false coin of our own dreams*. New York, Palgrave.
- Harlan, Lindsey, and Paul Courtright. 1995. *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage, Essays on gender, religion, and culture*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Kapila, Kriti. 2004. Conjugating marriage: State legislation and Gaddi kinship. *Contributions to Indian Sociology, New Series* 38(3): 379–409. [doi:10.1177/006996670403800304](https://doi.org/10.1177/006996670403800304).
- Kapila, Kriti. 2008. The Measure of a Tribe, the cultural politics of constitutional reclassification in North India. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14(1): 117–134. [doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00481.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00481.x).
- Kapila, Kriti. 2022. Nullius: The anthropology of ownership, sovereignty and the law in India. London: HAU Books. Kelkar, G. & D. Nathan. Gender and Tribe. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Kelkar, Govind and Dev Nathan. 1991. *Gender and Tribe, Women, land and forests in Jharkhand*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Lamb, Sarah. 2000. *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes, Aging, gender, and body in North India*. Berkeley, University of California Press. [doi:10.1525/9780520935266](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520935266).
- Macdonald, Helen. 2021. *Witchcraft Accusations from Central India, The Fragmented Urn*. London, Routledge.
- Marwick, Max. ed. 1970. *Witchcraft and Sorcery. Selected Readings*. London, Penguin.
- Munn, Nancy. [1986] 1992. *The Fame of Gawa, a Symbolic study of Value*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.
- Phillimore, Peter. 1982. Marriage and Social Organisation among Pastoralists of the Dhaura Dhar. PhD Thesis. University of Durham, UK.
- . 2014. 'That Used to be a Famous Village': Shedding the past in rural north India. *Modern Asian Studies* 48(1): 159–187. [doi:10.1017/S0026749X13000115](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X13000115).
- Pinney, C. 1999. On Living in the Kal(i) yug: Notes from Nagda, Madhya Pradesh. *Contributions to Indian Sociology, New Series* 33(1–2): 77–106. [doi:10.1177/006996679903300106](https://doi.org/10.1177/006996679903300106).

- Raheja, Gloria, and Ann Gold. 1994. *Listen to the Heron's Words, Reimagining gender and kinship in North India*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Roberts, Nathaniel. 2016. *To be Cared for, the power of conversion and foreignness of belonging in an Indian slum*. Berkeley: University of California Press. [doi:10.1525/california/9780520288812.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520288812.001.0001).
- Rose, H. A. 1919. *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and the North West Frontier Province*. Punjab: Government Publishing.
- Sax, William. 2009. *God of Justice, Ritual healing and social justice in the central Himalayas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simpson, Nikita. 2019. A Lonely Home, Intimacy and Estrangement in the Field. In *Home, Ethnographic Encounters*, edited by Johannes Lenhard and Farhan Samanani, F. London: Bloomsbury, 59–72.
- Simpson, Nikita. 2022. Kamzori, Aging, care and alienation in the postpastoral Himalaya. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 36(3): 391–411.
- Simpson, Nikita. 2023. “Ghar ki tension”, Distress and domesticity in India’s aspiring middle class. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13956>.
- Skaria, Ajay. 1997a. Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India. *Past & Present* 155(1): 109–141. [doi:10.1093/past/155.1.109](https://doi.org/10.1093/past/155.1.109).
- Skaria, Ajay. 1997b. Shades of Wildness Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India. *Journal of Asian Studies* 56(3): 726–745. [doi:10.2307/2659607](https://doi.org/10.2307/2659607).
- Sundar, Nandini. 2001. Divining Evil, The State and Witchcraft in Bastar. *Gender, Technology and Development* 5(3): 425–448. [doi:10.1080/09718524.2001.11910014](https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2001.11910014).
- Wagner, Anja. 2013. *The Gaddi Beyond Pastoralism, Making place in the Indian Himalayas*. Oxford, Berghahn Books.