

The Phenomenon of Witch-Hunting: A Case Study in Assam and Adjoining Areas of Meghalaya

CHITRALEKHA BARUAH[†] & MINI BHATTACHARYYA THAKUR[‡]

*Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University
Guwahati 781014, Assam
E-mail: Cbaruah2000@gmail.com*

KEYWORDS: Witch-hunting. Case study. Assam. Meghalaya.

ABSTRACT: Witch-hunting is a superstitious practice that leads to the persecution and death of hundreds of women in India every year. This practice is prevalent in different parts of the country in various degrees and mostly single women and widows become targets of this least talked about violence on women. Assam is a state in the northeastern region of India, where witch-hunting cases have been taking place for years. According to the Assam Government, about 105 cases of 'witch-hunting' have been reported across the state from 2006 to 2012, with the highest number, 29, in 2011. Kokrajhar alone has accounted for 20 of these cases. Parliamentary Affairs Minister of Assam, Chandra Mohan Patowary informed the Assam State Assembly that a total of 107 people were killed in witch-hunting incidents in the state from 2011 till 2019. Since most of the victim or survivors of witch-hunting are women, as understood from the various reports and articles, the current study wants to see it as a form of gender-based violence against women, and make a contextual analysis of the victims of witch-hunting. The primary data for the present study have been collected from field works carried out by the researcher mainly among Rabha and Bodo tribal communities living in the villages of Goalpara District of Assam and its adjoining parts in Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya in the period between 2016 and 2020. The secondary data have been collected from various books, research papers, articles and news reports through library work and internet browsing.

INTRODUCTION

In many communities' witchcraft is a function of a wide range of social behaviour, while in others it has little ideological importance (Evans-Pritchard, 1935). Witchcraft is a body of beliefs for explaining misfortune in terms of evil power thought to reside in human beings and influence their action. It is a system of action that is believed to be at least to some extent effective in taming and vanquishing that power. Witchcraft is the set of ideas that justifies the counter-witchcraft actions of curing, reparation, etc (Bohannon, 1963). Witchcraft is alleged to be the

intervention and practice of negative supernatural powers. It is more prominent in societies whose religious-cultural framework incorporates reverence towards mysterious supernatural realms. It is believed that witchcraft is mostly practiced by females. The females assumed to be practising this craft are considered or are often portrayed as malevolent and wicked, causing damages to people. Such women are branded as witches, and thereafter prosecuted (Ranjan, 2021).

The term 'witch' generally means a woman regarded as having supernatural or magical power through her contact with the devil. Common people believe that witches cast spell, curse people, make

[†] Research Scholar, corresponding author

[‡] Professor

livestock ill and crops fail, create fear and local chaos. They are believed to talk in dreams, to fairies, to ghosts etc (Baruah, 2015). According to the people of Rabha community of Assam, a witch actually is a demon, produced from human beings. The Rabhas believe that a man or woman can transform him/herself into a witch. With the magical power, he/she can separate the head from own body and the head would then move around in speed with the help of the tongue. They can fly from place to place and perform most of their evil acts during the night. They can see things in complete darkness as clearly as in the daytime or watch things happening far away and can see the supernatural beings that are invisible to common mortals (Das, 2012).

Witch hunting may be referred to as the search for witches or evidence of witchcraft. Going to the etymology of the term, witch-hunting may be used when a hunt for wrongdoers becomes abused, and a defendant can be convicted merely on an accusation. In modern day terminology, witch hunting has acquired usage referring to an act of searching and persecuting any perceived enemy, particularly when the search is conducted using extreme measures and with little regard to the actual guilt or innocence of the suspect. It merely occurs within the court of public opinion (Agarwal, 2015).

Statement of the Problem: India has seen killings of 2290 persons, mostly women for practising witchcraft, during the period 2001–2014. A death is reported every third day in modern India for witchcraft accusation (Srivastava, 2016). Witch hunting is a superstitious practice that leads to the persecution and death of hundreds of women in India every year. This practice is prevalent in different parts of the country in various degrees and mostly single women and widows become targets of this least talked about violence on women. There were more than 65 cases of witch-hunting in Assam alone in the years 2007-2012 (Mehra, 2014). Assam is a state in the northeastern region of India, where witch-hunting cases have been taking place for years. According to the Assam Government, about 105 cases of ‘witch-hunting’ have been reported across the state from 2006 to 2012, with the highest number, 29, in 2011. Kokrajhar alone has accounted for 20 of these cases (Pandey, 2013). Parliamentary Affairs Minister of Assam, Chandra

Mohan Patowary informed the Assam State Assembly that a total of 107 people were killed in witch-hunting incidents in the state from 2011 till 2019 (PTI, 2019).

Victims of witchcraft accusations are normally banished from their communities, property ceased, physically assaulted and leading to murder. As the number of incidents seems to be on the rise, the State action is inadequate to handle the situation as a plethora of socio-economic factors seem to be the driving force of the phenomena (Saikia, 2015). Those accused of witchcraft may flee their home areas to escape anticipated harm or may be banished from their villages by the community (Mgbako and Glenn, 2011). Even as the murders get reflected in crime records and news reports, they are not the sum total of victimisation. A large number of victims of witch—unting are humiliated through community punishments, ostracisation and dislocation from their homes and villages, resulting in impoverishment and a life of fear and isolation (Mehra, 2014).

Studies on witch-hunting and efforts from various bodies to deal with this problem are on. Several international conventions, where India is a signatory, also recommended taking up strict action for eradication of the heinous crime because it ruins a person and the family for entire life. Laws have been enforced with exemplary punishment for the perpetrators of witch-hunting. However, witch hunting is still continuing in many places of Assam and its adjoining parts. Since witch-hunting is rooted in traditional beliefs and the strong social structures of many communities, it is difficult to address the issue without a deep understanding of its underlying factors.

It is known from various accounts that the victims killed in witch-hunting are largely women, with men being involved mainly as members of the household (Nathan *et al*, 2013). Since most of the victim or survivors of witch-hunting are women, as understood from the various reports and articles, the current study wants to see it as a form of gender-based violence against women.

Objectives of the study: a) Explore the underlying factors that perpetuate the practice of witch-hunting; b) make a contextual analysis of the victims of witch-hunting.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data for this study have been collected from field works carried out by the researcher mainly among Rabha and Bodo tribal communities living in the villages of Goalpara District of Assam and its adjoining parts in Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya in the period between 2016 and 2020. The secondary data have been collected from various books, research papers, articles and news reports through library work and internet browsing.

Case study method has been explicitly used to find out how it became easy for the instigators to get mass support in targeting the women victim/survivors covered in the study and how they were dehumanised, and eventually were banished from their villages or murdered. Attempts have been made to showcase witch-hunting as one of the strategies adopted to perpetuate the patriarchal control over ordinary women by obstructing their rise in various spheres of life – economic, political and social. The case study method has been applied also to uncover some significant issues triggering witch-hunting. It was assumed by the researcher the human feelings like jealousy, enmity, non-acceptance etc. as comparatively less conspicuous reasons might play great roles in this entire scenario under the cover of superstition.

Interview method has been applied to know the responses of various bodies starting from grassroots up to the state level. The victim/survivors, their family members, neighbours, police, social activists and even the perpetrator of witch-hunting were interviewed to collect information on a few particular cases and also about witch-hunting in general. Apart from the interviews, focused groups discussions have been conducted with women groups to assess the conditions of life of women in the community, their multiple identities in the patriarchal society. The community members of the area and the other stakeholders deserve sincere thanks for contributing in this study by providing necessary information to the researcher.

CASE STUDY

Rinabala's Case

The incident happened in 2006. Rinabala Rabha (name changed) was a 50-year-old widow living with

her four daughters in Kharua village, Tikrikilla, West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya. After her husband's death, she started a small tea shop to earn livelihood and managed her family with the meager income from the shop. Her daughters helped her in the shop. Her neighbour Madan Rabha was a pharmacist, working in the government hospital situated nearby. One day Madan's aged mother got sick and he explained to all that after eating some fried items at Rinabala's tea shop his mother became sick and hence Rinabala was certainly a witch. During the ritualistic questioning by the villagers, Madan's mother uttered Rinabala's name as the witch who had devoured her. On the day of prosecution Rinabala was sitting in her shop as usual when her youngest daughter rushed to inform her that a witch had been identified by the villagers. Like any other villager Rinabala also wanted to go and see who was being accused as a witch. Meanwhile, a group of people came and asked her to go with them immediately. She went with the group to Madan's house where she was offered a seat. The sick woman was still shouting Rinabala's name repeatedly and commanded her to admit that she was a witch. All the villagers who were present in the gathering supported this and labeled her as a witch.

The next day a group of villagers led by Madan physically attacked Rinabala. They broke her shop, threw her goods outside and asked her to leave the place. Rinabala filed a case in the nearest police station, but the police did not take it seriously. After one week the people demolished her house. Madan cut down all the trees and plants in the backyard of Rinabala. The villagers called a meeting where Rinabala was put through several testes to prove that she was not a witch. Although she had passed the tests the mob of villagers continued to beat her and was about to kill her, but some of them prohibited the mob from doing so. Then the meeting ordered Rinabala to leave her own house and take shelter in an abandoned plot near the village crematorium, which she refused as it was unsafe.

Thus, Rinabala was forcefully evicted from her house where she had been living for 27 years. Since she had no registration of her land, she could not demand it. In the tribal villages of the area where the field work has been undertaken, the land is not registered, but owned by families and transferred

through generations in male line by strictly prohibiting women from claiming any right over it. Rinabala came to her mother's place, keeping her household goods with a well-wisher and neighbour who was a nurse. After a few days she came to her cousin's place in Goalpara, Assam and stayed there for two years. From there she went back to her sister's house in Rongadol village, Tikrikilla, Meghalaya and is till now living there. In that village also she faced trouble from the local community. They imposed Rs 2000/- as a penalty on her sister's son for giving shelter to a 'witch' in the village. Back in her own village Kharua, Meghalaya, the villagers occupied Rinabala's land where they set up a school and a pharmacy. The pharmacy is run by Madan.

After one year of the incident Rinabala came to know about an organisation named Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS). AMSS works for rural women empowerment; it has an active unit in Goalpara District. Rinabala approached the AMSS functionaries and requested to intervene in her case. AMSS took help of police and negotiated the matter with the villagers. They asked the villagers to give back Rinabala's land. The villagers as an alternative showed them the plot near the cremation ground that they had offered to her earlier. Police was not keen on fighting this injustice meted out to the poor woman. However, AMSS kept extending moral support to Rinabala who is living with the family of her sister. Due to financial crisis, her two daughters have been married off at a very young age. This is the story of Rinabala who lost her own land and property and is leading a pathetic life for no fault of her own.

Analysis of the Case

Rinabala's story is one of the many cases collected during the study. It explains many factors that are responsible for witch-hunting. First of all, she was a woman having no strong support of a male family member as she was a widow and did not have a son. Secondly, she was earning a livelihood for her family through her tea shop without depending on others. The community did not approve this economic independence and control over land by a widow who had only daughters in the family. The main factor behind the targeting was the intention of Rinabala's enemy Madan, to capture her land and set up his

pharmacy as a profitable business. He branded her as a witch and instigated the villagers to join him in persecuting her and eventually to banish her from the village so that he could execute his secret plan.

A critical analysis uncovers the fact that not only Rinabala, but the whole village were equally victimised in the incident. Due to their superstition and a strong patriarchal mindset, it became easy for the primary instigator to utilise them for his personal benefit. It has been mentioned above that Rinabala was also excited to see the accused witch, which meant that being a part of the same society she also believed like the other members that witches existed. It is predictable that if the person branded as a witch had been someone other than her, she would have taken part with the villagers in the persecution of that ill-fated person.

The roles played by a social organisation and police in this case are noteworthy. The police as a state body who had the authority to maintain law and order played a passive role in getting the survivor her rights back over her land and property. On the contrary, the AMSS as a social organisation was found to be very prompt in action. Immediately after knowing about the incident from Rinabala, the AMSS functionaries approached the police, asked for collaboration and visited Rinabala's village to negotiate with the community. It had been a difficult task for AMSS to avail full support from administration in dealing with the case because, her village belonged to another state, i.e. Meghalaya while AMSS' jurisdiction was limited to Assam. However, Rinabala is continuously getting moral support and strength from the organisation till date. She is also invited to awareness programmes, training, workshop and conventions conducted by the organisation and these have developed self-confidence in her.

CONCLUSION

Witch-hunting is one of the traditional practices intended to regulate the behaviour and mobility of women. It is one of the ways to confine women within the framework designed for them (Baruah and Thakur, 2019).

The factors for branding women as witches are personal grudge, jealousy, occupational rivalry and property disputes. However, the non-acceptance of

the behaviour of a woman by community also has been instrumental in the process. The societies maintain some behavioural standards. In traditional societies, the behaviour of an individual is always under inspection of the community with a more critical scrutiny for women. When a woman is not matching the stereotyped image, may be because of her progressive nature or economic, social, political independence, she becomes a topic of gossip. Some practices and characters of women invite suspicion of the community, and if the woman has a powerful enemy who endures personal rivalry, jealousy, anger against her and her family or has intentions of capturing her property or damage her for personal gain, that enemy would utilise this disfavour of the community in branding her as a witch and taking punitive actions against her with full public support. But before taking up this action they would wait till some unwanted occurrence takes place, e.g. illness, death, crop loss or irregular rainfall. This will help to confirm the branding by uttering the name of the suspected woman through the diseased person in an unconscious stage and/or by an announcement made through an *ojha* (soothsayer). The enemy, to legitimize his/her personal revenge upon the targeted woman, would proclaim to have saved the community from the evil acts of the accused witch.

Superstition of people plays a crucial role in the entire phenomenon of witch-hunting by justifying the branding and persecution of the targeted woman. It has been found that much like the other members of the community, the survivors of witch-hunting also believe in witchcraft and before they were branded as such, they took interest in taking part in the public prosecution of accused witches. Superstition and patriarchy are so pervasive, strong and complementary to each other that they both create space for the primary accusers of witch-hunting to execute their plans. Therefore, it is not strange to find women accusing other women as witches in a society where everyone whether a man or a woman, is socialized to behave in a certain way which upholds subordination of women.

The prosecutions of women targeted as witches involve asking them to undergo very difficult tests to prove innocence. Many women accused as witches refuse to take these tests and surrender out of

nervousness. Other women of the village also attend such traditional courts, but are not allowed to speak. However, once the verdict is announced, they become equal partners of men in the mob attack against the accused witch. This is how patriarchy restricts women from the power of decision-making and encourages them to indulge in violence, as per the decision taken by men.

Women are branded as witches in various contexts. Middle aged women are the most common targets of witch branding. This is the age when a woman reaches the optimum level of progress in her life. Being labeled as a witch at this stage may have an extremely damaging effect on her later life. Apart from the age, women having no strong support of a male family member also create grounds for being accused as a witch. Control over landed property has been one of the basic contexts of branding women as witches. The communities do not allow land to be inherited by female offspring of a couple. If there is no son in the family, land will automatically be transferred to a male relative of the husband.

The multiple identities like tribal, rural, poor, semi or non-literate, having low or no formal education, ignorant about State support system etc. of women in the areas where the field work has been done are intersectional as Krenshaw (1989) had described in her theory of intersectionality. These identities have created contexts for their oppression making them vulnerable to violence including witch-hunting.

The main accusers in witch hunting are either a marital relative, or a neighbour, or a competitor in the similar occupation to the women accused as witches. Both accuser and accused in witch hunting belong to the same tribe. Often the accusers take help of an *ojha* to declare to the public that the suspected person is a witch.

Even if the woman branded as a witch manages to survive, she lives the rest of her life in constant fear of being assaulted again or killed. She also has to live with associated trauma of not being accepted by the society after the branding. The entire family of a victim/survivor is affected by the displacement, isolation, loss of property and livelihood followed by the traumatic mental condition.

The people in the villages covered in the current

study consider witch-hunting to be an internal matter to be settled entirely by the customary rules of the community. The various tribal bodies that proclaim of working for the justice and dignity of women and the entire tribal communities seem to evade the subject by discouraging 'outsiders' who want to intervene with a human rights perspective.

The police initially hesitate to intervene in cases of witch-hunting, leaving them to be settled by the communities as per their customary rites. However, police occasionally conduct awareness meetings in the villages. But then, no prominent effects of such programmes have been seen in the area where witch-hunting is still continuing as earlier. The Assam Witch Hunting Act, 2015 has clearly mentioned that police on having any information about a likely incident of witch-hunting, must visit the place immediately, and take all suitable measures to stop it by protecting the likely victim and giving warning to the probable perpetrators. The registered body, AMSS also sometimes fails in saving lives by bridging the gaps between the grassroots and the administration, when the murder of a suspected witch is planned secretly overnight by the perpetrators and executed immediately.

REFERENCES CITED

- Agarwal, D. 2015. Understanding the politics behind witch-hunting. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 68 (1):143-154.
- Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015 (2018). Home and Political Department, Government of India. Retrieved from — <https://homeandpolitical.assam.gov.in/documents-detail/the-assam-witch-hunting-prohibition-prevention-and-protection-act-2015>
- Baruah, C. and M. B. Thakur 2019. Accusing women as witches: A gendered outlook. *The Oriental Anthropologist*, 19 (2):208-218.
- Baruah, G. 2015. Witchcraft and witch hunting. In: M. Begum (ed.), *Uprooting Witchcraft*, pp.1-14. Women Cell, Assam College Teachers' Association House: Guwahati.
- Bohannan, P. 1963. *Social Anthropology*. Holt, Rinehart, Winston: New York.
- Crenshaw, K. 1989. *Demarginalising the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics*. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1): 139-167. Retrieved from — <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Das, M. 2012. Witchcraft among the Rabhas of Kamrup and Goalpara Districts of Assam. *Ph. D. Thesis, (Department of Anthropology), Gauhati University: Guwahati*.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1935. Witchcraft, Africa. *Journal of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures*, 8(4): (October) 417-422. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from — <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180590>
- Mehra, M. 2014. *Witch Hunting in Assam: Individual, Structural and Legal Dimensions*. Partners for Law in Development: New Delhi. Retrieved from — <https://www.academia.edu/15476106>
- Mgbako, C. and K. Glenn 2011. Witchcraft accusations and human rights: Case studies from Malawi. *George Washington International Law Review*, vol.43. Retrieved from — https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty_scholarship/399/
- Nathan, D., G. Kelkar and S. Satija 2013. *Witches: Through Changing Contexts Women Remain the Target*. Working Paper No.004/2013. Institute for Human Development: New Delhi. Retrieved from — http://www.ihdindia.org/Working%20Papers/2013/WP%20004%202013_devnathan.pdf
- Pandey, A. 2013. In Assam, a rising trend of murders on allegations of witchcraft. *NDTV* (September 4). Retrieved from — <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/article-533508?amp=1&akamai-rum=off>
- Ranjan, R. 2021. Witchcraft in India: A barbaric practice and a monstrous reality. *I Pleaders* (March 19). Retrieved from — <https://blog.iplayers.in/witchcraft-india-barbaric-practice-monstrous-reality/>
- Saikia, B. 2015. Witch hunting: The silent form of gender-based violence and the need to bridge the rural urban divide. *Rotrum's Law Review*, 2(2), (May 17).
- Srivastava, A. 2016. Over 2000 Women Killed in India for Practising 'Black Magic' in 14 years. *India Today* (June 20). Retrieved from — [Over 2000 women killed in India for practicing 'black magic' in 14 years - India Today](http://www.indiatoday.com/Over-2000-women-killed-in-India-for-practicing-black-magic-in-14-years-India-Today)



This document was created with the Win2PDF “print to PDF” printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>