

## **SANCTIONED VIOLENCE IN ASSAM: DEVELOPMENT AND PERSECUTION OF WOMEN AS WITCHES IN ASSAM.**

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India is a country of diverse population. This diversity ranges from religion, culture, language, customs, traditions etc. The religion of people here varies from person to person. Apart from the major well-known religion like the Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism etc. there prevails a number of religion that are different and strange. The rituals and practices of these religions include worshipping queer Gods and following distinctive procedures to please them, this comprises of even occult practices. In the North-Eastern part of India there is a state called Assam, known as the gateway to north-east India. Assam is inhabited by conglomerate of tribes; prominent among them are the *bodos*, *rabha*, *hajong*, *kacharis*, *mishing*, *deuris*, *tea-tribes* etc<sup>i</sup>.

The history of Assamese culture goes back almost two thousand years ago when the first cultural assimilation took place with Indo-Aryans, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic. Although they have been living in Assam for centuries their tribal and animistic beliefs still prevail. Assam from ancient time is known for its occult practices and magic. The village of Mayong situated at a distance of forty kilometers from the state capital of Dispur is known as the 'capital of black magic'. The famous shakti peeth or temple of *Kamakhya* located in the Nilanchal hill in Guwahati is a sacred place for tantricism. It is said one cannot be called a tantric i.e. his tantric knowledge remains incomplete if he had not visited the Kamakhya temple.<sup>ii</sup>

The world today is developing at a very rapid pace. The science and technology has prospered so much that the space agencies are planning to send tourists to moon, the same moon which was earlier worshipped as god. India is also not lacking behind and it is prospering in all walks of life like science and technology, medical science, economy, military, literature etc. India is considered to be one of the fastest growing economies in the world. But the front in which India is lacking behind is the social environment of the country. The remote areas of the country are still in the grip of social evils. The most notorious form of these social evils is the practice of witch hunting which is practiced in a large scale in some parts of the country. Witch hunting is a dangerous superstition that kills. The belief in the practice of witch craft is a part of almost all living societies and some traces of it can be felt at various degrees among all cultures. Witch

hunting has become a nuisance in the states those have larger presence of tribal population. The state of Assam, her neighboring states of Meghalaya, Tripura, Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chattisgarh are the worst sufferers.<sup>iii</sup> Apart from these states, cases of witch hunting are reported from other states now and then. This act of social evil has now become a concern for the people as well as the law framers of the country.

There is no universally accepted definition of witchcraft but primarily most of the times it is seen as a negative malevolent force used by the people i.e. witches to bring about harm in physical realm. In short witchcraft can be said as the art of doing evil.<sup>iv</sup> Witch craft beliefs are cultural phenomenon which is still a salient feature of daily life in India and beyond. The most remarkable feature of witch hunting is that in majority of the cases it is the women who are framed, executed, lynched or boycotted from society as witches.

This theme of witch hunting has received a very little attention in the recent burgeoning empirical research of cultural history largely due to lack of data, in the place of long standing traditional customs, practices and beliefs in developing country like India.<sup>v</sup> However, in recent years, due to efforts of several non-government organizations, human rights violations that took place due to belief in witchcraft have entered into the discourse of violence against women, children, disabled and elderly. These violations are recognised as some of the most horrific abuses witnessed today.

Women, the vulnerable section of the society are identified as witches with an aim to denounce them from the community and take control of their land, property etc. This is the reason why mostly single women and widows become 'easy scapegoats' and are branded as witches to divest them of their land and property, or punished for transgressing social norms or refusing sexual advances. Witch hunting is also understood as a manifestation of the low social status of women whereby male attitude of dominance and violence against women is legitimized by calling her a witch.<sup>vi</sup>

Witch hunting is a systematic act of violence against women where the entire community sanctions the punishment meted out to the person being accused of witchcraft. As a social evil it is more difficult to tackle because the stimulus of such action is often rooted in the traditional spiritual and cultural belief system of the communities which is misinterpreted by a selected few to manipulate the situation. Thus witch hunting perpetuates through a conspiracy of ignorance, fear and vested interest.<sup>vii</sup>

In a country which ranks at 129 out of 146 in gender inequality index with a score of 0.6, the highest in South Asia, each year an estimated 200 women are killed as witches in rural India.<sup>viii</sup> According to the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) the years between 2008 and 2012 saw

murder of 768 women for allegedly practicing witchcraft.<sup>ix</sup> There is also research evidence suggesting that there has been a disturbing rise in witch hunting cases in 2011. The rate of conviction in witchcraft cases in other cases of crime against women is the lowest in India(26.9%) when compared to other crimes.<sup>x</sup>

The number of cases of witch hunting in Assam is also rising rapidly. About two third of the districts in the state i.e. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Darang, Udalguri, Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Kamrup(rural), Goalpara, Chirang, Baksha have witnessed witch hunting in recent years. Statistics reveal that more than 116 people had lost their lives in such incidents in the state during the last decade. Of them 66 are women. However, unofficial sources claim this number to be very high including more than 300 women victims. On the other hand, in BTAD<sup>xi</sup> area the districts of Chirang, Baksha, Kokrajhar are also quite vulnerable in the context of this heinous crime. Particularly, Bodo dominated Kokrajhar district often makes media headline for such incidents.<sup>xii</sup>

The witch is called '*daini*' in local parlance and believed to cause ailment to people destroy crops and other livestock etc. They are usually identified by an '*ojha*', '*bez*' or '*deodhani*' (all names of witch doctor) and either banished from the community or killed. Sometimes the designated family of the witch is levied a hefty fine by the community leaders, by which she may be pardoned of her ill deeds or intentions against the fellow villagers.<sup>xiii</sup>

The absence of medical facilities in remote villages of Assam, the usual habitations of the tribal communities, is a compelling reason to make people believe in the *ojha* or *bez*. It is believed that some of the diseases cannot be cured by the doctors and modern medical facilities. It can only be cured by *ojha* or *bez*. The *ojha* or *bez* if suspects someone to be under the spell of witch starts his treatment of prayers, offerings and other practices which include covering the patient with hunting net and poked with a sharp object till the patient names the witch. Sometimes the patient dies which as a result further vindicate the belief and the identification of the witch starts. *Ojha* performs religious rites to arrive at the description of the person practicing witchcraft. The witch after identification is either lynched to death or forced to run away abandoning her family and property.<sup>xiv</sup>

A study conducted by Partners for Law in Development (PLD), Assam Mahila Samata Society(AMSS)and North-East Network(NEN) shows that women are the majority targets, although few men have been accused as witches too. Women above 30 years, and more specifically in the 40-60 age brackets, are the most vulnerable to being targeted as witches. It also showed that there is a linkage of near lack of formal education of the victims or high casualty on account of routine illness to blaming of illness and death on witchcraft appear to be a consequence of the regional poverty and governance failure.

According to this study the instigators are persons who are proximate to the accused, reinforcing plausibility of conflict, tensions and jealousies between them. Many of the motivations that result in 'witch' accusations may appear trivial but assume alarming proportions in contexts of structural neglect, deprivations and impunity that enable accusations to result in victimization, without fear of consequences. Illness, deaths and tragedies that cannot be explained, particularly in the context where education, health facilities and sanitation are lacking, tend to get rationalized through explanations of witchery. Inter personal jealousies, conflicts and tensions also tend to get resolved through accusations, which in one stroke dehumanize the victim in the eyes of others and allow extreme humiliation and violence to be perpetrated without protest. Likewise, differences in religion, rituals or extent of religiosity, in a context of close proximity, also invoke suspicion of witchcraft.<sup>xv</sup>

The victims of witchcraft have to face a lot of abuses, verbal taunts and slurs through local terms denoting 'witch' as well as other abuse aimed at demonizing and isolating the victims along with their family often accompanied by minor to grave physical violence sometimes even ending in murder. The long-term consequences of victimization are equally grim. They are displaced or expelled from their homes and villages and those who stay in their homes and villages have to face isolation with limited or no access to common resources of the village. Regardless of where the victims may be, in their village or displaced, they become impoverished and live in fear. The consequences upon the family are equally ghastly, with entire nuclear families being affected by the dislocation, isolation and loss of property and livelihood, impoverishment is certain.<sup>xvi</sup>

With regard to the responses of institutions and other persons, the immediate family is most protective, and as result also victimized. The neighbour appears to be hostile, either as instigators themselves, or as supportive of instigators, and at times as passive onlookers. The apathy in many cases is on account of fear of reprisal from vested interest groups. The local authorities – a heterogeneous group of autonomous women's bodies, local leaders and eminent persons played the most effective role.<sup>xvii</sup> Birubala Rabha, a social activist is constantly campaigning and fighting against witchcraft and witch hunting. She heads the 'Mission Birubala' and goes from village to village generating awareness against the practice. Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and Project Prahari, a scheme undertaken by Assam Police in 2001 with active support of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) have been able to rescue many victims of witchcraft.<sup>xviii</sup>

The women's body particularly stands out as the main lifeline for the victims' protection, redress and restoration of dignity. They deploy dialogue, negotiation and legal action, drawing in multiple actors to address the ostracism, expulsion and victimization, to safeguard the victims' interests. The police, despite being the sole agency fully mandated by law to take pre-emptive

action and provide redress, demonstrate neither initiative nor diligence in protecting the victims; some cases indicate that the police intervened only after they were pulled in by local authorities.<sup>xix</sup>

The convictions of culprits are not possible due to the absence of a proper law in place. They are convicted only under the archaic Indian Penal Code(1860); sections 302 (punishment for murder), 320, 351, 354(outraging a women's modesty), 364(A), 503 and 506. Most witch hunting cases are dealt under section 323(hurt) of the IPC.<sup>xx</sup> The punishment for 'hurt' under section 323 is imprisonment that extends up to one year with a fine of rupees one thousand. Such mild punishment has only deterrent value.

The inhuman practice of branding and execution of people as witches are direct violation of human rights. But the worst of all is that this crime is socially sanctioned. To control the cases of branding and execution of witches a very stringent path has to be followed. Unlike the other crimes where the society at a large condemns the act, but in case of witch hunting society sanctions it. Rigid laws should be made by the law makers not only in state level but also in national level. A national law against witch hunting and related senseless crimes is much needed and all policy makers should discuss this subject with utmost sensitivity, 'without hurting the pride and sentiments of the local population'.<sup>xxi</sup>

The need for a national law was felt long time back when senior advocate of the Supreme Court of India, Meenakshi Arora had filed a petition in 2010 but that was rejected. She had asked the apex court to direct Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Orissa, Bihar and Rajasthan to implement and monitor their anti-witchcraft Acts in "letter and spirit". The Women and Child Development Ministry must issue certain guidelines that would help in the formulation of a national law. *The Prevention and Protection of Witch Hunting Bill, 2013* is a recent development and the drafters of this bill must be lauded for this initiative. However, proper rounds of discussions must be taken before embarking on the process of making this the national law for detection of any lacunae. A separate fund must be allocated for the rehabilitation and welfare of the survivors for whom it is difficult to move back to their villages for the loom of fear. Counseling centers must be established at the district level to help these women face the trauma of social stigmatization. The role of the Judiciary in the era of judicial activism has not been commendable in this regard. There are instances when the Supreme Court has called for an effective enforcement of state laws against witch hunting.<sup>xxii</sup>

At the primary level, mass awareness is required to initiate a change in the mindset of the people. Apart from this education, health services and other basic amenities should be taken care of by the government, together with the sincere efforts of the guardians of society scientific temper among the people can be developed through which the cases of witch hunting can be brought

down drastically and save the society from this widespread nuisance, consequently saving lives of people in general and lives of women in particular. Nonetheless, it is hoped that with the growth of awareness of history among the people and the progress of historical research further by the coming generations it will fill the gaps in our current knowledge.

## NOTES & REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup>Joya Chakraborty, Anjuman Borah, 'Witch hunting in Assam: Strategizing Alternative media for women empowerment and overcoming superstition,' Journal of North East India Studies, Vol.3(2), July -Dec. 2013, pp 15-24

<sup>ii</sup>*Kamakhya temple* - The Kamakhya Temple also known as Kamrup-Kamakhyaisa Hindu temple dedicated to the mother goddess Kamakhya. It is one of the oldest of the 51 Shakti Pithas. It is situated on the Nilachal Hill in western part of Guwahati city in Assam India, the main temple is a complex of individual temples dedicated to the ten Mahavidyas: Kali, Tara

,Sodashi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chhinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamala. Among these, Tripurasundari, Matangi and Kamala reside inside the main temple whereas the other seven reside in individual temples. It is an important pilgrimage destination for general Hindu and especially for Tantric worshippers.

<sup>iii</sup>*op.cit*, Chakraborty (2013)

<sup>iv</sup>'21<sup>st</sup>Century witchcraft accusations & Persecutions',*The Witch craft & Human Rights Information Network*, Viewed on 5 September, 2017.

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<sup>v</sup>Boris Gershman, 'Witchcraft Beliefs and the Erosion of Social Capital: Evidence from Sub – Saharan Africa and Beyond', Journal of Development Economics, viewed on 5 September, 2017

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<sup>vi</sup> Chakravarty, Anuradha and Soma Chaudhuri (2012). 'Strategic Framing Work(s): How Micro-credit Loans facilitate Anti-Witch Hunt Movements'. Mobilization. Vol. 17 (2) pp.175-194

<sup>vii</sup>*op.cit*, Chakraborty(2013)

<sup>viii</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>ix</sup>National Crime Records Bureau.2011.<http://ncrb.nic.in/>

<sup>x</sup>*op.cit*, Chakraborty(2013)

<sup>xi</sup> BTAD – Bodoland Territorial Area Districts.

<sup>xii</sup>Nabajyoti Dutta, 'Social Mobilization Against Witch Hunting: An Account of Assam', *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*, Vol3(1), Jan 2015, pp. 21-26

<sup>xiii</sup> *op.cit*, Chakraborty(2013)

<sup>xiv</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>xv</sup> Partners in Law and Development, 'Witch Hunting in Assam: Individual, Structural and Legal Dimensions', Delhi, 2014

<sup>xvi</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>xvii</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>xviii</sup>*op.cit*, Dutta (2015)

<sup>xix</sup>*op.cit*, Partners in Law and Development (2014)

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<sup>xx</sup>Indian Penal Code, 1860

<sup>xxi</sup> Bipasha Saikia, *Witch hunting: The Silent Form of Gender Based Violence and the Need to Bridge the Rural Urban Divide*, Rostrum Legal.com vol2(2), May 2015, viewed on 5 September 2017  
(<https://rostrumlegal.com/witch-hunting-the-silent-form-of-gender-based-violence-and-the-need-to-bridge-the-rural-urban-divide-by-bipasha-saikia/>)

<sup>xxii</sup>*Ibid*