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Witch Hunting: Major reasons behind its existence with special reference to Assam

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Abstract

This study tries to explore the injustice faced by the victims of the cruel witch hunting practices in Kokrajhar district of Assam by analysing the factors responsible for the practice of this form of violence. The victims are severely punished or thrown out of the villages they inhabit after they are labelled as withes- named in local parlance as 'daina'/'daini'. A survey was conducted in selected villages of Kokrajhar district significantly dominated by the Bodos. The innocent women are the most silent victims of the crudest form of gender bias and superstition which still persist strongly in the region.

Keywords: Witch hunting, superstition, gendered violence, injustice.

Superstitions and superstitious beliefs are found all over the globe. It is a universal phenomenon. Type and degree of beliefs may vary in different regions and cultures. Superstitious beliefs are the tendency to direct one's behaviour with irrational and mysterious fear or to gain privilege from the supernatural power. It is an irrational or non-scientific belief in the existence of certain powers operant in the world, with positive or ill (usually ill) effects. Superstitions generally refer to having belief that certain things and incidences have positive or negative implications. For instance, certain colour, day and numbers are perceived lucky or unlucky in some societies. In spite of science making great progress the percentage of superstition is found to be increasing rather than decreasing. These beliefs impacts social lives of people by influencing their behaviour. Belief system is part of subjective culture that is usually imparted in human consciousness through mass media, cultural artefacts and educational institutions (Kelly and Ronan, 1987). Beliefs and attitudes are socially learned (Bord and Faulkner, 1975). Belief system as part of social structures has its own sociological implications. In spite of science making great progress the percentage of superstition is found to be increasing rather than decreasing. Such a type of superstitious belief which goes to the extent of extreme form of violence that is murder is of 'Witch Hunting'. Witch Hunting is a social evil which is an intentionally behaviour to

demean, dehumanize, harm, destroy, or kill innocent people. It is one of the most dangerous superstitions prevailing all over the world. Every year there are instances of witch hunting cases across all regions.

The present paper will try to analyse the reasons behind the practice existing in an Indian state of Assam. In the last five years, Assam witnessed more than 400 cases of witch hunting. In the local dialect, the witch is called as 'daini' and is believed to cause ailment to people, destroy crops and other livestock etc. She is usually identified by an 'ojha', 'bez' or 'deodhani' (all names for witch doctors) and either expatriated from the community or killed. Various studies are undertaken to understand the practice of witch hunting worldwide and they attribute it to different reasons beyond mere superstition. This paper throws light on the motivations underpinning the targeting of persons as witches.

It is recognised that superstition and belief systems of the community create a context that sanctions accusations of witchcraft. Most case studies reveal other factors at play, mainly pre existing tensions/ conflicts between the instigator and the victim. These other factors make for a complex reading of witch hunting, where individual motives and tensions, as well as systematic deprivations and structural failures comes together to target and victimize individuals and those who are close to them. This section will examine the complex reasons- both individual and contextual- that appear to play a significant role in targeting a particular position as a witch. The structural factors which include the social, economic and political context that shapes the lives, status and relation of the communities from which victims are drawn. The demographic set up to which these victims of witch hunting belong, the development status of the region and the status of the communities being the main observing points where the victims are drawn from are important to know the reasons. This section thus sets out to discuss the status of Goalpara and Kokrajhar district of Assam, the overall economic and social status, and within that, the communities to which the majority of the victims in our case studies belong.

Goalpara district was declared as one of the country's most 250 backward districts by Government of India in 2006 and therefore it receives funds from the Backward regions Grant Fund Programme. As per the fieldwork conducted in the region most of the respondents belonged to Below Poverty Line (BPL) category. The Bodo, Rabha, Rajbanshi communities from which a number of victims as the case studies are drawn belong, are indigenous to the region. They remain one of the most backward due to lack of Government initiatives to develop the area or the communities. The Rabha community is the most dominant community of the region and has been demanding an Autonomous District in Goalpara and some neighbouring district of Kamrup district which the government rejected on the grounds that the region doesn't come under the sixth schedule of the constitution. This led the Rabhas to protest against the Panchayat elections in the district in the year 2013, in the course of which riots broke between the Rabhas and the Muslims because the latter supported the elections and was against the formation of an Autonomous Council.

Kokrajhar was a part of undivided Goalpara district. Till 1956, it was merely a small village which had only a Railway Station which connected it to the rest of the world. It was only in July, 1983, when Kokrajhar was when Kokrajhar Sub Division(created in 1957) was upgraded to Kokrajhar district, with its Headquarter at Kokrajhar Town. Kokrajhar, in the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD). The creation of the BTC in 2003 is a recent event in the Bodos' long struggle – which dates back to the 1930s, when Bodo delegations met with the Simon Commission demanding an entity separate from the Assamese mainstream. Kokrajhar is not a performing district in many facets of development. This was also reflected by the state human development report (2003), which places the district at 15th rank in the state and the indices found to be lower than the state averages. Problems and losses related to conflicts, communal or otherwise and the sense of insecurity is found to be more in this conflict ridden district. The conflicts are mostly found to be communal in nature. This is found that more families from Muslim community have lost family members and property in the conflicts in recent past followed by members of Christian community. Insecurity feeling among the communities in this conflict ridden district is widely prevalent. This has affect in accessing livelihood and ensuring decent living of the community members.

In terms of relative deprivation, common perception of the people across the region is that that electricity, road communication, drinking water and agriculture services now require more attentions in the district. There is need of providing drive for universal provisioning of low cost sanitation facilities in the district. Along with these, education, housing and livelihood assurance are also major concerns.

The lack of education, lack of availability of access to a reasonable standard of Healthcare and administrative neglect in terms of basic needs and services perpetuated the presence of witch hunting practices and thus lends perpetrators confident of the inaction of the law enforcement machinery. The structural factors thus become important in understanding how witch hunting helps rationalize tragedies and resolve conflicts and superstition, which is not unique to any population group or region in India can assume the form and existence of witch hunting in selected regions and areas. Within the socio-economic context described above, the researcher also took stock of the individual factors and motivations which leads the instigators to accuse victims as witches. The motives has been clustered into broad themes for emphasis, although these are not exclusive but are interconnected with each other and indeed, with the structural factors discussed above. Significant among them are mentioned below:

Illnesses, Deaths and tragedies: Witchcraft is often triggered by a situation that spurs the instigator in some way. There are also individual tragedies or even collective ones which leads to despair, and search for resolution in some way. This section will look into the various factors that trigger the accusation of a witch and victimisation in the case studies. In the number of the cases the trigger was illness or death of a human or animal, and the attribution of this to the victim. In all the cases the victims were made responsible for the illnesses for the actual or alleged illness, starting from fever, wounds and infections, mental

illness, stomach aches, jaundice, diarrhoea, malaria, tuberculosis, inability to conceive a child, still born babies, death due to illness or even death of victims own children. The accusations become all the more plausible when the victim shares a familial or physical proximity with the instigator which we know is a common feature in Witch hunting cases. These situations are manipulated by local healers called as *Ojhas/deodhanis* in local parlance. These ojhas confirm a person as a witch. The ojhas don't introduce the idea of a 'witch'; they confirm the idea and perform or reinforce the identification. The ojhas in this region hold such a high position because the first approach for the villagers for any healthcare needs is not the Medical Officer, rather the Ojhas. It is important to add here that once a woman (or a man) is identified as responsible for any particular undesirable event, a series of other accusations may be made which reinforce and further establish claims about the suspicious conduct of the victim. Often extreme religiosity, difference in religious practices any novel religious practice etc are themselves read a witchcraft and are often treated as evidence to support labelling.

Historical relation with a age-old superstitious tradition: The belief in the practice of witch craft has a deeper connection with Assam's spiritual history. As since 3000 BC all diseases and mental disorders were treated as being caused by uncanny super naturals, some of which are supposed to dwell every nearby human habitat in the countryside. Even Mayong , known to be the land of witchery and natural paradise is situated in Assam. It's also believed that planet bestowed its devotees the art of black magic and sorcery. Various folklores describe its connection with astrology and practice of witchcraft. Similarly after centuries past in rural Assam the ojha, a traditional medicine man, is revered for his skills at countering black magic. According to folklore, the medicine man learns his skills which include identifying and curing a witch, but witches are said to be born with their powers. In patriarchal communities this is a convenient distinction. It is rare to find a female ojha. Interestingly Assam also has cases of male witch hunt.

Lack of education: Illiteracy is one of the most effective dynamic pressures, which may have different root causes and potential to generate many unsafe conditions. Such unsafe conditions combined with some external threats mainly superstitions, which causes different problems to the rural community especially tea tribes and tribal community in which the practice of witch hunt is prevalent. Illiteracy also halts the overall progress of the community. So, practical education to all members of the vulnerable community including women is necessary for overall development of the community.

Health care deficits: Every year, many people die of malaria, diarrhoea, and jaundice etc., in the tribal people-dominated areas of Assam. Due to the extreme ignorance of the administration, these people lack proper education, and is still today far from the glare of the media. As the people of this belt are unaware of the modern ways of health and hygiene, various diseases which break out easily among them without their knowledge and which is later linked in illogical way of treatment and finally leading to witchcraft and hunt.

Conspiracy: In majority cases in Assam it has been witnessed that there is a third party involvement in branding witches, which initiated the hunts in order to confiscate property, mainly of the victim. Jealousy and family rivalry are also seen in these cases. India is a land where the women are treated as symbol or are considered as a token of their community, family, caste and all other diverse divisions. Where people on one hand worship them in name of Goddesses on the other hand kill them considering them witch. This practice of killing is not new for Indian society rather it has its deep roots in history. Initially when the concept of witch was discussed people thought of ugly women with a broom who can fly, who can disappear. Now the concept has changed, witch now denotes women who acquire supernatural powers and are indulged in evil practices which are omen. It is believed that they are associated with negative energy and for their betterment and for enhancing their power they kill innocent members of society or cause disruptions in the community. They may be called in different names as 'Chudail', 'Dayan', 'Tohni', 'daini' etc. but the zest is that they possess supernatural powers which they use to hamper others. Therefore Witch Hunting is a process of killing these people in order to protect the society from being harmed by them. In name of witch hunting people kill innocent women, rape them, to acquire their property and some time it is being used as a tool for vengeance.

Poverty: Poverty and violence go hand in hand. It has been witnessed several time that Extreme rainfall (drought or flood), epidemic leads to a large increase in the murder of "witches"—typically elderly women killed by relatives—but not other murders. The findings provide novel evidence on the role of income shocks in causing violent crime, and religious violence in particular.

It is evident from the reasons above that the practice of witch hunting is not ignited only because of superstitious beliefs or irrationality. It is much beyond. Witch hunting becomes a scapegoat to many crimes that happens in the societies where the practice is prevalent. The need of the hour is to bring stringent laws which will work against such heinous practices in the society.

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