

Power Game of Witch-Hunting in Assam: An Analysis

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Abstract

Particularly defining witch hunt is a campaign directed against a person or group holding views considered unorthodox whom are assumed to be a threat to the society or searching out for persecution of persons accused of witchcraft. Here a big question comes to one's mind as to what is witchcraft? Witch craft is the practice of any magical art form of any religion or spiritual system regardless of alignment or intent. In Assam the cases relating to witch hunting are totally different from the actual connotation. In Assam basically women are branded as witch or daini (common parlance in Assam) only instigated by a quack or bej. Dr. Rakesh K Singh in his article "Witch-Hunting: Alive and kicking said that witch hunting is essentially a legacy of violence against women in our society. This study tried to highlight the practice of witch hunting and dimension of power.

Keywords: Power, Witch Hunting, Media, Politics

1. Methodology

The study tries to cover the practice of witch hunting and role of power relation associated with the practice in Assam. Most of the data are based on secondary sources. The data were collected

from three prominent newspapers of Assam The Assam Tribune, Amar Asom and The Times of India. Content analysis was carried out to study the practice of witch hunting dimension of power and its implications. Due to limitation of study four cases among three newspapers from June 2015 to January 2017 are picked randomly for the study.

2. Introduction

According to National Crime Records Bureau Report 768 women were murdered in India following accusations of Being “witch or Daini. Witch hunting involves the branding of victims, especially women as witches, either after an observation made by an ‘ojha’ or ‘bej’ or a witch doctor. The victim who is branded as a witch is subjected to numerous forms of torture, beatings, burns, parading naked through the village, forced to eat human excrement and sometimes even raped. In some cases their hair cut off and the victim and their children are socially ostracised and sometimes even put to death. There is a common belief in rural part of Assam that witch with a curse can cause drought, disease, death of children and livestock. People also believe that once the power of a witch are acquired, the person can Change form i. e. human to animal and vice versa (Witch-hunting in Assam Individual, Structural and Legal Dimension). Ronald Hutton has identified five characteristics generally shared by those who believe in witches and witchcraft across different cultures and time periods: (a) witches use non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to others; (b) harm is usually caused to neighbours or kin rather than strangers; (c) strong social disapproval follows, in part because of the element of secrecy and in part because their motives are not wealth or prestige but malice and spite; (d) witches work within long-standing traditions, rather than in one-time only contexts; and (e) other humans can resist witches through persuasion, non-physical means (counter magic), or deterrence including

through corporal punishment, exile, fines or execution(The Practice of Witch hunting A Call for its Abolition , 2010). The notion of witch hunting is not a new one for human civilization rather it entrenched from time immemorial.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 natural powers, 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 Assam. Mayongese believed to worship the planet of MAYA or BYADHI. 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. From various source and newspaper the fact exposes that apart from the world witch hunting is also widely practiced in Sonitpur, Bongaigaon, Nagaon, Gusaigaon, Darrang Tinsukia etc. districts of Assam.

Though the men also labelled as witch sometimes, the main victims who were targeted as witch in this study are all women which reveals that women are more vulnerable getting labelled as witch. Among all women separated from husband, widow, never married are further susceptible. With the reference of PLD report fact reveals that married women who enjoy substantial support of their husband appear to be more vulnerable. Witch hunting appears to be a tool by which conflicts, tensions and jealousies are overcome to restore status quo swiftly and absolutely. In a manner that brooks little or no opposition from the community and, indeed little or no

intervention by those tasked under law with protecting the security of people and property and of keeping peace(Witch-hunting in Assam Individual, Structural and Legal Dimension). Various source identified superstition as the factors of such practice is Assam. Historians have argued that the witch-hunt cannot be understood without using gender as a category of analysis in addition to other perspectives of race, class or culture. Witch-hunts were less about magic or heresy and more the expression of a contested power relationship between sexes. In a public display of male dominance the witch-hunts turned female exertions of power into criminal behaviour creating a social construction that exploited fear over the supernatural to ensure gender conformity(Hanna, 2013). There are many other reasons behind the practice such as greed for land, property revenge, maintaining status quo. Victims are basically from low economic background, uneducated and rural areas.

3. Case-1

Two women were buried alive in a well after being branded ‘witches’ in the Puranigudam area of Nagaon District of Assam in the Month of November 2016. Both the women are age group of 48 to 60 related to each other. In the case three men were accused of the crime. The police have arrested two of the accused Basu Gaur and Sanu Gaur on the next day of incident the third, Kumar Sanu Gaur, was absconding. Two of them are daily wage labourers. Instigated by a quack or ‘bej’ the men held the women responsible for the spreading of insects in a village well from which they would source water and buried them in the very well by dumping earth and mud over them. An officer of Samaguri police station claimed both the arrested had confessed to the killing “the trio branded the women witch’. The accused revealed that they had been guided by a quack.

Analysis- From this particular case inference can be drawn that both of the women are from rural area having poor economic background. As accused persons are their relatives it is clear that there must be other reason than accusing them of spreading insect or disease. In family there are many conflicts as for example encroaching property, jealousy, animosity. There must be family conflict which took two lives. Both accusers admitted that they are guided by quack or bej to do so. What should be the reason for quack to guide people to do so? It must be (a) money (b) fame (c) Show power (d) domination. In this case it is clear that factors behind witch hunting are not only confined to superstition belief rather it is a power relation.

3.1 Case-2

Member of a family accused of practising black magic went missing since 22 April, 2016 at East Maligaon village in Kokrajhar District. Ashinta Basumatary a B.A. 4th Semester student at UN Brahma College Kajalgaon in Chirang went missing from his house. Ashinta's mother Gaijrai was accused of being a witch give year back after the death of her husband and forced to leave her house in the year 2015, December. She has since been living at her parents' house at Sulmari in Gossaigaon subdivision in September 2013. The villagers of Sulmari and East Maligaon even held a meeting in this regard a resolution was adopted that the family should be allowed to live in the village without any problem. But the family was harassed continuously forcing Gaijrai to leave her home and two sons and a daughter. The ordeal resurfaces again after Gairaj came to visit her children for a family function few days back. Some villagers accused her of spelling black magic resulting in the death of a cow in the village after her visit in the village. Ashinta's elder brother Mahanta also received a threat few days back of the incident by some villagers, who even took away their goat as punishment. The five family members named Thobra Narzary,

Gobinda Basumatary, Elden Narzary, Borai Basumatary and Sontola Basumatary suspected as perpetrator.

Analysis- This case is little different from other three cases because victim in this case is male but the target was female (mother of the victim). Similar to case 1 perpetrators are victim's own relatives. Though the case shows reason behind the incident was black magic there must be other reason. Here the moot question is, why perpetrators are from own relatives in both cases.

3.2 Case-3

A woman around 50 year of age was lynched by a mob on the suspicion of practising witchcraft at No-1 Rangajan village in Assam's Tinsukia District on 18 July 2016. In the case Aghani Ghatowar, was dragged out of her home by a large group of people after a local priest reportedly branded her a 'daini' at a religious function held earlier in the day and accused her practising witchcraft that was bringing ills to the village.

Analysis- This case shows form of brutality carried out during witch-hunt. Victim was dragged out from her home and killed. From the case a fact reveals that witch hunting is associated with religion.

3.3 Case 4

A 60 year-old woman was branded a witch was dragged out of her house to river Dhuli, half a kilometres from her house and beheaded by villagers in Assam's Sonitpur District on 20th July 2015. Poni Orang a resident of No-1 Vimajuli village under Biswanath Chariali police Station and a mother of two boys was accused practising black magic by the villager instigated by

Anima Ronghang, whom is regarded as a priestess. Anima's husband Deliram Bey also regarded as a priest was also involved in the incident.

Analysis- Like other tree cases in this case victim is also from rural area. Similarly in this case also perpetrators are villager but instigator is a priestess. Though case shows immediate reason is black magic, there must be some other reason because instigator herself is motivated by her husband. This case clearly shows gender conformity because the ultimate victim was female and the main perpetrator is male but very interestingly acts was carried out through a female.

4. Comparison of four cases under given criteria

Case No.	Victim's Details				Perpetrator's Details				
	age	sex	Class position	community	Offender	Instigator	Reason	involvement	Ultimate reason (Hypothetical)
1	48 60	F	poor	Tea Tribe	Relative	Quack	Spreading illness	Villagers	Property, Enmity, Status quo
2	20(a)	M	poor	Bodo	Relative	Villager	Death of animals	Villagers	Property, Jealousy, Enmity
3	50(a)	F	poor	Tea Tribe	Villager	Priest	Spreading illness	Villager	Enmity, Jealousy, Status quo

4	60	F	poor	Tea Tribe	Villager	Priestess	Black magic	Villager	Enmity, Jealousy, Fear, status quo
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5. Discussion: With the help of above given table findings of the content analysis suggested that male has greater role in carrying out witch-hunting. The study reveals that male domination over the society is very significant. And analysis of the main institutions in the society shows that they are all patriarchal in nature. The family, religion, media, the law are the pillars of a patriarchal system and structure. Since in all four cases offender and instigator are male directly or indirectly. In case-2 victim was male and perpetrator are males but the perpetrator's ultimate target was mother of victim which was a woman. In the fourth case victim and perpetrators are female but female perpetrator is also motivated by the male priest. Here whole process of witch hunting from identifying witch to slaying is a very complex process. Though incidents shows villagers, relative are main culprit but they are only weapon foremost culprit are third person i.e. quack priest, priestess even land mafia sometimes. Witch hunting incident are not an overnight story and its a properly prearranged act. As villager or a group of people collectively carried out such incidents there must be a pre planning. For instance who will brand as witch, when the victim will be hunt, how it will be possible, a secret discussion took place before the incident. And very interestingly such type of incident took place in areas where administrative people can't reach immediately. To support this view we can quote Dev Nathan, Govind Kelkar and Shivani Satija who stated that witch hunting can be

looked in three different contexts. First is that of setting up masculine domination in the ritual and political spheres. The key aspect of this process was women not having a voice in governance, in conjunction with their ritual devaluation. Second context is that of the patrilineal descent system. Women's land rights were reduced over time. Third context of witch-hunting is that of transition from subsistence to an accumulative economy, and the decline of reciprocity. In this context the target is not just women, but may also include their households. The violence of the witch-hunt seems to have had a constitutive role in establishing women's subordination. But it also has an instrumental role in continuing to keep women subordinated. In the process of witch-hunt instigator play a crucial role. In many cases instigator is the main culprit who motivate villager or victim's relative to carried out the act only to accomplished his/her personal motives. Instigator may have multiple objectives behind the act such as money, scared of being exposed, hegemony, defend identity so on. Victor Turner (1996) believed that witch-hunting was motivated by conflicts over land and power. Consequences of witch hunting directly affect the victims as isolation, displacement, alienation from self and indirectly the society in maintaining peace and harmony.

6. Conclusion:

The study reveals an interesting fact that often goes unnoticed in the cases of witch hunting. Media coverages of such news are unfortunately insufficient due to lack of follow up. People overlook such case as victimised in the name of superstition beliefs. But often negate dimension of power within the witch hunting cases. The study shows that superstition is just a mean to achieve the selfish goal of priest, villager, and relatives of the victims. Social activists like Birubala Rabha, who has been fighting a tough battle against the menace of witchcraft and witch

hunting for over a decade. Factors like poverty, illiteracy, health deficits greed for property, conspiracy and most significantly power relation of the society can't be ignored in prohibition of witch hunting in the region. However, feminist historians like Marianne Hester are advancing research towards greater focus on power relationship as she sees the hunts as eroticized domination of men over women. She begun to recognized that inter-gender power was an important dimension to the witch hunts. Thus the need of hour is to enact stringent law to curb the practice of witch hunting in Assam. Greater level of sensitization programme in rural areas and talk should be organised to diminution such cases in the region.

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