

Power Dynamics in the Practice of Witch-Hunting: Cases of Assam

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Abstract

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. Witch craft is the practice of any magical art form of any religion or spiritual system regardless of alignment or intent. It is a universal practice all over the globe among tribal, peasants and underdeveloped societies. 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 the dynamics of power involved with these menace.

Key Words: Witch Hunting, Witchcraft, Power, Violence, Sensitization

Methodology

The study attempts to cover the practice of witch hunting and power dynamics associated with the practice in Assam. Most of the data are based on secondary sources. The data were collected from prominent newspapers of Assam The Assam Tribune, Amar Axom and The Times of India, The Sentinel, New India Express and North East News. Content analysis was carried out to study the practice of witch hunting and its implications. Ten cases were brought into the context from above mentioned Newspaper and News site from 2015 to 2019. And an attempt has been made to understand power dynamics involved with the cases relating to witch branding and hunting.

Introduction

The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015 which received the assent of the President on 13th June, 2018 defines 'Witch' as "any person who has been supposedly identified, called, stigmatized, defamed or accused as Daini, Daina, Dakini, Dakan, Bhoot, Bhootuni, or any other such name by person or persons under the grip of unrealistic and unfounded impression that such person has the power to harm anyone or society at large, in any manner;"

Whereas the same act defines 'Witch Hunting' as the identifying, calling, stigmatising, defaming or accusing any person as witch by any other person by words, or by signs or by indications or conducts or actions or in any manner. Thereby causing or abetting physical and/or mental harm or execution of a witch which may involve mass hysteria, lynching or any other activities."

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.

Following are some of the cases of Witch Hunting in Assam

Case-1

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 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.

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.

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.

Case 4

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.

Case 5

The Sentinel on 22nd August 2018, reveal the case that a woman named Pawanmotikoiri wife of Duklukoiri of Borhat Tea Estate under Charaideo District was found death near a drain of the tea garden. There was a clear sign of torture and attack by a sharp weapon on the body. In the investigation police come to learned that a puja had taken place to satisfy the god in her house, some superstitious people allegedly kill the female labourer suspecting her to be a witch.

Case 6

North East News brought the update on 18th November 2018 about a horrific case of witch hunting in a village under Bakalia Police Station of Karbi Anglong district. Sochen Teron alias Lougki Teron around 60 year of age was suspected as witch by the villagers. The villagers called victim to village headman's residence and hold a meeting, where the victim was killed by kicks, slaps, sticks and brick balling by the villagers. The son Bimal Teron tried to save his father was also attacked by the mob and injured seriously.

Case 7

On 17th January, 2019, the Sentinel covers the news that near the river bank of No 1 Aaipuwaligaon near India-Bhutan border at Chirang District bodies of elderly aged couple were recovered. Police interrogated and found that in connection to brutal murder 8 miscreants were identified. Among this 8 miscreants their own son was also in killing the aged old couple. As per eyewitnesses, the couple brutally killed with a sharp weapon and their bodies were later being dragged to the nearby Aaipuwaliriver near India Bhutan border on the night of the MaghBihu celebration.

Case 8

The New India Express brought the news on 4th August 2019, that on 2nd August at Hooloonguri Tea Estate, Jorhat District an incident took place; two women were branded as *duos* or witches by the villagers and further brutally beaten up by tea garden workers. In connection to the case three women were alleged by the police for instigating the mob to perpetrate the attack. According to locals, the victims are at fifties age and had gone somewhere and they came under the attack when they were on their way back home at Tekela Line of the tea garden. On seeing them

disorganized with mud all over their clothes which were also torn, the assailants suspected them to be witches.

Case 9

The Times of India reveals the fact on 20th February 2019, that a 50 year old farmer was died after trashed by a mob in suspect of practicing witch craft at Kokrajhar district. The incident took place as a repercussion of a 16 year old boy who was sick in the village for few days; villagers are claiming that the reason behind his illness is witchcraft practiced by the victims. Three person along with one women from a separate village were branded as witch.

Case 10

In the Kokrajhar, Assam on 8th August 2019, one family headed by Bhodreswar Rabha, Puleswari Rabha wife of Bhodreswar along with her son Ajit, daughter in law and two year old grandson were outcast and ordered to leave the village within a week. On 7th August, 2019 a meeting was held in the village where a resolution was taken by the villagers to outcast the said family accusing them of practicing black magic in the jungles of the village and the family

member were forced to sign a paper to leave the village.

Discussion:The above given ten cases which occurred in Assam since 2015 in the name of witch hunting or branding. Out of the ten cases almost in eight cases women are involved as victims. 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. In all ten cases offender and instigator are male directly or indirectly only one case two women are involved in instigating the mob. 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 it's 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. 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.

Conclusion:

The study reveals an interesting fact that often goes unnoticed in the cases of witch hunting. Media coverage 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 discourse of power in within the hitch hunting cases. The study shows that superstition is just a mean to achieve the selfish goal of priest, villager, and relatives of the victims. Many 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, greed for property, conspiracy and most significantly power relation of the society can't be ignored in prohibition of witch hunting in the region.

It has been one year the Assam Witch Hunting (Prevention, Prohibition and Protection) Bill, 2015 given assent of the President of India on 13th June 2018 after almost three years it was passed by Assam's State Assembly. But the administration of the Assam State totally unsuccessful in implementing the Act. 23 more lives were lost in the name of Witch Hunting till October 2019 Parliamentary Affairs Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary informed the state Assembly (India Today, 2019). Greater level of sensitization programme, promotion of basic amenities, establishment of educational institution, promotion of health services in rural areas

and multi-lateral dialogue should be organised to decrease such cases in the region.

N:B: This research work is in continuation of my own research work published as entitled 'Power game of Witch Hunting in Assam: An Analysis' in International journal for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, ISSN 2206-2107, Vol-4, (2), 2018. In this research five more cases of witch hunting since 2016 were included and analysed.

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