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WITCH HUNTING WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM- Dharitri Sharma¹**Abstract:**

We are the citizen of a developing country. Being a developing country, India is continuously developing in various fields to touch the zenith. At the same time, the woman's position is sliding downward in parallel. Day by day, the work and status of woman is coming down. In recent years, crime against women has crossed its limit. The suffering of women knows no bounds. They were tortured and neglected everywhere and held responsible for their woes almost always. Apart from the other crimes like vulnerability, torture, and violence in various forms such as rape, molestation, stripping, kidnapping and abduction, domestic violence including wife beating, wrongful confinement, incident behavior, dowry harassment and dowry death, cruelty to women, driving them to commit suicide and also other abnormal practices like female feticide, female infanticide, one of the serious crime against women which is increasing day by day is the problem of witchcraft and witch hunting. The researcher in this article would like to discuss the aspects of witch and witch hunting. The researcher also analyzes various causes and effects of witch-hunting with particular reference to Assam.

Objective:

The researcher's objective is to analyze the concept and history of witchcraft and witch-hunting. The researcher also tries to investigate the causes and consequences of witch-hunting with particular reference to Assam.

Research methodology:

¹Assistant Professor, Tezpur Law college

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The researcher in this Article uses secondary data by applying the doctrinal method

Introduction:

Witch hunting is regarded as one of the social menaces of the society. Different nomenclatures know this in other places. While in Assam, this is known as the Diane system; in Chhattisgarh, this is called Tonhi. 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 to various degrees, and mostly single women and widows become targets of this least talked about violence against women.

History:

The classical period of witch hunting dates back to the 14th century, when certain people were labeled as “witches” and executed across Europe, Africa, and Asia. The victim included Joan of Arc, who was burned alive at 19 at the stake for heresy on May 30, 1431.

In India, witch hunting dates back hundreds of years. It emanated in the Morigaon district of Assam, which is infamously known as the “Indian capital of black magic” People from far-flung areas would come to learn witchcraft. Even today, witch hunting is being practiced in the state and has become a burning issue where previously women fell prey to this heinous crime. Witch hunting involves branding victims, especially women, as witches, after an observation made by “ojha” or “be” and a witch doctor. The victim branded a witch is tortured, beaten, burned, forced to eat human increments, and sometimes even raped. Sometimes their hair is cut off, and the victim and their children are socially ostracised and even put to death.

The fact that witch hunting has been making the headlines in all local newspapers of Assam for quite some time is disturbing. Though official cases have been filed against witch hunters, little progress has been made.

This article focuses mainly on Assam, where witch-hunting has recently increased.

The belief of witchcraft exists across most of India, but accusations and related violence are most prevalent among specific indigenous communities and states in the rural North East of India. Witches are believed to have supernatural power that they use only to cause harm. They are said

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to transform into animals, use invisible weapons, or send ghosts to cause illness and death. „Witch Doctors“ are seen as spirit healers and the main force to control witches by identifying, deciding punishment, and ensuring it is carried out. Black magic, witchcraft, and superstitious beliefs have been part of the tribal customs in part of Assam, Tripura, and other North-Eastern states. Again many tribal communities practice indigenous faith and resort to such rituals in treating ailments. Assam’s social landscape remains locked in an uneasy co-existence between the modern and barbaric. More than 20 people have been killed in witch hunts every year. Black magic practitioners, called Bej or Ojha, still sway in the state's vast swathes of tribal-dominated areas. And the faith often becomes a fig leaf to victimize opponents and settle personal scores. Most witch-hunts reported this year were from Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Sonitpur district, etc. The practice is also prevalent in Kamrup(rural), Goalpara, Chirang, Baksha, Karbi- Anglong, and, notably, Jorhat and Lakhimpur districts of Upper Assam. Except for Fort Jorhat district, the other witch-hunt-prone communities are marked by rampant illiteracy, poor accessibility, and a severe lack of basic infrastructure, including health care, education, sanitation, or portable water. Inevitably, local peoples fall back on Ojhas, quacks, and begs to heal, often bringing the dead back to life.

Witch hunting in Assam:

Given witch hunting, Assam is not a safe and secure place for women, particularly in the downtrodden society. Every day, the media has reported cases of women labeled „Witches“ brutally and mercilessly killed for the past several years. Most accusations are made against women who are often unmarried, widowed, or childless. Women branded witches are usually elderly widows or spinsters, and the reason for killing them is to usurp their property. That such brutality can be allowed to happen with such impunity in the 21st century shows the complete failure of the state.

Witch hunting, a social malaise, the Assam government has been able to tackle effectively. In most instances, witch hunters have operated with impunity. Police forces often side with or refuse to arrest them, not to be accused of protecting witches or because they cannot find people who testify against them. Governments, too, have watched from the sidelines. The situation is

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complicated because there are different motives behind the charge of witchcraft. A witchcraft accusation can result from a land conflict, economic rivalries, competitions, etc.

There have been numerous such cases in tribal-dominated areas in Assam, mostly of women, either widowed or living alone, who are beaten and sometimes even killed after being branded witches. The main reasons are lack of awareness and poor health facilities or property disputes. Moreover, the 'Witches' are predominantly older women, poor farmers, often living alone, or women considered competing with men. The prime reason behind the killing of older women as Witches is to get hold of their land or property, which had probably come to them after the death of their husbands. The sons are sometimes impatient for widow mothers to die natural deaths, so they connive to kill them, albeit with an excuse that they are witches, so they escape arrest. This has to be the grossest violation of Human Rights in Assam today. Even male person was also targeted. There were guilty of association with suspected witches or were killed in their stead when the women could not be found or they tried to protect them. Accusations often result in physical and emotional abuse, banishment, torture, and murder.

Witchcraft occurs daily among the tribal of Assam, but the practice is more rampant in the tribal-dominated areas of the North and Western part. Experts, however, put in that the problem is equally severe among a few communities in some other states of the North East. The practice of witchcraft has been observed in almost all the tribal communities in Assam but is more among the Rabha, Boro, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, and Adivasi communities.

Since time immemorial, Assam, one of the eight states in North Eastern India, has been a melting pot of diverse tribes and races, and each of these tribes is opulent in its heritage, legacy, customs, and traditions. The tribes of Assam are the aborigines of the land who have inhabited the area forages. The state of Assam, which is surrounded by the other six sisters of North East with Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya, is located at the Centre of these with pollution of three core people. The state, which covers an area of approximately 78,000 sq. kilometers, is connected with the rest of India through the state of West Bengal on its West, which shares a narrow corridor in Siliguri and other forms of North East on different sides. The state also shares its borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh's International regions. Overall the state of Assam has been influential within Indian polity for it represents a

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large group of Indian tribes who belong to various groups of tribal origin, Assam witch hunting is still widespread in districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baska, Sonitpur, Udalguri, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, etc. Another statistics available is that According to available statistics, cases of witch-hunting were reported in the state between 2006 and 2010. While 57 victims were physically tortured, the rest were brutally murdered. This evil practice is prevalent mainly in the backward regions of the state where the level of literacy and healthcare is low. Since 2001, 38 cases of witch-hunting have been reported in Goalpara district alone.

Identifying a 'Witch' starts with members of the local communities as and when any unnatural death occurs within the community. The process of identification of a witch is similar among all the tribal communities of Assam who practices witchcraft. Though there are multiple ways of identification of witchcraft, two of the most common are as follows-

a. If in a village someone is suffering from some disease unknown to the member of that community, the members of that community decide that it has occurred as a result of some witch practicing witchcraft; along with that, it is also believed that the death of the person has happened as a result of the witch practicing witchcraft. The community leaders preferred to visit the local head shaman to help identify the witch. After prolonged scrutiny and thought, the shaman utters a woman's name, and that woman is held guilty of practicing witchcraft in that area.

b. In the second process, the person suspected of being a victim of witchcraft is wrapped with a net, and the whole body is pinched with sharp objects. The victim is believed to speak out the name of the woman practicing witchcraft. The victim utters the name of a woman who is practicing witchcraft. The victim utters a woman's word, and immediately that woman is recognized as a witch.

After that, the community members try to provide customary treatment for the patient's recovery. For this, the community members first take the initiative to conduct worship to eliminate the witch. The process of witch worship involves leaving the leg pieces, intestines, and the head portion of a cock, along with ashes of a betel leaf and rice, on the middle of the road outside the house of the suspected wife. It is believed that the witch will eat the food provided and will get satisfied only after these community members start providing medical treatment to

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the patient. In this way, sometimes, the patient may succumb to death due to not receiving medical attention in time. If the end of the patient occurred immediately, it is declared among the member of the community that the witch is responsible for the death. The community members punish the witch“ to eliminate her evil power and influence.

The ‘witch’ is punished according to prevailing customs. Once the judgment of the head of the society is given and punishment is decided for the witch, the following sentences are given to the witch.

- a. The suspected is given the death penalty and mental and physical torture.
- b. The villagers forcibly take the suspected witch’s properties, and she is chased off from the village. In one sense, she is expelled from the town where she lives—anyone who attempts to defend her faces the same consequences.
- c. Strict prohibition on the ‘witch’ and her family is imposed. They are barred from having necessities like water and firewood from anywhere in the village. Besides this, a heavy fine is imposed on anyone attempting to help the ‘witch’ or her family.
- d. The children of the ‘witch’ are not allowed to study in schools or other institutions in the village or nearby.
- e. The ‘witch’ and the other family members of the ‘witch’ are not restricted from attending any rituals, social gatherings, and festivals in the village and the nearby areas.
- f. The children of the witches are also deprived of playing in the playgrounds in the village and nearby areas.
- g. No marriage can occur between any member of the family of the witch and anyone else in the village.

The pieces of dead bodies of the ‘witches’ are buried separately in different places as it is also believed that if they are buried together, the witch will take rebirth and harm people. As we have seen, the recent Witch hunts have spread to no one. The weaker section, i.e., women, are victims and targets of hunters, but sometimes male persons are also victims of witchcraft. In reality, what

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is taking place is a broad attack on women, reflecting a dramatic evaluation of their position and identity. It is recon from rational and international data that thousands of women have been burned or buried alive or beaten or tortured to death. In India, especially in Assam and North-East states, labeling a woman as a witch is a standard play to grab land, settle scores, and even punish her for turning down sexual advances. In most cases, it is difficult for the accused woman to reach out for help, and she is forced to her abandoned house or family or driven to commit suicide.

Most cases are not documented because it is difficult for poor and illiterate women to travel to isolated regions to file police reports. It is a matter of great shame that such macabre incidents continue to haunt the state. What has made the matter worse is that killing people, especially women, after branding them as witches has become a norm in several inferior areas of the state. The highly deplorable act is a crime against humanity, not only against women, and it needs to be tackled with iron hands.

Suppose we analyze the motive behind witch-hunting. In that case, it is felt that witch killing was an act of the land mafia increments use social superstition to uproot families from the land they have an eye on and later acquire their properties at throwaway prices. Another survey revealed that it is the brainchild of the Ojha and Bez, who control the people and make a living by providing medication to the villagers for survey disease.

If we see the scenario regarding state laws regarding Witch-hunting, we clearly mark one thing. Till date, Witch is not recognized as a crime in Assam. So the imposition of punishment is a myth to date. Till today not a single case has been lodged before the court directly seeking justice in matters related to witch hunting. Based on its hindrances to development and threat to the lives of hundreds of women, witch hunting should be recognized as a severe offense. To eliminate this menace, stringent laws must be formulated and enforced to protect women from witch-hunting.

We observed clearly that only one government scheme had been implemented in Assam, which is very sad. This scheme was the sole initiative the government took against witch-hunting practices.

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PRAHARI, the government initiative to check witch hunting in Assam. The Assam Government launched a project called 'Prahari' in 2000 to curb the practice of witch hunting. Under the prairie, regular health camps are organized.

Through qualified experts, villagers who impart knowledge about health and hygiene and local women are trained.

On May 8, 2015, the Assam state assembly unanimously passed the Assam Witch Hunting (prohibition, prevention, and Protection) Bill 2015 to eliminate rising cases of superstition leading to murder. Besides this, Birubala Rabha, a tribal woman from Assam, has been crusading against witch-hunting since 1980. But the state needs more than one but several Birubal to stand up and fight against this crime.

It is apparent from the forgoing discussions that witch hunting and craft is not only a social evil but also a socio-legal evil against womanhood, and it should be regarded as a severe offense. It is a conclusive presumption that every human has sufficient intelligence to differentiate between just, fair, unjust, right, and wrong. So the accused should not be exempted from the punishments. Due to the absence of adequate penal provisions, the problem of witch-hunting is increasing, and most surprisingly, the effort by the government is far below the satisfactory level.

Therefore, it is high time to take proper steps against these practices. The practice is not confined to specific areas but became a grave offense against women in Assam, like any other offenses against women, as provided under different because the evil is not practiced most of the time by a single individual but is committed by several people with common intention and an everyday object. Most of the time, it is seen that women are tortured in the name of witch-hunting for property grabbing by a group of people together having an everyday object and shared intention. So it is not a problem of a particular state or locality, but it is a matter of National concern because in India, where more than 70% of worship is in the name of Goddess, more than 20% of women are killed in the name of witch hunting. Although, to date, it is not included as a crime against women or offenses related to women under the provisions of IPC, it is the proper time to tackle the matter with an iron hand, not as a social menace but as a socio-legal problem against womanhood. In this regard, the media, student organizations, NGOs, and various civil society groups have a significant role ahead of them. It is high time that the authorities woke up to the

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social-legal evil and took steps to eradicate it from society. Because many a time, we found that not only the illiterate sections of society believe and practice this barbaric evil, but also even some literate sections of society do not know that the aggrieved women have the right to have unrestricted legal services under the Legal Service Authorities Act, 1987 in witch hunting cases. Even though they are also not aware of the fact that the Indian Penal Code 1860 is still used in witch-hunting instances, under it, there has to be “proof beyond reasonable doubt” of the crime, which can be a hindrance in securing justice.

Apart from all those mentioned above, the state must also improve health care facilities in the interior areas so that the patient can consult a doctor instead of a Bej or Ojah or quacks.

Conclusion:

It may be observed that a multi-pronged strategy on the above lines needed to be adapted to ameliorate the severe problem, which not only amounts to grave criminal activity but also results in an extreme violation of Human Rights. It is high time to include the matter as an offense similar to other crimes against women under the provisions of the Indian Penal Code 1860. Because unless and until the issue is not included under the conditions of IPC, people do not mind committing such practices and do not take concern about the matter seriously. No doubt the enactment of laws, such as the Prevention and Protection of witch-hunting act, 2013 will bring about some changes, but the point is that such Acts, when they become law, should be utilized appropriately. Because many a

Time, we found that we have rules, but due to lack of proper implementation, we must suffer many troubles. It has to be further recognized that the issue needs to be addressed by focusing on the people's economic upliftment and addressing the social and cultural attributes involved. The proper remedial measures adopted based on the documented success stories within the country and abroad are expected to pave the way toward resolving the menace. In doing so, the regional and international instruments on the economic, social, and cultural front must be adopted and implemented earnestly. However, tailor-made strategies may yield different dividends. For natural and practical progress, the provisions of such instruments may need to incorporate necessary changes based on experience and local requirements.

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