



WITCH HUNTING IN ASSAM: A FORM OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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ABSTRACT:

Gender based violence against women is not a new topic of discussion. Women face different kinds of violence throughout their lifetime. Most of these violence are result of the patriarchal norms of the society. Women are thought to be inferior to man and treated like that. Witch hunting is another example of gender based violence that has historically targeted women particularly vulnerable or marginalized women in societies. It is used as a means to control and oppress women specially those who do not conform to societal norms or challenge traditional power structures. This form of violence is exacerbated by superstitions, fear and ignorance. This paper will try to focus on witch hunting as a gender based violence against women and the prevalence of the practice of witch hunting in India specifically in the state of Assam.

KEYWORDS: Women, Witch hunting, Violence, Witchcraft.

INTRODUCTION:

Whenever we talk about witch hunting in any academic discussion, reference to historical incidents of witch hunts are given utmost importance. Witch hunting can not be understood without discussing the past witch hunting practices. Scholars of different disciplines such as ritual studies, religious studies theological studies and demonology have studied witchcraft with serious concern since the 15th century. While research on witch hunting has been carried out lately and seriously by sociologists, folklorists, anthropologists, historians and feminists from the 19th century.

Although human civilization have progressed in scientific temper, there are people who believe in in witchcraft and practices like witch hunting. These superstitious beliefs are so inhuman that life of women become trivial so much so that the murdering her is regarded as the universal remedy. Right to life and liberty are two basic rights of individuals living in a civilized society that needs to be protected. Witch hunting is a systematic violation of human rights and it is a atrocious act of human right violation against women. An entire community of individuals sanctions punishment to the accused. Witch hunting and witchcraft are rampantly practiced with modus and motives changing over time and space (Iqbal, 2015). Witchcraft has victimized certainly innumerable women innocent of inflicting harm.

Violence against women takes place all over the world. It is a gross violation of women's human right which also has serious health impact and is costly to economic development. Women are facing violence from both intimate partners and strangers. One in every five women is at risk of violence while carrying out daily activities. According to the World Health Organization (2002) many girls and adolescents are forced sexual initiation in several countries. This has overall impact on the economy by reducing women's participation are productivity which results in lower earning, saving and investment.

Violence against women has a lot to do with men and masculinity and the patriarchal structure of the society. Men's violence towards women is linked with the idea of controlling women. Women who challenge men's action threatens masculinity and it results in violence against women. The act of violence against women has been classified as control, emotional violence, physical violence and sexual violence. Violence against women can take place in both private and public sphere.

Witch hunting is a form of public violence against women. A whole community of people come together and perform such evil practice. The issue of witch hunting is a global phenomenon which has spared neither women nor men. But it is seen that the main target of such evil practice is mostly a woman.

Sociologist Bula Bhadra described witch killing as “genderised mass murder”. Belief in this practices arrive from the believe in the notion that women are morally weaker than man and are more susceptible to the advances of the devil and therefore are frequent practitioners of witchcraft.

In most cases the so called “witch” is forced to leave their own village and property and flee to protect themselves. Superstition is not the only reason behind such evil practice. Various studies have shown that there are other factors also which encourages the practice of witch hunting against women. The patriarchal structure can be held responsible for this type of gender based violence against women.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER:

The main objectives of the paper is to-

- Understand the history of the practice of witch hunting and why women are specifically targeted as witch.
- Examine the practice of witch hunting in the context of India specifically in the state of Assam.
- Examine the efforts taken by government authorities and other non government institutions to curb out the evil practice of witch hunting.

METHODOLOGY:

The paper is based on purely qualitative methodology of study. The data of the study is collected through the use of secondary sources. Secondary sources like books, newspaper articles, journal articles, internet archives etc. have been used to gather information in the study.

THE HISTORY OF WITCH HUNTING:

The history of witch hunting is a dark and complex tale that spans centuries and is deeply rooted in religious, social, and cultural beliefs. Witch hunts were widespread in Europe and America from the late 15th to the 18th centuries, but similar phenomena can be found in various societies throughout history. Here's an overview of the key periods and factors contributing to the practice of witch hunting:

1. Pre-modern beliefs: The concept of witches can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where people believed in magic and sorcery. In many societies, people thought witches possessed supernatural powers, either to do good or harm. These beliefs often associated witchcraft with pagan rituals and nature worship.

2. Christianization and demonization: As Christianity spread in Europe, pagan beliefs were often considered heretical or Satanic. The medieval Church incorporated these earlier notions of witchcraft into their doctrine, portraying witches as agents of the devil. The idea of witchcraft as heresy gained momentum during the 14th and 15th centuries.
3. Malleus Maleficarum: Written in 1487 by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, the “Malleus Maleficarum” (The Hammer of Witches) became a pivotal text in the witch-hunting movement. It provided detailed instructions on identifying, interrogating, and punishing witches, fueling the hysteria that followed.
4. Political and social turmoil: The late medieval and early modern periods in Europe were marked by political unrest, religious strife (e.g., the Protestant Reformation), and economic challenges. During times of crisis, scapegoating and fear of conspiracy played a role in the increased persecution of alleged witches.
5. Witch trials and executions: Witch hunts reached their peak between the 16th and 17th centuries. Thousands of individuals, primarily women, were accused of practicing witchcraft and subjected to horrific trials, often involving torture and forced confessions. Many of these individuals were executed, typically by burning at the stake.
6. Decline of witch hunts: The witch hunts began to decline in the late 17th century. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire and Montesquieu, criticized the witch trials, and skepticism towards superstitions and irrational beliefs gained traction. Secular courts gradually took over jurisdiction from church-run Inquisitions, leading to a decrease in witch trials.
7. Legacy and contemporary views: The history of witch hunting remains a dark stain on human history. Scholars estimate that tens of thousands of people, mostly women, were killed during the European witch hunts. In modern times, there is a consensus that these trials were a manifestation of mass hysteria, misogyny, and the abuse of power rather than any actual magical practices.

In conclusion, the history of witch hunting is a tragic tale of human fear, intolerance, and prejudice. While it largely faded away in the 18th century, its impact on society’s perception of women, the marginalized, and those accused of witchcraft continues to be felt in various ways today

WITCH HUNTING AND INDIAN SCENARIO

Asian countries like Saudi Arabia, India and Indonesia are seen to have to have the practice of witch hunting in the 20th and 21st century among various ethnic groups. In regard to India, it is observed that there are some states where witch hunting practice is prevalent among various ethnic groups since the 20th century. Practice of witch hunting is prominent among the various tribal population although there are sporadic reports of similar incidents among other communities (Soma Chaudhary, 2013). The practice of finding the witches and the practice of witch hunting is prevalent among most of the tribal and ethnic groups even today.

The early witch hunting practices were prevalent among the Santhal community in India. The practice of witch hunting which is prevalent among the Santhal community predate British rule of India and existed long after they left the country and perhaps still continues (Verma, 2007). The first witch hunting among the Santhals in India was seen in the year 1792. It remained a evil practice in the states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Chotanagpur until the British banned it in the 1840s

and 1850s. The period therefore saw a drastic decline in the practice of witch hunting. However the practice of witch hunting and the belief in witchcraft still continued to remain strong after that period, says Sinha (2015). The Santhals believed that the ban encouraged the witches to flourish. During 1857- 58, there was a surge in witch hunting; coinciding during the period of a major rebellion, which has led some scholars to see the resurgence of the activity as a form of resistance to company rule (Sinha, 2007)

Even after India's independence, the practice of witch hunting is prevalent in many parts of the country. The constitution of India that proclaimed and declared ourselves to be democratic republic believing in the ideas of equality, justice and freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The constitution also recognizes the supreme court as the apex body of justice. The constitution also believes judiciary to be the sole authority in resolving disputes. But it is shame that in such a democratic state with such great ideals in front of us, the government is still unable to eradicate Superstitious believes in witchcraft and abuse and torture in the name of it.

Singh (2011) said that witch hunting is like a infectious disease and it slowly spreading to newer areas and solutions have to be found to eradicate this evil practice. Accusation of witchcraft and killing in the name of it had been a part of the history of rural India. It is still continuing to be a social problem in the 21st century also. For example according to a report published in The Hindu, between the year 2014 and 2020 as many as 344 people have been killed in the state of Odisha on suspicion of performing witchcraft. Jharkhand is another state which tops in witch hunting cases. According to a report by Times of India, a 55 year old tribal women named Rupi Murmu was beaten to death with strikes by two men on the outskirts of Jamshedpur in the state of Jharkhand in the year 2021. According to the police data published by the times of India, some 123 people were killed by mobs in Jharkhand between 2016 and 2019. These people were mostly women and accused of practicing sorcery. Evidences has been made clear by the National Crime Rerecords Bureau that in India, each year about 200 women are killed in the name of witch hunting. During the year 2000-2001 there were 253 cases of witch hunting were recorded. During the period 2001-2019, there were approximately 2937 cases of witch hunting where women were killed in the name of the evil practice of witch hunting (NCRB). However, these are statistics which have been logged in and the unrecorded ones are anticipated to be far more than this number (Mehra and Agarwal, 2016). The practice of witch hunting is prevalent in most Indian states and majority of the cases were reported from states like Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, west Bengal and Assam.

The National Crime Rerecords Bureau data for 2019 revealed that the state of Chhattisgarh topped the list of witch hunting murders with 22 cases, Odisha was in the second position with 19 witchcraft related murders and Jharkhand was in the third position with 15 witch hunting related murders.

There are various reasons behind the witch hunt practices against women. Elderly women living alone or widows who own some sort of property are the main targets of witch hunt practice. The patriarchal structure of the society is very much responsible for this form of violence against women. Issues like land grabbing and revenge for refusal to sexual advances are some of the hidden reasons behind this witch hunt practices. In some rural tribal areas a widows right to property is denied if other family members can prove that she is a witch (Kelkar and Nathan, 1991). Women are targeted and victimized in witch hunting by land mafias to grab land and settle their interest behind the veil of superstition. By declaring someone witch and forcing them out of the house or getting them banished from the village, it becomes easy to acquire the victims relinquished property (Mehra and Agarwal, 2016). According to a report by Firstpost, an Indian news website, a local land dealer in Jharkhand's Namkom district spread rumors about a woman being a witch because he wanted to grab her property. There are several evidences that shows that victimization is used to punish social and sexual transgressions. In various cases after declaring women a witch, she is kept outside of the village and is taken sexual advantage.

The committee on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) in 2007 had expresses serious concern on the practice of witch hunting in India as an extreme form of violence against women. It had urged India to adopt appropriate measures not only for elimination of the practice and prosecution of perpetrators but also to provide for rehabilitation of and compensation to the victimized women. Further it also recommended that such measures be based on an analysis of its causes.

In India, at the national level there is no specific law against the evil form of violence against women in the name of witch hunting except from the Indian Penal code. Indian penal code, schedule castes and schedule tribes (prevention of atrocities) act 1989 and the protection of Human Rights act 1993 can be considered to be associated with witch hunting atrocities.

In India, some of the states have come up with some provisions against witch hunting while some other states are still trying. The Jharkhand government passed the Dayan Pratha (prevention of witch practices) act in 2001 to protect women from inhumane treatment. The Rajasthan women (prevention of atrocities) bill makes it illegal to call a woman "Dayan" or accuse a woman of performing witchcraft that leads to harm. The Odisha government came up with the prevention of witch hunting bill 2013 with provisions of imprisonment up to seven years and penalty for offenders. In Assam the "prevention of and protection from witch hunting bill" 2015 which came into force in 2018.

WITCH HUNT IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM

Assam, one of the states of North East India where various tribal and ethnic groups live in various parts of the state. The practice of witch hunting is not new in Assam. There is a wide prevalence of the practice of witch hunting among the various tribal or Adivasi groups. The practice of witch hunting is common among the Adivasi's, bodos, mishings, rabhas and some other tribal communities. The art of black magic can be traced back from the ancient time. Mayong a place situated in Morigaon district is popularly known as the Indian capital of black magic where people from different parts of the world come to learn the art of black magic. Apart from Mayong, different parts of Assam are also witnessed of adopting this art as a common practice. It is believed that black magic is practiced for the ill effects of the society. With hunting is one of the traditional practices among various tribes and ethnic groups that involve branding of a victim specially women as "Daini" in Assamese vocabulary which refers to a witch. The victims are branded as witch by a neighbor or a relative or a "bej" in Assamese vocabulary which refers to a witch doctor. The victim who is branded as witch is subjected to inhuman treatment and torture including beating, burns, paraded naked through the village and sometimes even raped and lynched by the villagers (Acharya, 2018).

The practice of witch hunting is not limited to a particular district or among one community of people. It is prevalent amidst several communities and tribes across the Brahmaputra valley. This practice is a part of traditional belief system in Assam; therefore, it is not limited to a single community or place in Assam. However some of worst affected areas in Assam are Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri, Sonitpur, Baksa, Karbi Anglong, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Goalpara and Jorhat. People who practice these dark acts are referred to as Bez or Ojaa. In Assam, areas which are tribal and rural, have low rate of literacy, people are guided by blind belief and superstition in those areas and this blind belief invokes them to believe in witchcraft.

In the state of Assam, we have seen various events where people are killed in the name of the superstitious belief of witch hunting. In the year 2019, the Assam government informed the state legislative assembly that in 18 years as many as 161 people have been killed in the State in the name of witch hunting (NDTV). According to the Assam government figures between 2011 and 2019, 107 people were killed across Assam in witch hunting incidents. The official data says that witch hunting is prevalent in 21 districts of the state. However the maximum number of cases are reported from the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts which include the district of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and udalguri.

Various cases of witch hunting have been seen in the state of Assam in recent years also. Various news reports have reported witch hunting cases from various districts in the state of Assam.

According to the NDTV report, in the year 2020, two people were killed by a mob in Rohimpur village, karbi Anglong district of Assam, a 50 year old widow Ramawati Haluwa and a 28 year old educated young man Bijoy Gaur were killed by a mob on the accusation of practicing witchcraft. Some of the villagers alleged that Ramawati was practicing witchcraft. A kangaroo court trial adjudged her as a witch and held responsible for bad fortunes of the people in the village including deaths. The boy Bijoy Gaur was actually intervened when a mob started to beat her and attacked her and therefore he was also beaten to death by the mob.

According to the New Indian Express report, in the year 2021, a widow of 53 years old, mother of four children, Laksheswari Daimary was beaten to death at no 1 Geruajuli area of Rangapara in North Assam's Sonitpur district. The incident came to light by the victims children and the dead body of the victim was found 1 km away from her house in the forest. The locals told that the miscreants killed the woman after suspecting her to be practicing witchcraft.

RESISTANCE AND PROTEST AGAINST WITCH HUNTING IN ASSAM

Various Non Governmental Organizations are playing vital role in creating awareness among the people, rehabilitation of victims, joining hands with the law enforcement machineries in punishing the perpetrators of witch hunting and creating pressure on the government to bring laws for ending the menace of social evil.

Social activists fighting against the evil practice like witch are of the opinion that this superstitious practice have become more complex as more and more cases are found to be related to personal enmity. Although superstition seems to be the reason behind such practices, local rivalries and enmities come to play an active role in perpetuating the crime. Dibyajyoti Saikia, the general secretary of the NGO named "Brothers" says that, "In more than 80% cases I have come across over the years, personal enmity and jealousies play an important role behind such crimes. False beliefs, no doubt is the prime cause, enmities and rivalries also instigate people in backward villages to indulge in such acts". He also added that "On the one hand lack of adequate health and education facilities in remote villages are making people prone to superstitious beliefs like witchcraft and sorcery and on the other hand local rivalries and enmities are making the situation more complex". Elderly women are accused of practicing witchcraft and sometimes they are beaten and driven out of the society. The NGO "Brothers" also initiated a bicycle rally in 2014 covering an area of 40 km as a part of their awareness programme. It also organized road side meetings to spread awareness against witch hunting.

NGOs like All Bodo Students Union, which is an organization of tribal students has launched an awareness program in the district of Kokrajhar among the villagers. It also helped hundreds of persons who left their homes due to witch hunt accusations in rehabilitation.

Birubala, an NGO founded by Birubala Rabha who herself was a victim of the practice of witch hunting, with her strong will power came out to help the victims of this social evil. Presently Mission Birubala is basically dedicated to protecting women from superstition. Mission Birubala working as rescue and rehabilitation of witch victims, conducting awareness along with free health camps and formation of student cell. Mission Birubala has done a lot of works and saved many women from this social evil. She said "By fighting for them, I was fighting for myself. I was fighting for women hood and I was fighting patriarchy, because most of the witch hunt victims are women."

Assam police has also tried to eradicate superstitious beliefs from the tribal communities through a few programmes. "Project prahari" an initiative taken by the Assam police in 2001, involves community policing to do away with the menace of witch hunting. Kuladhar Saikia, the senior IPS officer, who retired in the year 2019 as the Director General of Police, Assam, launched the project. Kuladhar Saikia claimed that because of prahari the media spot light, witch hunting cases are reported now. But the sad thing is that the project has declined now and in Kokrajhar, just a small office is there in the name of the project.

Several other NGOs such as North East Network, Mahila Samata society, Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Sadou Assam Pragatisheel Nari Santha and women in governance also also playing role in creating awareness and making public appeal to condemn Witch Hunting.

All the combined initiatives of the different organizations, agencies, judiciary and people taken together have led to the submission of the Anti Witch-hunt draft Bill to check the social evil, at the Assam legislative assembly. The bill has been passed and converted into an act after almost three years it was passed in the Assam State Assembly. President Ram Nath Kovind approved the bill in June 2018. It imposes imprisonment up to seven years and fine of 5 lakhs. The act refers to various measures that police and administration should take together. It also refers to Civil society and NGOs to educate people about this social menace. The act is supposed to be strict in punishment for terming someone a witch and for physical, sexual or

mental torture. It also proposes to undertake legal steps to check against negligence in investigation and formation of special courts for trial of witch hunting cases and also legal aid to the victims.

The 2018 law also entitled complainants to receive compensation, rehabilitation and counselling. However according to various activists no one has ever received any compensations. Arunima Hazarika, director of North East Network said that sections of law regarding compensation have not been adequately publicized. She hold that “you need more coordination between the police and social welfare department. The FIR has to be forwarded to the district legal services authority which releases the money”. According to Kuladhar Saikia, the former Director General of Police, Assam “ just financial support from government departments is not enough. An individual can not remain in an island. Women who are labelled witches are not allowed to visit social gatherings. It is not a very happy life for them.”

Social activists are of the opinion that school teachers should be sensitized to educate to fight all kinds of superstition including witch hunting as well as to include scientific temper and scientific values in the minds of school children. The anti superstition campaigners put the blame on the state governments health, education and social welfare ministers in eradicating inhumane practices and superstitious activities that are prevalent among various tribal communities of Assam, despite having sufficient resources at their disposal (Bhattacharjee, 2014). Even though the Assam witch hunting (prohibition, prevention and protection) act is there to fight with the practice, we need more awareness at the local level and it is possible if the various NGOs, civil society organizations, women organizations, doctors associations, police, educationists and prominent members of the society come together to teach the people and make them aware about this superstitious practice at the very bottom level. A multi agency approach is needed to curb this social evil. Mere enforcement of law and punishing the guilty ones only is not the solution to the problem. The involvement of different organizations is necessary to eradicate the menace of witch hunting in a scientific manner.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to look at the history of witch hunting . Efforts are made to understand to concept of witch hunting in Indian society and reasons behind this superstitious belief. We have also try to understand the concept of witch hunting in Assamese society. Efforts of various non governmental and civil society organizations are tried to incorporate in this paper.

Witch hunting is such a phenomenon which ruin the victims reputation, life, family and property. It is very hard to believe that in 21st century when we talk about women empowerment, issues like witch hunting still exists. Efforts to combat gender based violence including witch hunting involve addressing deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, proving education, promoting gender equality and implementing legal protections for women. Recognizing the historical and ongoing impact of witch hunting on woman is essential in working towards a more just and equitable society.

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