



# WITCH-HUNTING AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST TRIBAL WOMEN IN BTR, ASSAM.

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## **Abstract:**

Witch-hunting is found to be a traditional practice in some of the tribal society in India. Those so called labelled witches are usually found to be elderly people or women living alone. They are accused of manipulating some paranormal energy with evil intentions in the area. Witch branding takes place mostly in rural tribal community areas where poor people predominantly live. The occurrence of incidence of witch-hunting especially in BTR area in the recent past had led to gross human rights violations. This so called practice has caused untold sufferings of humiliation for women, loss of respect, dignity, culture and above all unspeakable horror in the society. In this article I have tried to provide an overview of incidence of human rights violations of tribal women due to witch hunting and measures for ending and eradication of the practice. This article is based on data collected through various secondary sources like books and articles from internet.

**Keywords:** Witch-hunting, tribal society, elderly people or women, human rights violations.

## **1.0 Introduction:**

Witch-hunting is a traditional phenomenon in some of the tribal society in India. It has come down from generation to generation. This practice has been found to be followed by some elements in BTR region also. This has led to gross human rights violations of tribal people especially Bodos in the region. It has occurred mostly in an area of rural, poor and illiterate people and in the region where tribal community is concentrated.

### **1.1 Objectives:**

1. To study the traditional practice of Witch-hunting in tribal area.
2. To discuss about the human rights violation in BTR region as a result of witch-hunting and provide solution for eradicating these evils.

## 1.2 Methodology:

In this research study, the primary source has been collected from my relatives who suffered due to this evil practice through the interview method, and as a secondary sources, it has been collected from various books and internet sources.

## 2.0 Analysis:

Human Rights refer to the concept of human beings as having universal rights, or status, regardless of legal jurisdiction or other localizing factors, such as ethnicity and nationality. Human Rights are intrinsic to all human beings irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex, race, language and place of birth and residence.

Human beings are equally entitled to human rights without any discriminations. All these rights are fundamental freedoms for all individuals. All human rights such as civil and political for example right to equality, right to freedom, cultural and educational rights and right to life are indivisible, interrelated and interdependent. Thus securing of one right guarantees the other right. As well the deprivation of one right will adversely affect the other. The contents and existence of human rights are found to be the subject matter of debates in contemporary times. Nevertheless, legally the human rights are found defined in the domestic laws of all states. These constitute democratic ideals for the states. These lay down responsibility for Governments to refrain from doing certain acts to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms of all the individuals and groups. In general the right to life, liberty, equality, the honour and respectability of an individuals are guaranteed under the law of the state. Thus universal human rights are guaranteed by law in every state which constitute sum total of human values. The Indian Constitution also grants and guarantees the Fundamental Rights and Freedoms as the basic human rights to all the citizens without any discrimination. Two parts of the constitution---Part III and Part IV were devoted to this purpose. Moreover, India has been continuously working for ensuring a better protection of Human Rights of all the people. In this context mention may be made of the Right to Life and Liberty which is considered as the most cherished right of all rights for secure and dignified living. As per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, fundamental rights are violated when citizens are not treated equal, life, liberty and security of human being is threatened. Fundamental Rights are also violated when a person is given inhuman, cruel and degrading punishments, deprived of freedom of speech and religion arbitrarily without a proper and fair trial.

In this part of the globe also women live daily with the risk of physical harm in ways that have no direct parallels for men. The witch hunting practice in BTR area has become most rampant in recent years. Witch-hunting is a gross violation of human rights which affects a woman's livelihood and property, her personal security and social dignity, and most importantly the right to life. Under the pretext of witch-hunting many innocent Bodo and other tribal women have been killed mercilessly in Kokrajhar and other district of BTR in recent times. Witch-hunting is still rampant and going on without any sign of abatement and the victimized women were often forced to migrate which led to their displacement, loss of livelihood. Oppression of women branding as "witches" and killing them cruelly has become commonplace in the area. The number of deaths of six persons in a span of four months in 2011 in various parts of BTR area indicates the sorry state of affairs which negates the values of human rights enshrined in the supreme law of the land. This has been the result of illiteracy, superstitions and weak healthcare services in the region. Because in the absence of proper healthcare facilities and due to the lack of knowledge, the villagers mainly depend on local Ojhas (Quack) who promise to cure dreaded and even the unknown diseases. In the circumstances women have been targeted by some opportunists

as the easy prey to score over land dispute among other instances then labelled as dangerous witches and killed arbitrarily with the help of a few anti-social elements without any conceivable justice. Many more innocent lives have been destroyed on petty grounds due to false beliefs and blind faith.

### **3.0 Measures for ending and eradication of the evil practice:**

The present scenario no doubt raises widespread concern among various sections of peoples and warrants an urgent intervention of the Government. There has been a lackadaisical effort on the part of government instead of strengthening enforcement mechanisms to prevent such violations of human rights. At present six states such as Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Odisha, Bihar and Assam have laws that target witch-hunting. Meanwhile Karnataka and Maharashtra have legislation that cover prevention of witch-hunting and other superstitions.

However, the overall effectiveness of legislation of anti witch-hunting has been in question. Most of the laws so far enacted to battle the witch-hunting have been made at the state level and the National Government has yet to pass a comprehensive legislation relating to ending such type of practice. One such attempt limit this crime at the National level has been the introduction of "The Prevention of Witch-hunting Bill" by Raghav Lakhanpal in the Parliament in 2016. However it is still pending for passage.

The implementation of these state laws have been found to be very poor. Only small percentage of perpetrators are convicted. Most of the cases are dismissed due to the lack of witness, improper investigation or compromise reached between the parties involved. Moreover many cases go undocumented because of lack of knowledge on the part of poor people of the region. Under the circumstances social campaigners argue for social solutions that target old superstitions and unreasonableness in the communities. They also support in helping victims and address the root causes of the problem rather than finding a legal approach in eliminating practice of witch-hunting.

Mention may be made here regarding the role of NGOs such as Centre for Social Justice. This organization uses the legal system to fight for the rights of women and marginalized people who are victims of this practice. Organization called ANANDI is also building solidarity among the victims of witch-hunting or who are living in areas where women are always targeted. The role of renowned activist for the past fifteen years, Birubala Rabha who has founded Mission Birubala to spread awareness against witch-hunting is creating a significant impact in the region. Birubala Rabha played an instrumental role in passing the Assam Witch-hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and protection) Act. Her campaign against witch-hunting has been recognized by the Govt. of India in 2021 when she was awarded with the prestigious Padma Shri.

### **4.0 Conclusion:**

So the government alone can do little. A civilized society cannot tolerate such an inhuman act which is not in conformity with proper human civilization. Not only a clarion call may be echoed across the society but also it is time that every effort was made with the help of various local NGO's and other interest groups to end and eradicate this menace from our society.

Thus various local bodies are to be strengthened for that purpose. Education moulds one's life. Therefore a proposal may be put to the government by various stakeholders of the society to make the program of awareness to eradicate this evil practice a part of the curriculum of both lower and higher education. Moreover the students of all educational institutions are to be encouraged

to read various books of human rights apart from regular books of curriculum so that rights, dignity and other values of human life may be inculcated. It is not far away to clean the society when good values are instilled into the minds of the people.

Hence efforts should also be made so that the Government also adopts some policy on eradication of this evil practices along with providing for proper education and adequate rural healthcare facilities.

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