



## ONTOLOGY OF WITCHCRAFT IN ASSAM: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

**Dr. Lekha Borah**

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, North Gauhati College

**ABSTRACT** There has been a long history of witch hunting cases throughout the state of Assam more specifically among the tribal communities of the state. Religious beliefs, inaccessibility interwoven with superstition contribute significantly to the phenomenon, ensuring numerous innocent lives and vulnerable individuals. This disturbing practice affects individuals of all genders, yet women, often perceived as the weaker sex, are particularly vulnerable to becoming scapegoats in such circumstances. This paper is thus an attempt to illuminate into the ontology of such cases drawing its analysis of both primary data and secondary data; understanding the consequential impacts on the victims.

**KEYWORDS :** Witch hunt; Assam; Genesis; Consequences.

### INTRODUCTION

Witch hunting, which involves the pursuit of individuals believed to be causing harm to others through supernatural means, has sparked serious moral panic and mass hysteria among innocent people worldwide (Borah & Das, 2019). Religious beliefs intertwined with superstitions often play a significant role in making vulnerable individuals victims of this heinous crime. While both genders can fall victim to witch hunting, women, perceived as the weaker sex, are often targeted more easily in such cases (Behringer, 2004; Levack, 2013). The term "witch" has evolved to encompass two distinct meanings: one referring to individuals practicing black magic or sorcery, and the other referring to those accused of being supernaturally evil (Steadman, 1985; Borah & Das, 2019).

The perception of malevolent and benevolent spirits varies among societies and can influence prejudices in people's thinking (Borah & Das, 2019). Witchcraft, as a belief system, is perceived to be work of malevolent spirits (Das & Sharma, 2014). Once labeled as a witch, an individual is often perceived as someone using mystical powers to cause harm. This labeling triggers a complex array of emotions and processes that make defense challenging. The customary religious and cultural beliefs within communities often fuel such events.

### OBJECTIVES

The major objectives of the research paper include

- To highlight upon the genesis of age old practices having implications towards witch hunting cases
- To illuminate upon the atrocities inflicted upon victims.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Data source & study area

The research utilizes a combination of primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data sources encompass a variety of published and unpublished governmental records, monographs, books, newspapers, police records, and bulletins of NGOs. Additionally, field investigations were conducted in various districts of Assam and among diverse tribal communities to gain a comprehensive understanding of the case studies. The communities examined in the study comprise Bodo, Rabha, Garo, Mising, Ahom, Adivasi, among others, across districts such as Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Sivsagar, Bishwanath, and Majuli.

#### Genesis of witch hunt in Assam

Assam, situated in the northeastern region of the country, is renowned as the land of tantra-mantra (magic), rich with numerous folk tales of resurrecting the dead through mantras. Remarkably, despite the advent of modernity, these practices have persisted over the years. Such beliefs still prevail in communities where incidents of witch hunts and accusations are widespread today. Much of this folk culture and purification rituals associated with these beliefs can be traced back to the primitive cultures of Austrian and Mongoloid origins.

In societies lacking enlightenment, such as specific areas of Assam, anything can be attributed to the evil eye (nazar). The roots of witch hunting among the various indigenous communities of Assam can be traced back to their cultural beliefs and traditional values. While present in some non-tribal groups, this belief is most prevalent among

Assam's tribal communities, including the Rabhas, Misings, Bodo, and Adivasi.

The understanding of witch hunting differs between insiders and outsiders. For insiders, it is seen as a means of protecting the community from harm, while outsiders view it as a barbaric practice resulting from a lack of education and development. Conflicting perspectives arise regarding the roles of "victim" and "perpetrator" from both insider and outsider viewpoints. The village community perceives the witch as the perpetrator of the alleged victim's suffering, whereas outsiders regard the villagers as perpetrators and the witch as the victim. Therefore, delving deeper into the customary and traditional beliefs of these communities is essential to gain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon.

The Rabhas are a unique ethnic group deeply rooted in animism, attributing events to malevolent deities and believing in the presence of witches residing in seora bushes. Their religious practices center around various magico-religious rites and beliefs, notably including two specific rituals known as "bai thakai" and "bai dhankai" (special offerings). When someone is suspected of being afflicted by "daini" possession, they undergo examination by a "mangalati" (a diviner skilled in divination) (OKD, 2015; Hakacham, 2006, 2012; Borah & Das, 2019).

Similarly, within Bodo society, there exists a longstanding belief in witchcraft and sorcery, with witches being feared and viewed as malevolent beings. They are perceived as sinister entities that can only be identified and cured by traditional healers or Ojhas. Additionally, animism is prevalent among the Bodos, who consider "bathou" (God) as the guardian of their families, with reverence given to the "siju" tree as the deity of "bathou".

The Misings, originally known as Miris, adhere to a religion grounded in supernaturalism and animism. Their faith revolves around appeasing the spirits present in their surroundings, in order to protect themselves from malevolent influences, including the evil eye. They hold the belief that the universe is governed by "ui" or "uyu," two types of spirits that can either be benevolent or malevolent, and are responsible for various natural phenomena. According to their beliefs, spirits are omnipresent, and the village priest, known as the "mibu," has the ability to appease these spirits through rituals and offerings.

Tribal communities adhere to a multitude of spirits, with some perceived as harmful and others as benevolent. Among them, the malevolent spirits are thought to be more active than their benign counterparts. There's a prevailing notion that malevolent spirits wield influence over various illnesses. (Bhattacharya, 1994; Das, 2012; Borah & Das, 2019). In light of such a milieu it is often easy to scapegoat someone merely by word of mouth as a witch.

#### Consequential implications

To outsiders, instances of witch hunting may seem like manifestations of backwardness and superstition. However, the true impact on the lives of victims is beyond the comprehension of those unfamiliar with the situation. While the physical and social repercussions are visible and provoke reactions from the conscious mind, they represent only a fraction of the victimization endured. The consequences can vary

widely in terms of severity and nature, influenced by the community's beliefs and the intentions of those instigating the witch hunt. (PLD, 2014; Borah & Das, 2019)

The consequences extend to severe outcomes such as being separated from one's children and family, enduring forced stigma and isolation, facing threats, being denied access to public resources, experiencing forced displacement, losing property and livelihood, being subjected to fines, oath-taking, and ritual performances, being ostracized from the community, and being subjected to violence like lynching, burial alive, stoning, hair-cutting, and humiliation. In many cases, victims are even murdered. (Borah & Das, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Witch hunting entails the pursuit of individuals believed to be causing harm through witchcraft. This phenomenon is a complex amalgamation of superstition, religious beliefs, political dynamics, societal norms, and traditions. The majority of recorded cases occur among various ethnic groups such as the Rabhas, Bodos, Misings, Garos, Tea tribe, and Ahom in the state. This belief in tantra-mantra still persists in communities where incidents of "daini dhora" (witch catching) and "daini" (witch) remain prevalent today (OKD, 2015). Additionally, these communities also maintain beliefs in spirits, ghosts, the evil eye, etc., along with remedies for such perceived evils. The belief in witch hunting within aboriginal communities stems from their adherence to animism and pagan religions, although many have since adopted Hinduism while still preserving their age-old customs and traditions.

The primary causes of such crimes can be categorized as both structural and social factors. Structural causes include deficiencies in infrastructure, accessibility to services, education, and basic healthcare, as well as shortcomings in administrative machinery. Social causes encompass superstitions, community beliefs, taboos, as well as personal motives and grudges held by individuals. The consequences of witch hunting vary widely, ranging from verbal abuse, humiliation, forced exile, and separation to extreme forms such as lynching, burying alive, pelting with stones, cutting of hair, and even murder. These consequences impact both the victims and their families, and sometimes collateral victims make up a significant proportion of those affected.

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