



WITCH HUNTING: VIOLATING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ASSAM

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Article info

Article Received: 11/10/2022

Article Accepted: 08/11/2022

Published online:14/11/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.4.69](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.4.69)

Abstract

Witch hunting is an act of hunting and killing of people, which is mainly practiced for women. It is prevalent mostly among people who are deeply practice superstitious beliefs. To live with a dignified life people should have their basic fundamental rights. Both men and women are the beautiful creature of God. However, the rights of women can be seen as a matter of concern from ancient time. Women are always being exploited in every society. In spite of their immense contribution, they belong to the vulnerable section of society. In patriarchal structural society we can see that women rights are violating in every aspect of their life. Discrimination against women is a common phenomenon in our society. There are various forms of violence faced by women. One of the worst forms of violence is witch hunting which is more particularly subjected to women. This paper tries to study the witch hunting as an evil practice in our society which violates the rights of women. It is a superstitious belief which violates the rights of women that essential for a human being. The present paper tries to analyse the reason behind witch hunting. An attempt also made to highlight the step taken to eradicate such superstitious practice. This paper tries to understand the practices of witch hunting which is present in different parts of Assam.

Keywords: Witch hunting, discrimination, women, superstitious beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Inequality exists everywhere in society. According to the functionalist view in sociology inequality is functional to some extent. But extreme form of inequality is harmful for the growth of society. Gender is socially constructed which has attached some values. Both male and female face some kind of violence in their life. Violence is a social disease that appears as a barrier for the welfare of the society. But compared to male, the rate of violence against female is more. Gender based violence is more epidemically present in society. Cultural norms and societal regulation denies

women to get equal access of power and resources which make them vulnerable section in society. Violence against women is not specific in a particular area and region, it is universally present in every society. Women are the first victim of any kind of disaster. For example during covid 19 pandemic women are the ones who faced various form of domestic violence. According to United Nation violence against women is any act of gender based violence that result in physical, sexual, mental harm or suffering to women. There are various forms of violence which discriminate the rights of women. Different forms of violence are domestic violence, rape ,dowry death, female infanticide, witch

hunting, sexual harassment in work place, acid attack etc. witchcraft is a kind of social barrier that appears as an obstacle to the progress of a nation. It is a superstition where a person is tortured as a witch and his/her right to life is violated.

Most of the witch hunting we can see among the tribal people in rural area. In some rural areas of Assam whatever a traditional healer and a quack says people believe and support them. It has negative impact on their rights of the individual. Main cause of witch hunting is the socio economic conditions. Most of the people are backward in terms of health, education and women facilities are totally absent. There is lack of health awareness in rural villages of Assam, which leads to the rise of incidents like witch killings. Due to ancient beliefs, people still place their faith on traditional healers.

In patriarchal society male occupy a dominant position in decision making aspect within family. This structure put women subjugated position in society. A woman faces violence in different stages of their life from pre-birth to onwards. Violence against women occurs mainly due to societal reason. In most of the south Asian nations give preference to male child. People try to reproduce male child because they think that men are bread earner. Most of the family give birth till they get a male child. According to National commission of women there was 46% of crime registered against women in India. Assam also had the highest rates of crime against women in India in 2020 with about 154.3 crimes reported for every 100,000 women. The main cause of violence against women is inequality and discrimination. In patriarchal society social norms and practices are related to violence against women. Socio-economic condition, poverty, unemployment also lead to violence against women. Therefore gender oppression is common to all women in different part of the world. To give equal status to female we can see the growing idea of feminism. Feminism is a belief which provides social, economic and political rights for women as equal to male. The Seneca fall convention (1848) rise the demand of women rights. As a result feminist movement was emerged in late nineteenth century. The first wave of feminism was started from 1890 to 1960. First wave talk about the

legal rights of women which raised the demand for right to vote and property. Second wave started from 1960 to 1980 in this wave issue of racism, black feminism also emerged. Betty Friedan's famous slogan 'The personal is political' is the core aspect of this wave. Third wave feminism began from 1990 to 2010 as the influence of postmodernism. This wave criticised the core idea of second wave feminism. Third wave talks about the non-universality, intersectionality, cultural relativism, plurality and diversity.

Women safety in India is also a great concern. The safety of women has become major issue in India. In India violence against women has increased day by day. India is one of the unsafe places for women. According to global gender gap report 2021 India is ranked at 140 out of 156 countries with a score of 0.625 (PIB, 2021). In 2020 NCRB recorded instances of 357363 cases in the category of crime against women (Crime in India 2020 table 3.A 1). There is highest rate of crime against women in Assam. As per the crime in India report 2020 in Assam rate of crime against women was 154.3 which is higher than the national rate of crime 56.5. The development of a nation depends on the comprehensive development of the people of that country and therefore it is essential to protect the rights of women. If we look from the British regimes of India there were various revolutionary laws were enacted such as Hindu widow remarriage act 1865, Child marriage restraint act 1929 etc. The recent development for protecting the rights of women are The sexual harassment of women in workplace (prevention, prohibition and redressal) act 2013, The criminal amendment act or Nribhaya act 2013. Constitution of India under article 14 providing right to equality to all Indian citizen including women. The government of India has taken various steps to protect the rights of women. For example mission Shakti, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, one stop centre, POSHAN abhiyan etc.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study various forms of violence against women in the name of witch hunting,

2. To analyse how superstition belief and traditional practices hinder the development of society.
3. To study the role of social activists along with non-governmental organizations and commission for creating awareness and eradicating such kind of social evil.
4. To study how witch hunting violates the rights of women in different part of assam.
5. Role of education to make a healthy society.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative explanation. All the data and information are collected from secondary sources. They are newspaper, digital resources, e journal, archives, census of India, crime report published by national crime record bureau.

DISCUSSION

Assam is located in the northeast India which is extended from 89E to 96 E longitude and 28N to 28N latitude. Assam is bordered by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh to the North, Mizoram and Tripura to the South, Nagaland and Manipur to the East and Bangladesh, West Bengal and Meghalaya to the west. The state is comprised into three divisions – Brahmaputra valley, Barak valley and Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills. Assam is a home to various ethnic groups that represent their own culture. In ancient time Assam was known as Pragjyotisha. According to kalika Puran Brahma first made calculation of star in pragjyotisha. According to Edward Gait 'prag' means 'former' or 'eastern' and jyotish 'a star', astrology, shining. Therefore pragjyotishpur mean the 'city of eastern astrology' (source: assam year book). But later it was known as kamrupa where God of love kamdev was reborn. The word assam was derived from the Sanskrit word asoma which means peerless for its beauty. Assam is also known as asomani.e uneven because the region is covered with various mountain ranges. The region is known as assam since the arrival of the ahoms . The name of assam was popularly known after the ahom came in 1228 A.D. According to 2011 census

assam has 31, 169, 272 population. Sex ratio in assam is 954 females per 1000 males. There are currently 35 districts in assam including the new district tamulpur. The literacy rate of assam is 72.19, male literacy rate 77.19 while female literacy 66.27.(census 2011). Assam is a hub of different cultures, where people of different ethnic groups live. The state has also ethnic diversity, where a largest number of tribe bodo, mishing, tiwa, deorietc live together. According to national crime record board assam has recorded highest crime against women among northeastern state.

Witch hunting is a superstitious believes which violates the rights of women. It is the act of hunting for people believed to be practicing witchcraft and sorcery. Men and women both are fall under the victim of witch hunting, but in most of the cases women are primary victims mainly due to the patriarchal nature of the society. When someone is made a witch, all their basic rights to survival are violated, which are necessary to live as a human being. The alleged witches are mentally and physically tortured, chased away from village and even killed. In most of the cases village bez, ojha and deodhani play a major role and witches are identified by them. If any bad incident happens in village the ojha or deodhani or bez accused someone that practicesorcery and villager branding them as witch. Sometimes the family of witch is levied fine by the community leaders. The victim of witchcraft have been seen suffering from symptoms like fever, cough cold, delirium or hysteria. It is also believed that there are some diseases which cannot be treated by the medical doctor and needs to be addressed specifically by an ojha (Chakrabarty & Borah, 2013). People tries to get rid of the spell through payers and offering. However, not all witch killings are caused only by superstitiousbelief; there are also some vested interest like property dispute, intention of grabbing land, jealousy and enmity, conflict, rivalry, rejection of love proposal etc. It is a manmade evil practice. It is believe that witchcraft is associated with some evil supernatural, mystical power which have harmful impact in society. This kind of superstitious believes take life of many innocent people. Witch hunting is existing in

different part of the World; India is also not immune from it.

History of witch hunting: Witch hunting is an aged old concept, which originated in Europe in early fifteenth century. It mostly began in Western Europe. In medieval period harmful sorcery rooted in Europe, which is endure in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. It is a form of violence which affects our society till now. Most of the vulnerable section of society are affected by witches hunting. It impacts older age women, who are physically, mentally and economically vulnerable. Many studies shows that most of the women witch craft are unmarried, some of them are widow. Witch also known as Dayan which came from Sanskrit word Dakini, which was known as an evil character who worship Kali Devi. Male victim who alleged such evil practice known as Wizard. From 1484 to 1750 in Europe more than 2 lakhs women were killed in the name of witchcraft. In witch trail women who alleged as witch they were burnt by people.

Since ancient time Assam is known as Pragjyotishpur, a city of astrology has its roots in trantric practice and sorcery history. Assam is also known for its famous region Mayong. The region is known as its black magic, which has been passed from generation to generation. Mayong is originated from the Sanskrit word maya means illusion. According to some other like Chutia, Tiwa, deurie mayong means (mother). Maa for mother Shakti and ongo means part. People use black magic for various reasons like cure from health related issues and other disease. It is also beliefs that the origin of practicing witchcraft has its roots in Mayong. Witchcraft as an occult practice, which was accountable for disease, famine, death etc. Witchcraft is a belief and practice of supernatural abilities and the person who practice witchcraft is called as witch or wizard. Person who are identified as witches are socially excluded and subjected to various punishments which violates their social rights. When any kind of misfortune occurs in particular region ojh has identify a women as a witchcraft and torture her. Women who are accused a witches are known as various names like Dayan, Tonahi, Bhootni, Surel etc.

Witch hunting in India: witch hunting is practice most of the parts in India. Most of the witch hunting found especially in rural and isolated areas where a large number of tribal people live. It is believed that witches are manipulated by supernatural power to cause various detrimental events such as destruction of crops, ill health of human being, death, diseases etc. witch hunting imposed extreme violence against women which led to the torture and murder of alleged witches. The woman who is accused of being a witch is subjected to various form of torture by the society like boycott from the village and even death penalty. Witch hunting is mainly concentrate in the state of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhathishgarh, Gujrat, Jharkhan, Karnataka, Rajashthan and West Bengal. In Jharkhand there is highest number of witch hunting happen. In India witch hunting is more prominent among tribal people. According to NCRB, more than 2500 victims were tortured and killed in witch hunts between 2000 and 2016. According to the data of criminal investigation department (CID) Assam registered 152 incidents of witch hunting from 2010 tpo 2020, in which 119 people branded as witches, were killed. Northeast India is the confluence of various communities where the practice of witch hunt is more prominent. In Meghalaya's west khasi hill 80 years old man was buried alive as his relatives suspected him as witchcraft.

Assam is also more prominent in witch hunting. In Assam most of the witch hunting are seen among the tribal and Adivasi communities of rural areas. 84 people have died due to witch hunting from 2011 to 2016. According to the Assam legislative assembly report, since 2011 a total number of 107 people have been killed in assam. According to official data 21 district of the state recorded witch hunting case. Witch hunting are found in certain district of Assam such as Darrang, Goalpara, Tezpur, Sivsagar, Tinsukia etc. However maximum number of cases were happened in Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri, Chirag districts of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). Kokrajhar district recorded highest number of witch hunting cases. The cases were prominent among most of the tribal community such as Bodo, Mishing,

Rabha, tea tribe, hazong in Assam. A few years ago, in karbiAnglong district a man and a woman were killed by their neighbors on the suspicion of witchcraft. In 2000 five villagers were branded as witches and killed at Thaigarguri in kokrajhar district. Witch hunting cases are not seen in the same way in

all parts of Assam but in some region the impact of witch hunting is more prominent. Most of the witch hunting regions have low literacy, sex ratio. In Assam tribal belt areas are more prominently affected by witch hunting. But in recent time it also prevailed in other community also.

WITCH HUNTING CASES IN ASSAM:

Districts	2019					2020				
	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA	CR	CS	FR	PI	PA
Kokrajhar	1			1	17	4	2	1	1	4
Goalpara	1			1	5					
sonitpur						3	5	6	7	8
Dhemaji						1		1		
Tinsukia						2	1		1	1
Sivasarag						3	3			18
Jorhat						3	1	2		5
Karbi Anglong						3	3			26
Chirang	3	1		2	13					
Majuli	1			1	8	2	2			5
Kamrup	1			1	10					
Total in assam	7	1		6	53	23	19	10	9	83

CR= Cases Register, CS= charge sheet, FR= Final Report, PI= Pending Investigation, PA= Persons Arrested.

Source: Statistical Handbook, Assam -2021

Causes of witch hunting: There are various reasons behind the practice of witch-hunting and the main reason is superstitious beliefs, where a woman is blamed for social unrest. There is also some religious impact and also some economic issues. Underdevelopment, lack of education, health facilities are the main reasons behind witch hunting. Witches are usually identified by ojha, bez or deodhani all are known as witches doctor. people visiting the deodhani, bez, ojha for treatment of disease. For some, influence of climate and its relation to food crops failure and income shocks while instigating many witch hunting cases (Cohen, 1941; Cohn, 1990; Miguel, 2005; Behringer, 1999; Pfister, 2007; Behringer, 2004). It is an evil magical power concentrate with some individual who can harm to others.

Steps taken to remove witch hunting:

Witch hunting as a form of violence against women associated with the traditional beliefs and practices which is difficult to eradicate from the society. Birubalarabha was the first assamese women to be nominated for the nobel peace prize in 2005 for her courageous to fight against witch hunting. In 2015 Guwahati university awarded doctorate degree for her works for the society. She was born at Thakurbilla village in Goalpara. In her early life she also belived in traditional practice of witchcraft. But in 1985 one incident changed her life. In 1985 her son suffered malaria and become mentally disturbed. Deodhani predicted that her son would die within 3 days but this did not prove to be true. After that she would stopped believing to the words of Deodhani .Unfortunately, her husband fell ill after her sons illness. Because of these incident villagers suspected her of being a witch and kept her alone. But she did not break down and spoke out

against it. Since 1999 she has been involved with the Assam Mahila Samata Society. Through this AMSS, she was able to speak out against superstitious believe.

Birubala's battle has been against patriarchy and social structures that aid the subjugation of women. Given the fact that 33 out of the 35 people that she personally rescued are women, she

labels witch hunting as a 'crime against women' by the community and the society (Chakrabarty & Borah, 2013). In 2011 she launched Mission Birubala which tours different parts of Assam to spread awareness against witch hunting and superstitious believe. Birubalarabha was honoured with the women's world summit foundation prize in 2018. She rescued over 50 women from being branded as witches. The main aim of this mission is to serve human being and to protect the rights of women. Birubala Rabha was honoured with the Padma shri award on January 25, 2021. Birubalarabha is instrumental in getting Assam witch hunting (prohibition, prevention and protection) act 2015.

Former director general of Assam Police kuladhar saikia initiated a mission project 'Prahari' to create awareness among people against witch hunting by uplifting socio economic status of the people.. Through this project police able to get information from communities about the probable incident. It acts as a role model of law against witch hunting.

Former CM of Assam Sarbananda Sanowal initiated an awareness programme named as "Sanskar- Manuhe manuhor Babe" to eradicate misbeliefs and superstitions and to cultivate empathy amongst people. Through this awareness programme, society can eradicate such evil practice.

Role of education

Education plays a vital role in the life of any individual. Education is the light of life. Without it people become illiterate. It helps individual to become a good person and also shapes the personality of people. Education is necessary to live with a dignified life. It has importance in the life of an individual to become aware of their rights, duties

towards society, families and the nation. Education helps people to become self-reliant and also give employment and identity to the people. Education plays a key role for the growth of rational and logical thinking of people. Therefore education is necessary for all round development of an individual. Most of the witch hunting cases are prevalent in rural areas of Assam where people are illiterate and education is not properly developed. Therefore to eradicate illiteracy from Assam is an undeniable necessity in order to fight against witch hunting.

Various civil society organisation plays an important role to fight against witch hunting. For example some of the organisations are Assam State Commission for Women, All Bodo Student Union, ElloraVigyan Mancha started campaign against preventing and prohibiting the social evil. They also gave employment opportunity to the victim of witch hunting.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion we can able to know that origin of witch hunting traced from ancient time in Europe. It is a superstitious believed which inflicting the life of many people. Assam is also victim of such kind of evil practice. The victim of witch hunting faced many kind of social stigma which violates their rights as a human being and makes life miserable. The roots of witch hunting in Assam are traced from Tantra -Manta and traditional rituals. In Assam Witch Hunting cases mostly found in the district of Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Chirang, Udalguri etc. Most of the cases are reported from the tribal belt areas in Assam. Various survey shows that Victims are mostly belong to middle aged group from 35 to 39 years of age. People are also far behind in education. Since women are targeted as the victim of witch hunting it is necessary to protect their rights and freedom. Hence to create awareness programme and develop scientific temperament is an important step for the empowerment of the communities and protect the rights of human being which help to prevent and eradicate such kind of evil practice of witch hunting.

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