

Witch Hunting and Role of Public Library in Eradicating it: A case study in Golaghat, Jorhat and Majuli District

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Abstract: *In India, Witch hunting, a social violence against women dates back hundreds of years. It is found that the Morigaon district of Assam which is now infamously known as the 'Indian Capital of Black Magic'. Even today, witch hunting is being practiced in other districts along with Golaghat, Jorhat and Majuli in the State and has become a burning issue, where predominantly women along with a less number of male fall prey to this heinous crime. It involves the branding of victims, especially women as witches or 'daini' either after an observation made by an 'ojha' or 'bej' or a 'witch doctor' on suspicion along with some vested interest of the third party. The victim who is branded as a witch is subjected to numerous forms of torture. In most of the cases the victim and their children are socially ostracized and even put to death. The mass awareness among the backward people can only make a halt to the menace. In this case the role of Public Libraries can easily be lauded to combat the menace in the state. In this paper an attempt is made to give a brief description of Witch Hunting and to study the role of Public Library for creating awareness among the masses to eradicate the social menace.*

Index Terms: *Mass awareness, Public library, Social violence, Superstition, Witch hunting.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Witch hunting is one of the most dangerous superstitions prevailing all over India. The witch is called as 'daini' in local dialect and is believed to cause ailment to people, destroy crops and other livestock etc. There are several ways of identifying a "daini" among which two are mentioned below:

- (i) Generally, in a village there is a traditional astrologer, who looks into the matter and reveals a woman's name. She is then considered as a 'daini' or the witch harming the village.
- (ii) The second way of identification of a 'daini' is by covering the patient with a net. The person is then pricked with thorns and other sharp things until it becomes difficult to bear the pain and finally he or she reveals the name of a woman, who is then accused as the 'daini'.

Once a woman is identified and branded as witch; she will be summoned before the whole community and process of confirmation of her as witch will start. Finally, she is either banished from the community or killed. Various studies are undertaken to understand the practice of witch hunting worldwide and they attribute it to different reasons beyond mere superstition. The practice of witch-hunting may be as old as witchcraft itself. But, of late there has been a sharp rise in the number of women being denounced as witches and sentenced to gory deaths. This trend is all the more alarming because the victims have often been women from Dalit or tribal communities and the reasons for the "witch-hunt" have actually been political, property-related or gender-specific. Five general characteristics of witches and witchcraft across different cultures and time periods are-

- (i) Witches use non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to others.
- (ii) Harm is usually caused by the neighbors or kin rather than strangers.
- (iii) Strong social disapproval follows, in part because of the element of secrecy and in part because their motives are not wealth or prestige but malice and spite.
- (iv) Witches work within long-standing traditions, rather than in one-time only contexts.
- (v) Other humans can resist witches through persuasion, non-physical means (counter magic) or deterrence including through corporal punishment, exile, fines or execution.

1.1 Five major reasons of this maleficent practice in Assam are discussed below:

(i) **Historical relation with a rife age-old superstitious tradition:**

The belief in the practice of witch craft has a deeper connection with Assam's spiritual history. Mayong, known to be the land of witchery and natural paradise is situated Assam. Mayongese believed to worship the planet of MAYA or BYADHI.

It's also believed that planet bestowed its devotees the art of black magic and sorcery. Various folklores describe its connection with astrology and practice of witchcraft. Similarly after centuries past in rural Assam the ojha, a traditional medicine man, is revered for his skills at countering black magic. According to folklore, the medicine man learns his skills which include identifying and curing a witch, but witches are said to be born with their powers. In patriarchal communities this is a convenient distinction. It is rare to find a female ojha. Interestingly Assam also has cases of male witch hunt.

(ii) **Lack of education:**

Illiteracy is one of the most effective dynamic pressures, which may have different root causes and potential to generate many unsafe conditions. Such unsafe conditions combined with some external threats mainly superstitions, which causes different problems to the rural community especially tea tribes and tribal community in which the practice of witch hunt is prevalent. Illiteracy also halts the overall progress of the community. So, practical education to all members of the vulnerable community including women is necessary for overall development of the community.

(iii) **Health care deficits:**

Every year, many people die of malaria, diarrhea, and jaundice etc., in the tribal people-dominated areas of Assam. Due to the extreme ignorance of the administration; these people lack proper education and is still far from the glare of the media. As the people of this belt are unaware of the modern ways of health and hygiene, various diseases including tuberculosis, cancer, cerebral malaria, typhoid, encephalopathy, encephalitis, meningitis, metabolic encephalopathy, jaundice etc., break out easily among them without their knowledge. It is later linked in illogical way of treatment and finally leading to witchcraft and hunt.

(iv) **Poverty:**

Poverty and violence go hand in hand. It has been witnessed several time that Extreme rainfall (drought or flood), epidemic leads to a large increase in the murder of "witches"—typically elderly women killed by relatives—but not other murders. The findings provide novel evidence on the role of income shocks in causing violent crime, and religious violence in particular.

(v) **Conspiracy**

In majority cases in Assam it has been witnessed that there is a third party involvement in branding witches, which initiated the hunts in order to confiscate property, mainly of the victim. Jealousy and family rivalry are also seen in these cases.

The new form of oppression is camouflaged under tribal rusticity or yokel behavior. However campaigns and protests against it have been on. The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and other organizations have been taking up the cause of the victims in the most affected states of Bihar, west Bengal and Andhra Pradesh and in parts of North eastern India. In Assam also the cases of Witch-hunt is increasing at alarming rate. The Assam State Commission for Women (ASCW) is doing some works in this field but still more emphasis and action should be materialized in this regard.

1.2 Theories of witch hunting:

The theories for the causes of the Witch Hunts listed below are drawn from what various historians have suggested. They are called theories, because they are based on reasonable information (or were, when they were first proposed), and make some sense in explaining the phenomena. They are- (i) Illness theory (ii) The Geographic Origin theory (iii) The Greed theory (iv) The Religious Rebellion theory (v) The Confessional conflict theory (vi) Disaster

theory (vii) The Conspiracy theory (viii)The social counter or state building theory (ix) Social Functionalist or Social Association theory (x)The Misogyny theory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is indeed curious, as Robert K. Merton has remarked, that while historians of science have increasingly come to use in their work sociological conceptualizations and methodological tools, historians of sociology have largely been remiss in this respect, if one can judge from the dearth of any serious sociological study (Coser, 1996).

The woof and warp of magical beliefs and practices is made up of positive and negative strands, and taboo is the later. Its purpose is three folds: productive, protective and prohibitive. Taboos associated with the process of cultivation are designed to be productive; those like keeping women, children and, in cases, men also away from certain places; actions and objects are protective; and those which seclude a person or limit contact with him or her, as is done in the case of a chief, a priest, a magician or a menstruating woman, are designed to be prohibitive in the sense that they prohibit the persons tabooed from doing harm to others. Protective and prohibitive taboos are almost always the same (Majumdar, 1987).

Prominence of male gods in the early Vedic patriarchal society was another such example of relationship between religion and material conditions of a society. Thus, Richard Eaton in his study of the conversion of the three Naga tribes- Ao, Sema and Angami- to Christianity has noted how different physical and spiritual conditions worked behind their creation of ethnic beliefs. Being part of the belief systems of the non-brahmanical tribal societies many non-brahmanical and unrecognized beliefs of Assam bear sex-related magical practices in order to understand and control the physical and natural environ of the society, to explain the secrets of its production systems (Nath, 2011).

Assam is a land of age old ethnic diversity, caste, community, religion etc. But some communities of the state from the last few decades have been grabbed with the stories of 'black magic' in the name of superstition. The position of women in the traditional patriarchal societies was deplorable, in some cases, to the extreme in few areas of Assam. Women today suffer various kinds of atrocities which violate the basic values of human rights and human dignity. Women are subjected to torture, humiliation, raped and many times killed in the name of 'witchcraft'. The violence on women both visible and invisible has increased in recent past which is now a key issue for the state (Begum, 2015).

The public library is an educational institution open to all- rich or poor, young or old. It is an institution which has no age limit, no entrance requirements other than the desire to learn. It has no restrictions on progress other than those determined by the individual himself. The public library is therefore called the people's university. Each individual in this university begins at his own level and progresses at his own speed (Chakrabarti, 1993).

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Though there is no practical base of witch but the witch-hunting cases are still increasing at alarming rate. So, there is an urgent need to control the same. To eradicate the menace mass awareness is must. So the study regarding mass awareness is need of the hour. With this back ground, the present study is carried out to fulfill the following objectives.

- (i) To get a firsthand knowledge of the witch-hunting cases of Assam with special reference to Golaghat, Jorhat and Majuli district.
- (ii) To know the different aspects of witch-hunting cases.
- (iii) To know the real cause behind such cases.
- (iv) To find out some practical solution of the witch-hunting cases.
- (v) To find the role of Public Library in combating the menace.

4. LIBRARY AS A COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE

The UNESCO manifesto clearly states that "the public library should be established under the clear mandate of law, so framed as to ensure nation-wide provision of public library service". The manifesto also states that – the public library must offer adults and children the opportunity to keep in touch with their times, to educate themselves continuously and keep abreast of progress in the sciences and arts. Its contents should be a living demonstration of the evolution of knowledge and culture, constantly reviewed, kept up-to-date and attractively presented. In this way it will help people from their own opinions, and develop their creative and critical capacities and powers of appreciation. The public library is concerned with the communication of information and ideas, whatever the form in which these may be expressed.

The role of the library as a community gathering place was stressed repeatedly at focus group sessions. Whether discussing concerts, classes, and other events, book clubs and other social groups, or simply a forum where people could come and sit, talk, and read, quite a few people expressed their appreciation that libraries stand alone in many communities as a gathering place. Although many towns also have community centers and parks, Wisconsin winters render such options unavailable a significant amount of the time. Many interviewees place a great deal of importance on the value of a comfortable public library facility where they can gather, especially as opportunities for social interaction have decreased in the wake of more people seeking out services online .

5. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCE OF DATA

The data are taken mainly from field visit, books, internet, questionnaire and personal interview with Sociologist, Police officers, villagers etc. So, the data are two folds i.e. primary and secondary. Descriptive statistics are used to analyze the collected data.

As the paper aims at the witch-hunting cases in Assam with special reference to Golaghat, Jorhat and Majuli districts the study area is confined in Assam in general and Golaghat, Jorhat and Majuli district in particular. Here a total of 21 Government Public Libraries will be the Universe of study.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Though the rapid development of Science and Technology has been witnessed in the recent days but the superstition is still continuing in the society. Among others, Witch-hunting is rather increasing among the rural people specially the tribal one. According to the latest data disclosed in Assam Assembly altogether more than 132 people, including 66 women, had been killed in the state from 2001-2012. Among them 105 cases were registered during this period.

In Assam the practice of witch-hunting is more potent among the poor fellow of Mising, Tea-tribe, Karbi, Rava, Hajong communities are seen in general. The following table shows the number of witch –hunting cases in Assam (2006-2016 July).

Table-1: Witch-hunting cases in Assam (2006-2016 July)

Years	No. of Cases
2006	21
2007	07
2008	10
2009	04
2010	11
2011	29
2012	14
2013	12
2014	05
2015	10
2016	13
Total	136

From table 1, it is seen that about 136 cases were occurred during the study period. It is also seen that maximum number of cases were occurred in the year of 2011.

According to the report of the CID more than 133 people were killed during 2002-2016 (July). Due to the lack of education and economic constraints the practice is still in force. In this practice the woman are more victimized than male one. In this case the women are easily targeted due to the Patriarchal society. In all the three districts Mising and Tea-tribe people have been victimized in this case. The literacy rate for ST population is not satisfactory. The result is shown in the following table.

Table 2: Population and Literacy rate in the study area:

District	Population (2011)	Literacy (%)	ST Literacy (%)
Golaghat	10,66,888	77.43 %	12.11

Jorhat	10,92,256	82.15 %	13.02
Majuli	1,67,304	79.00 %	11.03

From table 2, it is seen that literacy rate is highest in Jorhat district as compared to the other two districts.

Table 3: Witch-hunting cases in Golaghat, Jorhat and Majuli district (2009-2016 July)

Police station/ Cases	Name of victim
Ghiladhari (2009)	A. Mura (50) Balijan T.E
Kamargaon (56/2010)	Subheswari Bauri (80) Damoni Goraik (70) No.1 Parghat , Numaligarh
Dergaon (101/2013)	Pamila Mudi (50) Badlipar Garhguri
Dergaon (108/2013)	Kamal Morang (45) Bahguri
Jengraimukh (Oct/ 2013)	35 people victimized
Pulibar (197/16)	Lal Bauri (40)

From table 3, it is seen that during 2009-2013, 4 cases of Witch-hunting were registered in Golaghat district while one case registered at Pulibar PS in 2016. On October 2, 2013, an 18-year-old youth and a woman visiting Shikarigaon in Assam's Majuli Island declared that 35 people living in the village were "witches". For 22 days, the 35 were kept confined to the village and subjected to a "public hearing", "humiliation" and "purification". Outsiders were barred entry, while the administration kept away. The 35 escaped the ultimate punishment, which is death. They were lucky. Many haven't been on the world's largest inhabited river island that is fast eroding under the encroaching Brahmaputra but is holding fast to a belief that has come down generations. According to the Assam Police, 132 persons, a majority of them women, were killed in the state after being dubbed witches between 2002 and 2012. While over 100 cases have been registered, charge sheets have been submitted in only about 60, while about 450 persons have been arrested. Several of the killings took place on the 600-sq-km island of Majuli. Among these the case of one Subheswari Bauri (80) and Damoni Goraik (70) under Kamargaon Police Station was one of the cases of Success Story where the Officer-in-Charge could convince the people for their fault and accepted the women who were made witch. Details results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: A Story of Witch Craft uprooted by Police

Case No.	Name of victims	Result
Kamargaon (56/2010)	Subheswari Bauri (80) Damoni Goraik (70) No.1 Parghat , Numaligarh	OC Dipak Sarmah organized a public meeting at No.1 Parghat LP School on 24-6-2010 the day following the incident. Later the meeting could convince the villagers and the victims were re-accepted by the villagers. And since then no such incident occurred in the area.

Though in the case of Witch-hunting cases the superstition is regarded as the root cause but in almost all the cases some other story behind it. Some remarks from personal Interview are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Remarks from Personal Interview:

Name of the person	Remarks
Dipak Sarmah OC Kamargaon PS	In the case No. 56/10 arrested enjoyed the women in the night without cloth (for poverty) and took their money to drink alcohol. But later they termed them as “witch” when they opposed the practice.
Ashim Bora OC Dergaon PS	In case No. 101/2013, it was found that there was some property related case. In case no. 108/2013, the victim was planned to send back to his native place and tried the accused to take the land of the victim
Hrishikesh Hazarika OC Pulibar PS	In case no. 197/16, it was found that there was a land dispute between the victim Lal bauri and the prime accused Mahesh Oria.
Dr. Chandan Sarma Prof. Deptt. Of Sociology Tezpur University	Most of the witch-hunting cases it is found that there is a hidden agenda behind the witch making
Lakhiram Choudhury Retd. Principal Kuralguri H.S. School	Superstition and other beliefs even going on among the high class people like sacrifice of animal etc. should be banned. The strict law can combat the menace.

6. Among the 21 libraries, a total of 7 libraries were surveyed based on the Questionnaire which are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 List of Govt. Public Libraries:

District	Type of Library	Name of the Library
Golaghat	District Library	Golaghat District Library (S)
	Sub-Divisional Library	Sub-Divisional Library, Dhansiri (S)
	Rural Library	Puberun Puthibharal
		Sankar Library
		Bharati Puthibharal
		Yubak Sangha Library
		Nirmal Pustakalaya
		Seba Sangha Puthibharal
		Panka Sapta Swahid Puthibharal (S)
Jorhat	District Library	Jorhat District Library (S)
	Rural Library	Baligaon Reading Club & K. C. Library
		Chungi Lahing Puthibharal Aru Samuhik Kendra
		Kenduguri Sanskritik Samaj
		Bimal Puthibharal
		Jakharia Janapriya Sangha
		Sastri Adarsha Puthibharal

		Morijhanji Central Library
		Kalakunja Cultural Centre & Library
		Ramakanta Samaj Kalyan Sangha (S)
Majuli	Sub-Divisional Library	Sub-Divisional Library, Garhmur (S)
	Rural Library	Tarun Puthibharal (S)

The data revealed from the survey it is found that all the libraries surveyed are in the opinion that the Witch Hunting may be eradicated with public awareness through public libraries.

7. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study the following suggestions and recommendations have been made for eradication of Witch-hunting from the society. They are-

- To eradicate witch-hunting practice mass awareness is the key solution.
- As there are some other vested interests are in hidden in making a witch there must be a strong Legislation to combat the practice.
- The role of Social organization, NGO for literacy campaign may be underlined.
- The friendly relation of Police and Administration with the villagers may be attributed in this connection.
- The public libraries can be made community gathering centers and awareness meeting among the people may also be organized.

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APPENDIX:



Picture 1 : Woman as a Witch



Picture 2: Family members of a Victim



Picture 3: Men at Purification Process at Majuli (October, 2013)



Picture 4: A witch being punished



Picture 5: Noted Anti witch Campaigner Sjta. Biru Bala Rava