

Deciphering Witch-Hunting- A Social Menace In The Context Of Assam, Ner India

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ABSTRACT

Witch-hunting practice has been traditionally a part of belief in rural India. Like other parts of India, Assam also witnesses this atrocious practice at an alarming stage. 210 cases of witch-hunting have been occurred in Assam during the period 1989-2019, which is a severe quandary to the advancing society. Killings in the name of witch-hunting also violates human rights as well as women rights as majority of the victim branded as 'witch' are women. This paper tries to highlight witch hunting practice, witch-trials and witch-hunting phenomena globally, nationally and primarily in the context of Assam. It also elaborates the legal safety afforded by the state of Assam in general. This paper accomplishes with an assessment of the efficacy of the legal instruments implemented for protection of 'witch-hunting'. The paper attempts to identify the causes responsible for witch-hunting with some practical solution to tackle this social menace.

Keywords:

Witch-hunting; witch-trials; human rights; women; society; legal safety.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

On the intervening night of 30th September and 1st of October 2020, Ramawati Halua (50, female) and Bijoy Gour (28, male) were burnt to death by a mob on suspicion of being witches in Karbi Anglong's Rohimapur village of Assam. Eighteen persons have been arrested who confessed that they believed that the two deceased were spreading disease and misfortune to the village. SP of Karbi Anglong district stated that it was a case of witch-hunting.

The concept of witch-hunting has its root traced in past, it may be primitive, medieval, modern and now in industrial age. Witch hunting is like an infectious disease and is slowly spreading to newer areas and solutions have to be found soon to eradicate this evil practice. Women were held responsible for all the calamities let it be famine, flood and epidemic diseases which caused death of livestock. And the only solution they found was to kill them who were responsible for it. It was seen that incidents which could not be answered was thought to be the act of women who were having super natural power. In few cases, even men have been accused of having supernatural powers

resulting often beaten, tortured, publicly humiliated and murdered. It is introduced in order to damage or threaten person's reputation or resources without solid evidence. It remains a form of personal threat or attack. It is a system which reverses all moral norms.

It can be said that witch-hunt practice exists not only in India but in different countries also. It is targeted specially against women who are branded as witches because of their physical features-hunchback, weird hair or skin color which makes witch-hunt a gender-based crime. Witch-hunting continues as a criminal offense. It is one of the superstitions in the evolution of the human civilization and the outcome of certain misleading discrimination. This practice is also existing in countries like Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Gambia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Uganda, Mexico, South Africa, Chile, West Indies. Children are also being made victims, mainly in the African nations. The perpetrators in most of the cases are the traditional witch doctors and, in many cases, they are the close relatives or neighbours of the victims. A shocking situation arises whenever a majority of the community or villagers are involved in the attacks,

where the village headman either remains as a mute spectator or becomes a part of the attacking mob. Furthermore, it is also another matter of concern that majority of the incidents happen openly and only a few numbers of incidents are committed secretly. It has been noticed that male members of the of the community take much more initiative in spreading up of the incidents.

Witchcraft and witch-hunting have been a very extensive research subject for many papers and monographs, which dealt with differential scopes of it (Banerjee, 2017; Chaudhuri, 2008; Chaudhuri, 2012; Chaudhuri, 2014; Das, 2015; Kapur, 1983; Rajaram, 1981). The common conclusions resultant out of these studies lighten witch-hunting as something related to superstition & beliefs, law and order, religious influences or related to property matters and its relations with illiteracy and poverty (Geis, 1978; Goodin, 1981; Miguel, 2005; Rabia, 2005) and climate and its relation to food crop failure and income falls. This is because, during the time of extreme rainfall resulting in droughts leading to poor harvest and near feminine condition in remote and backward areas, witchcraft practice rise in order to safeguard near existence consumption nutrition level by removing older members in the area (Behringer, 1999; Cohen, 1941; Cohn, 1990; Miguel, 2005; Pfister, 2007). Further, it has been also related to politics. Formation of a new political party and thereby, witch hunt was seen as a means to suppress the upheaval of traditional order. (Bernhard, 2010; Kapur, 1983). The ruling administration, used witch-hunt as a means to blame someone of rising political upheaval. Nonetheless, the dark side of kinship, marriage customs, and polygenic societies has been the main focus of many studies (Behringer, 2004; Feng, 2018).

The practice of witch-hunting is present in a number of states in the country, and the exact date of origin of witch-hunting in India is not known. The practice is a customary one and is prevalent in rural isolated areas and specially among the tribal population. Practice of killing is not new for Indian society rather it has its deep roots in history. Witch now denotes women who acquire super natural

powers and are indulged in evil practices. It is believed that they are associated to negative energy and for their betterment and for enhancing their power they kill innocent members of society. Therefore, witch hunting is a process of killing these people in order to protect the society from being harmed by them. Allegations of witch craft that result in communal murder have long been a part of rural India's history. This practice has continued though with irregularity, into the present. It generally happens in places where there is almost no economic development, with little or no access to basic education. In this kind of an atmosphere people tend to develop very strong superstitions and anything bad that might befall these villagers like bad crop, diseases, sudden death of individual in the family, dying of well or pond tend to be considered the work of 'witch'. Thus, begins a witch hunt to locate the person responsible. The incidents of witch-hunting are prominent in Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujrat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal; these are generally the regions located in central and eastern part of India.

Witch-hunting is a three-stage process viz. accusation, declaration and persecution. Accusation means and includes 'accusing women of any harm occurred in the community or to the individual, such as the death of any person, child or animal, any disease in the village, natural disaster or crop loss'. Declaration means to declare or brand the woman as a witch as she possesses some evil power, and exclude her socially. The so-called witches are identified through certain rituals by traditional witch-finders or witch-doctors, who are variously known as the khonses, sokha, janguru, or ojha, and then perpetrators charge them for persecution (Malick, 2008). Persecution includes mental and physical torture, ranging from social exclusion, name-calling, psychological torture, lynching or putting to death in any way. The concept of persecution refers to strategic attempts encouraged by dominant and influential groups in society, directed at groups that threaten them (Jensen, 2007). It is an acknowledged fact that the

most of the witch-hunting victims are widows, single, older women and social-economic marginalized women without any support (Barman, 2002; Kelkar & Nathan, 1991; Mehra & Agrawal, 2016). In general, there always have two categories of people for such incidence. First category represents the people who live in the village/community/society/place where the incident of witch-hunting cases took place consider the witch as the perpetrator of the alleged victim's sufferings. On the other hand, second category represents those people who are unknown to the accused witch and are not residing in their area or place understand the villagers as perpetrators and the witch is regarded as a victim.

The term 'Witch' literally represents a woman who is believed to have magical powers specially to harm others. In most cases, women are alleged to be a practitioner of 'black magic' causes death to people where she belongs. A 'witch' or its Assamese term 'daaini' has been derived from Indo-Aryan term 'dakini' is used to identify a male or female who is alleged to have magical powers to bring evil to the community. Witch hunting is stigmatization of specific group of people which mostly contains widowed women, childless women, mentally sick women, old couples, women of lower caste though men can not be freed from this. Many are targeted due to local politics. To identify witches, the community avails 'witch doctor' or 'Bej' or 'Ojha', who on the basis of certain symptoms like fever, cough-cold and hysteria etc. declare any person (men or women) as 'witch'. The community then collectively decide the fate of such person and becomes subjected to merciless criticism of the community they live in. Reports and studies on the witch-hunting phenomena at the state level, is relatively few, as compared to the international and national levels. There are very limited works that detail upon the witch-craft practice and witch-hunting phenomena in the state. Incidents of witch hunt in Assam are immensely widespread in recent times. Assam is land of both tribal and non-tribal communities. Majority of the tribes in the state have heterogeneous tradition and culture. All the

districts of the state exhibit a mix of divergent ethnic groups who are truly distinct in their own identities. Some of the important tribes include Bodo, Karbi, Deori, Dimasa, Rabha, Miri, Mishing and many others. People from various communities always try to protect their self-identities through their customs, traditions and cultural and religious affairs. Recent revelations about the incidents of witch hunt in Assam through media, shows that districts like Kokrajhar, Chirang, Goalpara, Tinsukia, Udalguri, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Karbi Anglong, Majuli, Baksa, are seriously affected by the problem.

This study emphasized witch hunting practice, witch-trials and witch-hunting phenomena in an international as well as national perception, primarily in the context of Assam. It confers the fears and harassment faced by different category of people on being branded as witches. The paper results from qualitative study with an exploratory approach, highlighting the women's issues and suggesting sociolegal solutions to prevent such incidence. Moreover, this paper elaborates the legal safety afforded by the state of Assam in general. This paper accomplishes with an assessment of the efficacy of the legal instruments implemented for protection of 'witch-hunting'.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA:

To achieve the objectives of this study, mainly secondary data have been used. The secondary data have been collected from sources like books on witch-hunting, journals, newspapers, magazines, research articles, government reports and survey and internet sources. Concerning the subject matter particular observation has also been incorporated in this paper.

3. DISCUSSIONS:

3.1. WITCH-HUNTING PRACTICE IN INDIA

Belief in the presence of witches, practice of witchcraft, witchcraft allegation and witch hunting are world-wide phenomenon, which still remains in modern India. Over the ages, women who are branded as witches are threatened to inhuman

torment. However, in the modern age, witch-hunting has become a practice used by certain vested people for serving as a conspiracy towards fulfilment of various self-interests. Using a curtain of superstition, various wrongdoers in our society have been hiding their true purposes behind the witch-related sufferings and murders. The phenomenon has also been continuing due to different reasons like ineffective police enquiry, inaccessibility of laws, lack of strict punishments, ineffective rehabilitation or support systems, etc. Social and economic disparities have also played a vital role in fuelling such incidents.

The key triggers for instigation of witch-hunt incidents in the context of India include sickness in the neighbourhoods which is supplemented by personal envy, disputes and vested interests. Once the perpetrators become successful in achieving their motive of branding and banishing a victim, the grounds are cleared for fulfilment of a wide variability of interests. For reaching their goals, the perpetrators have also planned various ways and means to classify the 'witches' in their targets. Once the 'witch' gets successfully identified, the victims are subjected to countless inhuman tortures. It is not only that only the targeted victims had to suffer, but in most of the cases, the entire family of the victim had to tolerate the pain, which

makes the situation much worse. In many cases, the humiliation and socio-economic losses suffered by them become life-long and in certain extreme cases, the sufferings conclude with the decease of the victims.

It is commonly believed that the witches, who are mostly females, operate the perceived evil supernatural powers to cause harmful and ill-starred events such as destruction of crops, ill health of villagers, death of nearby children etc. The fault of anything bad is written off upon her and thereafter she is subjected to mass agony and barbarity, often leading to adverse inhuman behaviour, comprising of ostracizing, harassment, rape, burnt alive and even execution.

Though, there are many as well as stage legislation implemented to protection of witch-hunting yet the inhuman practice of witch-hunting prevails in several states in India, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam, mainly in the tribal areas. The latest report of National Crime Records Bureau (a body under Ministry of Home affairs, Government of India) reported 2765 cases in the name of witch-hunting practice from the year 1999-2016 (Fig 1), which means on an average of 153 cases/annually. These are the numbers which have been logged-in; the unrecorded ones are likely to be far more than this number.

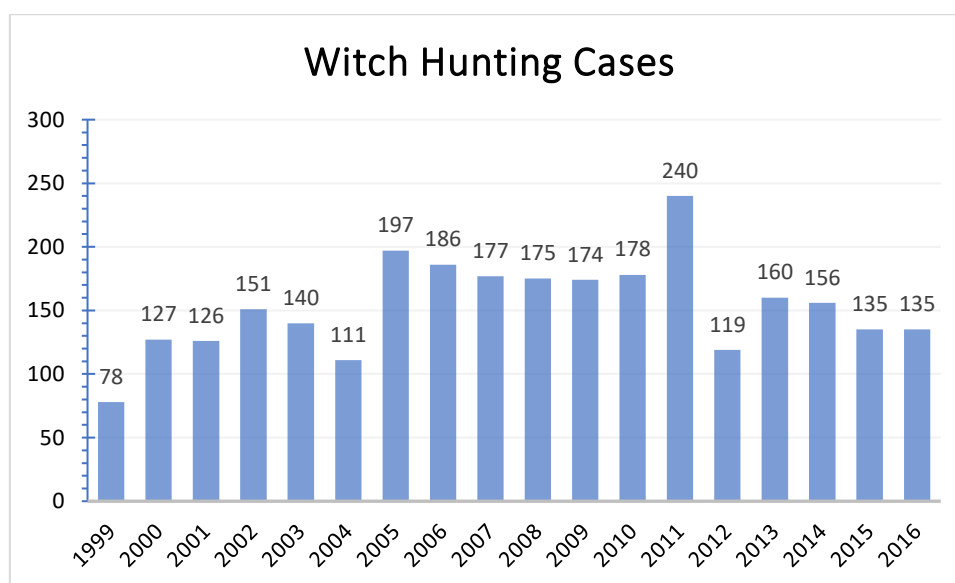


Figure 1: Number of witch hunting cases in India during 1999 to 2016

The social evil has long vanished from most parts of the world, barring India and some African countries. Examples of such legislations protecting witch hunting in India are Constitution of India, Indian Penal Code, The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, The Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill, 2016 (in process), The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, The Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act, 2006, Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999, Bihar, The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices 2001, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act 2005, The Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill, 2013. Assam Witch-hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2018.

The very basic assumption behind the formulation of specialised anti-witchcraft laws is defective. It is just a check-mechanism and should not be taken as satisfactory answer to the complications originating in the society due to wicked practices, illogicality or suspicion.²⁰ Such laws cannot culminate superstitions, provided redressal to victims or insert scientific approach and wisdom in the community. These laws also do not take into account a) the surroundings under which such practices embellish, b) the holes in prevailing laws, c) the method of reporting of cases, d) the

investigation carried after reporting, and e) the budding needs of the victims. Hence, a more social approach must be approved than just being stringently legal.²¹ Also majority of witch-hunting cases are never taken to the police or court. even if taken, more than half are discharged due to lack of proper inquiry, nonappearance of witnesses, trivial punishments to the committers or compromise between the victim and the perpetrator. Due to the aforesaid circumstances, anti-witchcraft laws are impotent to achieve their desired spirit and determination for which they were enacted.

3.2. WITCH-HUNTING IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM

The state of Assam, located in the North-Eastern part of the country India (**Fig 2**), has been a significant hotspot of existence of this crime bearing deeper gripping roots mostly in tribal society (Bhattacharya, 1994). It covers an area of 78,438 sq. km. It has a population of 31,169,272 (Census, 2011). The literacy rate of the state is 73.18% and has a sex ratio of 954 females per 1000 males. About 87% population of the State lives in rural areas. The region has lagged behind the rest of the country due to several parameters and economically under developed (Borah & das).

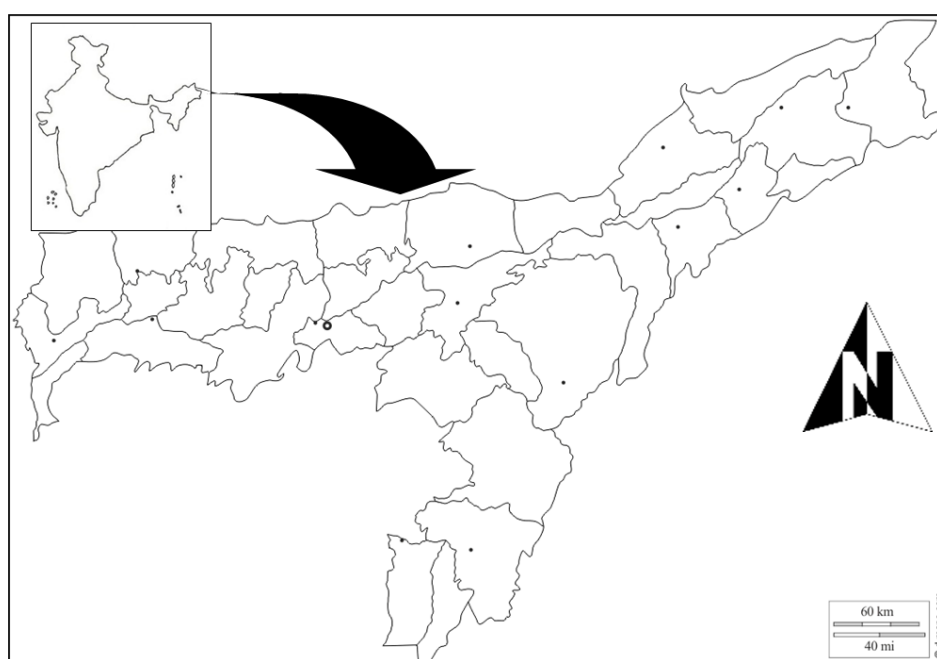


Figure 2: Map of the state of Assam with all its districts. In inset: Map of India

In Assam, practicing of witch craft or black magic dates back hundreds of years too. Mayong in Morigaon district, now a major tourist hub, used to be known as the *Indian Capital of Black Magic*. However, witchcraft was not limited to Mayong only, unfortunately it was and is prevalent amidst several communities and tribes across the Brahmaputra valley. In 2019, Assam government has informed in the State Legislative Assembly that in 18 years (2001-2019) as many 161 people have been killed in the case of witch-hunting. 210 cases have been occurred from the period 1989 to 2019, which is a severe quandary to this advancing society. However, this is merely on the small proportion of actual happening as most of it goes unreported and unknown. This observation is similar to various forms of crime against women which also remains unreported for various reasons (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Beniwal, 2017; ~~Mukherjee et al., 2001~~). Nonetheless, considering the seriousness of witch-hunting practices, since 1995, it has been incorporated in the realm of crime against women in the country. Out of 34 total districts present in the state of Assam, witch-hunting cases were found mostly in the districts like Kokrajhar, Chirang, Sonitpur, Goalpara, Udalguri, Baksa, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Jorhat, Majuli, Sivasagar, Tinsukia (**Fig 3**). Out of these, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa and Goalpara falls under Lower Assam region with the cases of witch-hunting being dominant among the Bodo tribes except for in Goalpara where the cases were prominent among the Rabhas. Sonitpur falling under Upper Brahmaputra valley (Northern Bank) records the occurrence among a mixed group of Karbi, Tea tribes, Bodo. Jorhat including Majuli and Sivasagar falling under Lower Brahmaputra valley (Southern Bank) has maximum occurrence of witch-hunting cases amongst the Misings, Deuri and Ahom tribes.

In Assam cases of witch-hunting have been spotted mainly in six districts- Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Sonitpur (Fig 3). Along with the increasing number of witch-hunting cases in the state, the cases are becoming

more complex. Originally, incidents were limited to tribes meting out public punishments to those charged with practicing black-magic. Today witch-hunting cases often relate to personal rivalry, grabbing property or land and other divisive issues, apart from mere superstition. The recent trend is that suspected persons have been killed secretly, preferably at night taking advantage of darkness, so that no one can detect the perpetrators.

Table 1-Witch-hunting cases in Assam during the period 1989-2016

District	Witch Hunt Cases
Baksa	11
Barpeta	0
Biswanath	5
Bongaigaon	3
Chirang	24
Charaideo	0
Cachar	2
Darrang	0
Udalguri	15
Dhemaji	7
Dhubri	0
Dibrugarh	0
Dima Hasa	0
Goalpara	20
Golaghat	2
Hailakandi	0
Hojai	0
Jorhat	1
Majuli	2
Kamrup	3
Kamrup Metro	2
Karbi Anglong	3
West Karbi Anglong	2
Karimganj	0
Kokrajhar	52
Lakhimpur	4
Morigaon	0
Nagaon	2
Nalbari	1
South Soolmara Mankachar	0

Sibsagar	9	Total	187
Sonitpur	12	(** 23 cases were registered during 2016 to 2019	
Tinsukia	5	October)	

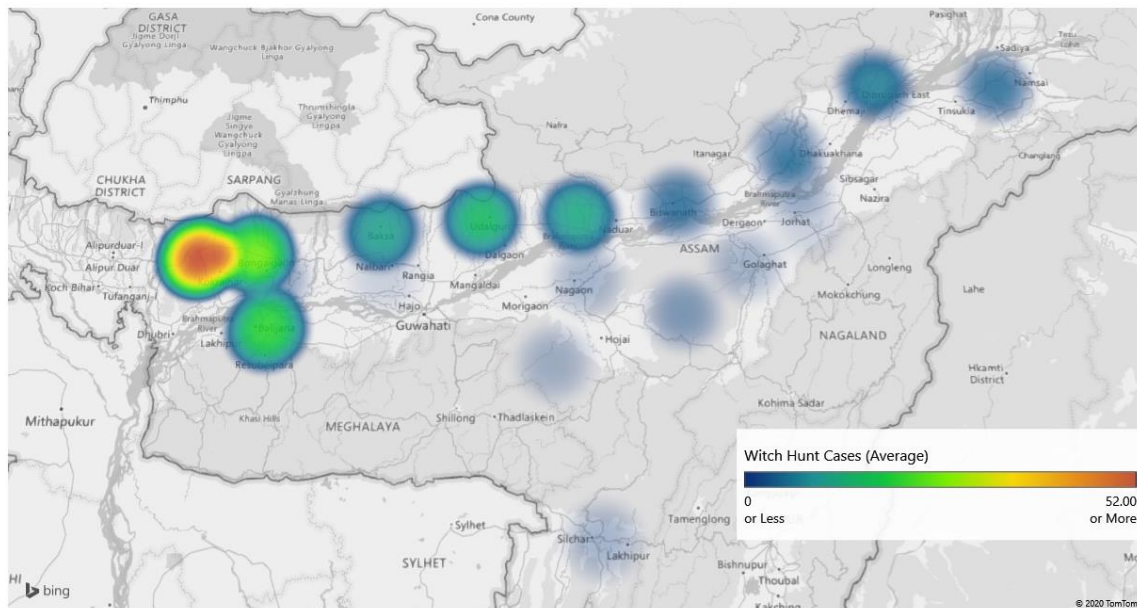


Figure 3: Map of the state of Assam with all its districts along with the spatial distribution of registered witch hunting cases.

Table 2: Comparison of district wise witch hunting cases against Literacy Rate and different communities

District	Witch Hunt Cases	Literacy Rate	%SC	%ST
Baksa	11	69.25	7.69234	34.84009
Barpeta	0	63.81	5.628174	1.614528
Bongaigaon	3	69.74	11.20514	2.549391
Chirang	24	79.34	7.28697	37.05974
Cachar	2	79.34	15.25362	1.01168
Darrang	0	63.08	4.336026	0.906731
Udalguri	15	65.41	4.550373	32.14889
Dhemaji	7	72.7	6.445543	47.44853
Dhubri	0	58.34	3.611374	0.324842
Dibrugarh	0	76.05	4.438999	7.756034
Dima Hasa	0	77.54	2.02567	70.92087
Goalpara	20	67.37	4.472799	22.96904
Golaghat	2	77.43	5.839226	10.4758
Hailakandi	0	74.33	10.71734	0.104809
Jorhat	1	82.15	8.117602	12.81485
Kamrup	3	75.55	7.105372	11.99558
Kamrup Metro	2	88.71	8.117546	5.990807
Karbi Anglong	3	69.25	4.701494	56.3349
Karimganj	0	78.22	12.85031	0.157892
Kokrajhar	52	65.22	3.333176	31.41154

Lakhimpur	4	77.2	7.853094	23.93409
Morigaon	0	68.03	12.30814	14.28595
Nagaon	2	72.37	9.432432	4.077991
Nalbari	1	78.63	7.803649	3.027841
Sibsagar	9	80.41	3.678989	4.260371
Sonitpur	12	67.34	5.671713	12.06828
Tinsukia	5	69.66	2.838104	6.179999

3.3. WITCH-HUNTING CASES AGAINST DISTRICT WISE LITERACY RATE IN ASSAM

As seen in Fig 4, the witch-hunting cases for Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Sonitpur are more than ten. The corresponding literacy rate are lower (below Indian Literacy rate) in case of Baksa, Udalguri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Sonitpur as compared with the overall literacy rate of Assam, where blind faith, evil practice and superstitions invoke them to believe in wizardry and witch-hunting. This means, illiteracy and healthcare facilities may be cited as reasons for occurrence of this criminal act, similar incidents have also been reported from Chirang district

where the literacy rate is comparatively higher (79.34%). This finding tallies with the general perception that witch-hunts are more overriding amongst the illiterate section of our society, which may have different root causes and potential to create many unsafe situations. Such unsafe situations shared with some external pressures mainly superstitions, which origins different problems to the rural community in which the practice of witch hunt is predominant. Illiteracy also halts the inclusive development of the community. So, practical education to vulnerable section including women is necessary for overall progress of the community.

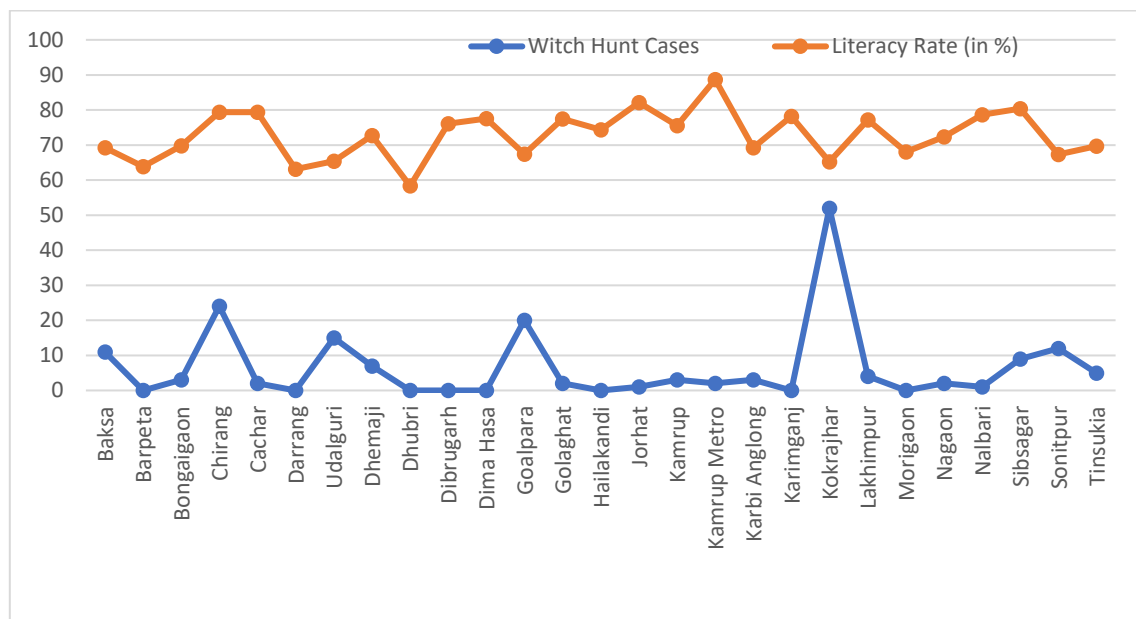


Figure 4: Comparison of Witch-hunting cases against District Wise Literacy Rate in Assam.

3.4. WITCH-HUNTING CASES AGAINST DISTRICT WISE DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES IN ASSAM

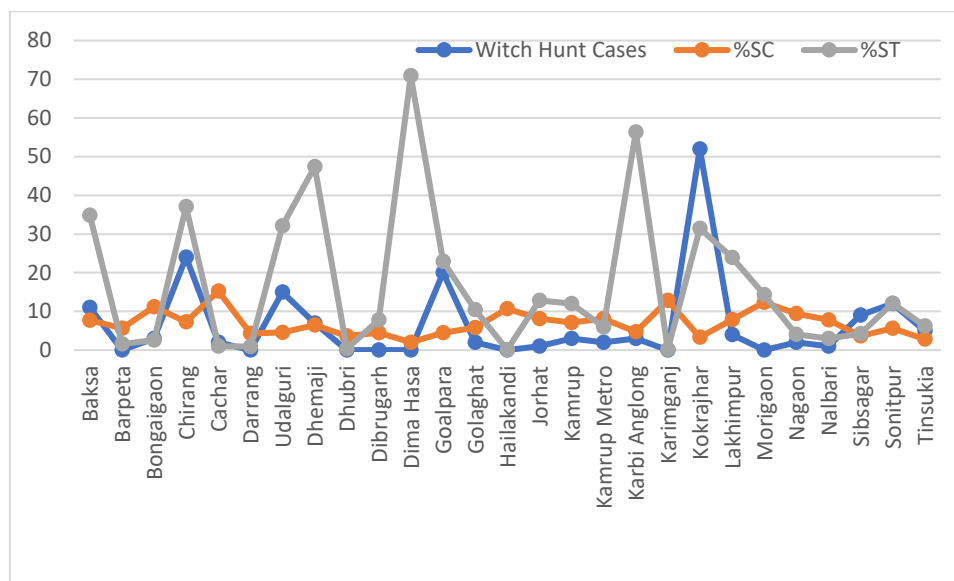


Figure 5: Comparison of Witch-hunting cases against District Wise different communities in Assam.

From Fig 5, it is clearly noticed that there is an organized disparity of witch-hunting cases with respect to the dominating communities. For instance, in Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Sonitpur districts, the Scheduled Tribe communities is dominating in number as compared to Scheduled Caste. Amongst 23 tribal communities in the state, the Rabhas constitute the fourth dominant Plain Tribes of Assam, after the Bodos, Miris and the Mikirs (Saikia et. al. 2016). Out of eight districts Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa and Goalpara falls under Lower Assam region with the cases of witch-hunting being dominant among the Bodo tribes except for in Goalpara where the cases were prominent among the Rabhas. Sonitpur falling under Upper Brahmaputra valley (Northern Bank) records the occurrence among a mixed group of Karbi, Tea tribes, Bodo. Like many other tribal people residing in Assam, these communities are also superstitious by nature.

But it is also enthralling to look at the way of presentation of regional newspapers which primarily emphasising the name of the particular tribe or community in witch-hunting practice. These types of articles depict the community as brutal in nature. There is a major failing in these news articles as the history, social structure and

belief system of the community are never taken into account by the printing houses. Thus, when it comes to readers, this kind of news always makes a negative impression towards the specific community.

3.5. WITCH-HUNTING CASES AGAINST DISTRICT WISE POVERTY RATE IN ASSAM

Assam Human Development Report 2014 unveils that about one-third of the population in the state are 'multidimensionally poor' i.e., poor in more than one dimension of human development. Table shows the overall economic and social status, and within that, the communities to which the majority of the victims in our case studies belong. Most districts in Assam fare much worse than the all-India average excluding Kamrup Metro. Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa, Kokrajhar and Goalpara districts are observed as very poor in Assam Human development report 2014. Among those districts, Goalpara district was declared as country's most backward districts by Government of India in 2006. There is inadequate medical access facility. Besides this, due to poor economic condition, they are not able to cope up with the current procedure of medical treatment like Sonography, Scanning, frequent blood, stool, taking and purchasing

medicine regularly, nutrition through vitamin, relaxation etc. Owing to unhygienic condition of living, they are easily inclined to various diseases. With the advent of science and technology, this heinous crime should be stopped but in reality, the number of victims of witch-hunting is increasing day by day. However, Assam is the latest state in India which gets a strict law to fight against witch-hunting, the Assam Witch-hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015 passed by state legislative assembly and with the assent of President of India in June 2018, it become an act and made an offence under the act as non-bailable, cognizable and non-compoundable, torturing of women in the name of hunting down witches. Some stringent clauses incorporated into the act includes maximum imprisonment term of seven years to life imprisonment and a fine amount ranging between five thousand to five lakhs. The most significant clause of the bill is that Section 438 of Indian Penal Code (IPC)¹ will not apply in cases of witch hunt, and with this the provision of getting anticipatory bail is wiped out in such cases. The bill further acts to provide rehabilitation to the victims.

3.6.UNDERLYING CAUSE RESPONSIBLE FOR WITCH-HUNTING:

Practice of witch-hunting violate human rights and fundamental rights like right to life, liberty, including social and economic equality. Increasing number of witch-hunting cases shame India's claim of a democracy that provides equality in gender, caste, race, and achievements in literacy, humanity and gender sensitivity. It also reflects state's failure to spread education and health facilities, dignity of women, promote scientific temper and make equality a social reality.

Law and criminal justice system have failed to understand the fundamental reasons for such menace. The reality of this problem is innate in a society that cannot be highlighted only by data. Only some of the most terrible cases get reported, while most witch-hunting incidents go unreported and unrecorded. Since most atrocities revolve

around the fundamental issues of land, wages, and lust for power; poverty and powerlessness, are viewed as the breeding grounds of such violence. Here are some chief causes responsible for witch-hunting-

- Poverty and illiteracy in backward or remote areas.
- Superstitious beliefs of witches have been a perennial problem leading to severe form of violation of human rights in a number of states in the country. Majority of people's mentality from tribal and backward areas superstitious by nature. There are always some people with hidden agenda to label their enemy as 'witch' by spreading rumor.
- We have seen that most of the Indian societies are divided on the basis of upper caste and lower caste. Societies belong to upper caste have a tendency to rule the society ignoring the importance of lower caste.
- Enmity arisen out of political rivalry has come out one of the common factors in some parts of tribal areas to kill the opponent in the name of 'Witch practice'. Human being as a political animal is being influenced by the wave of politics which make them blind to justify what is just and unjust.
- Personal intention to grasp property may be in terms of land, money, valuable assets etc. is also a prime cause for witch-hunting and mainly female witch-hunting.
- Adaptation of other religion has been getting progress in tribal and backward society. This conversion of religion brings a change attitude and mode of living with other fellow co-villagers. In some remote areas, the enraged villagers get together and branded the converted people as practitioner of black magic. So, the suspected person is killed in the of practicing 'witch'.
- Police does not always act according to the law passed by the state government. Under

this law, they can arrest the accused immediately, but that's not happening always.

3.7. PRACTICAL SOLUTION TO TACKLE WITCH-HUNTING PRACTICE:

It is not very easy to elucidate the remedies to remove this evil practice. Many steps have been taken to stop this brutal crime. Government of Assam specifically introduced an act "the Assam Witch-hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2018".

The understanding we have had from the forgoing discussion is that witch-hunting is still significant in the remote or regressive society. Specially, in those areas where the community miserably lacks of awareness, modern infrastructure, health facilities and in fulfilling their basic needs in general. Retd. DIG Kuladhar Saikia of Assam Police launched Project Prahari on 1st August, 2001 to root out the practice of witch-hunting from the society. He launched rehabilitation programmes in the affected areas as a part of his project. Well-known figure Birubala Rabha, witch-hunt crusader from Assam has been rendering her relentless effort to save lives from being hacked to death on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. In 2011, she set up Mission Birubala against the practice of branding women as 'dayans' or 'witches', torturing and even killing them. Mission Birubala, joint effort with Assam Mahila Samata Society rescued many witch victims which surely brings a ray of hope for removal of superstitions and evil practice of witch-hunt. The witch-hunting legislation of Assam has been in effect since 2018. Witch-hunting viewed as a cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable offence. However, it is noticed that neither the laws nor the social activists have been able to prevent witch-hunting completely from the society. Legislation alone can never bring a change in society without adequate support from the people, desire to positively reform the society. It is high time that joint social platform to bring all stakeholders like NGOs, government bodies, women associations, student bodies, science

society, members of civil society, local organizations come forward to make people concern about such brutal acts.

- Uneducated people are more prone to superstitions. Therefore, emphasis should be given upon educating the rural uneducated, especially women.
- Removal of Poverty and capability to access basic needs can barred the superstitious villagers to do this harmful act.
- Majority of the cases, personal envy or dislike was the principal reason behind the accusations and hunts. Hence, a cordial interpersonal relationship should be maintained between the villagers.
- As most of the incidents happened in remote areas, far from police station/outpost. Police should provide tight security in the vulnerable areas.
- Awareness camps can be established against this atrocious crime. NGOs can play a vital role in this regard.
- As a tribal state, people of Assam drinks traditional rice-beer (a kind of alcohol) which sometimes influence the villagers to commit a crime.
- We must develop a societal eco-system with scientific temper and attitude at the community level.
- The tendency to put the blame on women for any natural or other misfortunes, including health emergencies or epidemics should be stopped completely.
- Exposing fraud who tries to brand a person as 'witch'.
- Women empowerment through financial independence is needed.

In order to handle this matter, we must expand our education, health and communication and transportation facilities in those sensitive areas. Only public awareness can bring an end to this problem. Instead of going to the quacks or witch doctors when sick, people must throw away such superstitious beliefs and take the aid

of doctors. Mass media should play a vital role in spreading awareness amongst society.

4. CONCLUSION:

Prevalence of Witch-hunting practice is a curse in today's world. It extinguishes the traditional set up of a society and distresses the victim or their family. In this era, when people are advanced in their believed and living standard, then why and how such barbaric superstitions are still prevailing. It is certainly shameful that our government and civil society failed to stop such inhuman happenings even as many have lost their lives due to this brutal practice. In this conjuncture, police apathy, poor investigation and strict action are among the major barriers in providing respite to the victims. Strict enforcement as well as the implementation of Anti-witchcraft law, including sensitizing of police and welfare department is also needed to generate awareness among people. Each and every concern people of the society must join their hands together to eliminate witch-hunt practice completely across the state. Until and unless necessary action is paid to these incidents-amelioration of practicing witch-hunt and witch-hunting related crimes shall be a distant dream. Victims of these incidents should properly be supported and rehabilitated. Witch-hunting becomes a barrier in the path of inclusive development of a nation. So, a scientific approach is required to deal with this multifaceted phenomenon.

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