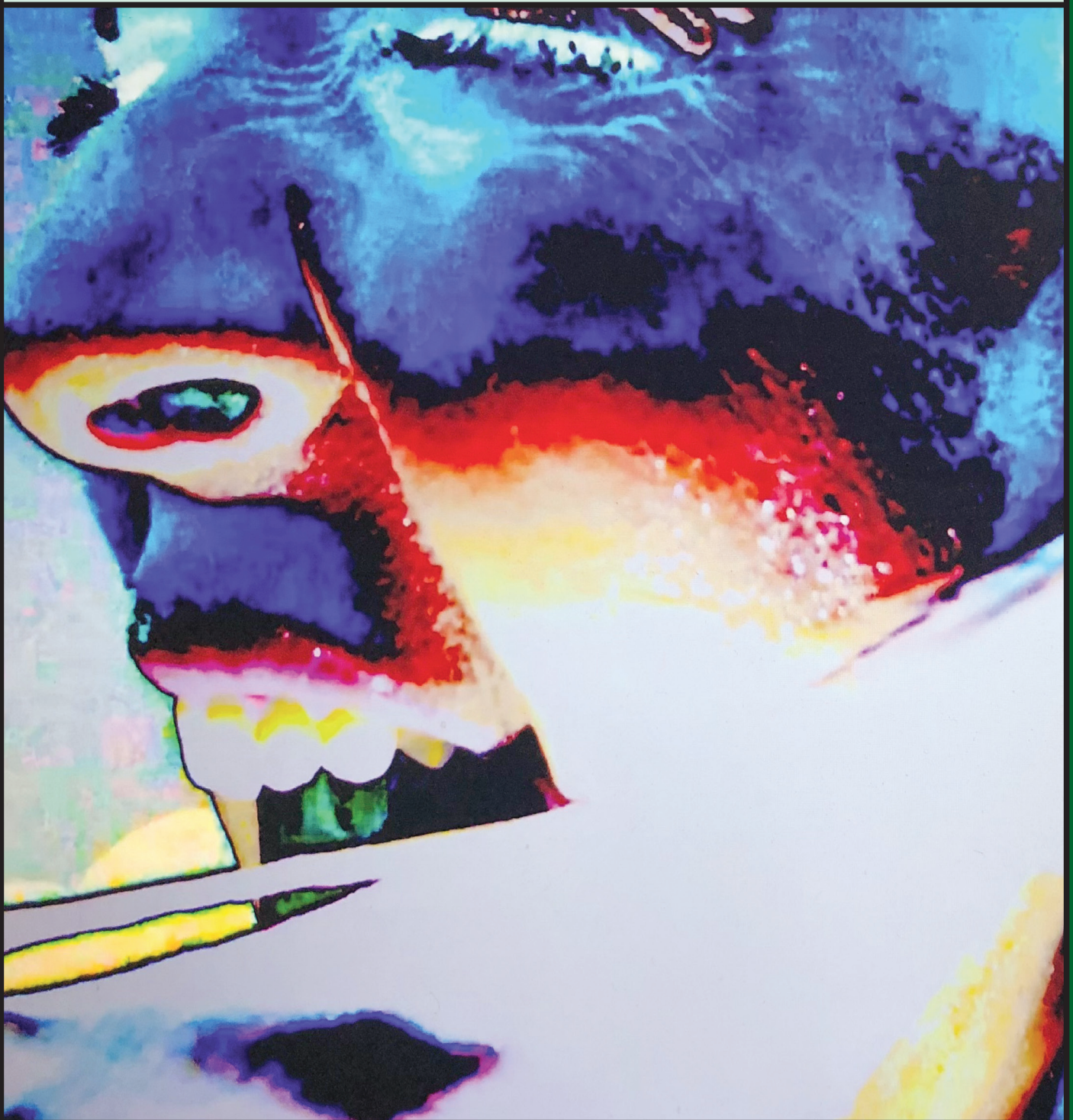


Culture, Capital, and Witch Hunts in Assam

Govind Kelkar & Aparajita Sharma



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Witch hunts are recurring punitive practices by male vigilantes and self-appointed ojhas/kabirajs (witch-finders). In most cases these lead to the inhuman torture and killing of so-called witches and the confiscation of their properties. Originating in traditional cultures, witch hunts have become a serious problem over the last several decades in indigenous societies in India.

In conducting and completing this study we owe our gratitude to survivors of witch hunts, who narrated their stories of persecution, pain, insult and unsupported isolated living in these very communities. We salute them for their resistance and resilience. In conducting and completing this study we owe our gratitude to survivors of witch hunts, who narrated their stories of persecution, pain, insult, and unsupported isolated living in these very communities. We salute them for their resistance and resilience. In addition, we want to thank Neha Naqvi and Vinod Koshti of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation who at varying stages of our research provided much needed support to bring this study to fruition. Professor Nitya Nanda welcomed the idea and provided a warm intellectual home for the study at the Council for Social Development, New Delhi.

In 2020, Dev Nathan and I completed a book titled *Witch Hunts, Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation*, an analysis covering Asia, Africa and early modern Europe. Prior to this book, one of the authors (Govind Kelkar) began working on witches in the late 1980s with a chapter titled 'Women, Witches and Land Rights' in the book *Gender and Tribe* published by Kali for Women and Zed Press.

In the process of conducting this study in Assam, we interviewed 19 survivors of witch hunts and had discussions with 16 thought leaders on the subject: Gita Bhattacharya; Birubala Rabha; Usha Rabha; Preetam Brahma Chowdhury; Khanindra Basumatary; Dr Natyabir Das; Chikimiki Talukdar; Mamoni Saikia; Bhumika Rai; Poonam Toppo; Neelesh Singh; Samar Bosu Mullick; Chhutni Devi; Dev Nathan; Virginus Xaxa; and Sarika Sinha. They helped us understand, although still only partially, the difficult question of the cultures of belief in witches in indigenous societies in India.

In writing this study, we received unlimited support in sorting out complex thoughts from Dev (Govind's partner in personal and professional life) and Pallavi (Govind's daughter, a young scholar completing her Ph.D. on acid attacks on women in India). Many parts of this study were written while staying at home and in frequent consultations between the two authors and in friendship with three non-human beings, one cat and two dogs Gulgul, Kunnu and Jampa. Our great debt is to two supporters: Bahadur who smilingly met Govind's endless demand for coffee and tea at frequent intervals, and Anant Pandey who tirelessly gave a clean shape to this writing. Ashwitha Jayakumar provided help in copy-editing this study.

It is our hope that this study will help build an understanding of witch hunts in Assam and elsewhere, which is necessary for human society to end belief in witchcraft and the practice of witch violence, and bring in a human rights-respecting culture. We have noted a slow chipping away at this belief and practice among youth like the All Bodo Students Union and indigenous women leaders like Birubala, Usha Rabha of Assam and Chhutni Devi of Jharkhand, as well as many witch violence survivors. This makes us confident that however slow, there is an erosion of beliefs in witch hunts.

The responsibility for opinions and interpretations expressed in this study rests solely with the two authors.

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Culture, Capital, and Witch Hunts in Assam

Introduction

This study looks at the interrelated factors of transition from a pre-state forest dependent economy to a social system of an agricultural economy and state society; a society where new inequalities are brought by global changes such as consumption patterns, new communication technologies and new forms of mobility, all leading to an increase in inequalities and patriarchal forces. Some outcomes of capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects for a large percentage of women in indigenous and rural populations. The objective of this study is to understand the culture and social beliefs that underlie modern-day witch hunts in Assam and to explore the specific direction of change in these cultures and belief systems at the nexus of patriarchal capitalist trajectories.

While some contemporary representations of witchcraft include feminist reclamations in cities, this study deals with the current misogynist branding of rural and indigenous women as witches who cause harm to others in their communities. These women are punished in inhuman ways for their alleged diabolical activities. The violence inflicted on them includes both killing and humiliation-cum-banishment from home, along with the seizure of land and properties. This form of violence and its consequences of killing and banishment came to the attention of UNHCR as an international problem as early as 2009 (The New York Times, 20 May 2021).

Official police records in India list 'witch persecution' as a cause of killing and list an average of 150 killings per year from 2001 to

2012. NGOs and social scientists who have actively opposed witch violence point out that this is an underestimation, since many killings may be shown as having occurred due to property disputes. In India, most of the accused are women; only 10 to 13 per cent of reported cases involve men. Several states in India, such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Tripura, Odisha and Rajasthan, have responded by enacting anti-witch persecution laws from the year 2000 onwards. Feminist organisations like the North-East Network (a women's rights organisation), the Assam Mahila Samata Society, the Bodo Students Union of Assam and Assam police initiative 'Project Prahari' as well as human rights organisations have noted the violent consequences of witch accusations and have mobilized to eliminate witch hunting practices. However, societal belief in witches and in their power to cause harm and illness as well as the land and property gains that come to the accusers have resulted in limited success.

In our earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020) we observed that witch violence is related to two different types of structural transformations occurring somewhat simultaneously: the creation of patriarchy in the move from hoe to plough agriculture, and capitalist transformation e.g., massive structural changes within families from matriliney to patriliney and the formation of patriarchy, along with the primary accumulation of capital and the separation of workers from the means of production. The articulation of belief in witchcraft alongside such massive structural

changes produces a spiritual insecurity that results in the persecution and killing of women, some men and even children. This occurs largely in indigenous areas in India as well as parts of Africa and Asia.

This study is a critical analysis of cultural rights among Assam's indigenous peoples as well as an attempt to understand the human rights-respecting cultural rights of everyone without discrimination and violence in the case of diverse practices. This framework for addressing witch persecution or witch hunts in Assam must also be informed both by local and global dynamics in understanding the ways in which capitalist patriarchy in one part of the globalised world can affect development elsewhere, and lead to discrimination, xenophobia and related violence such as witch branding and hunting. The UN Secretary-General's Report 'Field of Cultural Rights' (2021) recently noted that a "refusal to respect cultural mixing or mixed cultural identities leads to many human rights violations". A society cannot progress and be part of wider society where equality and dignity of women are an integral part of the sustainable, justice-based development without rights-respecting cultural sharing.

Methodology

A systematic literature review that took an unbiased and more political and scientific approach than a traditional narrative review was employed to explore people's belief in the concepts of witchcraft and witches. In the first phase of the review, the research objectives for finding the basis for the data and key words for a search were chosen. This was followed by the use of Google Scholar to ensure the inclusion of relevant papers/studies and archival sources. An analysis of secondary sources was undertaken through collecting information from various published and unpublished materials in the public domain and from the websites of government agencies, academic institutions, research centres and individual researchers in

India, Africa and Europe. During our survey and discussions, we focused on the period from 1990 to 2020, keeping in mind the process of accumulation and the rise in patriarchal changes in indigenous societies. We focused on how the process of accumulation and the associated development of patriarchal governance has played a major role in changing the traditional beliefs and social structures, and led to a strengthened patriarchy and indigenous identities but with less room for human rights-respecting discourses.

Fieldwork was then conducted in the districts of Goalpara and Kokrajhar of Assam by the Lead Researcher (Govind Kelkar) and the Research Assistant (Aparajita Sharma). Both Goalpara and Kokrajhar are infamous for carrying out witch hunts. In 2006, Goalpara was declared one of the most backward districts in the country by the Indian government; the district is inhabited by the Rabha and Bodo and Rajbongshi communities. Kokrajhar district is an administrative unit carved out from the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam; it is predominantly inhabited by Bodo indigenous peoples.

We gathered material on 19 cases of witch violence from the survivors, who included 18 women and 1 man, as well as 3 cases of ojhas/kabiraj (witch finders), and compiled a total of 22 case studies. The survivors included 11 individuals from the Rabha community, 6 from the Bodo community and 2 from the Rajbongshi community. Additionally, we interviewed the 3 practicing ojhas (witch finders) and conducted 16 key informant interviews to understand diverse viewpoints and get a plurality of perspectives on cultural diversity and cultural rights in indigenous societies. During fieldwork, two researchers engaged in the day-to-day activities of the villagers and ojhas to understand their history, culture, and the socio-economic structures of their society. We had long sessions with women in their homes during which they shared their life stories, talked about the status



Interview with key informants in Kokrajhar

of women in their communities and their health problems. Field assistance was provided by Usha Rabha, who manages the Birubala Mission office in Goalpara, and we are grateful for her time and assistance.

Interviews with local NGO workers and government officers who have dealt with cases of witch violence also helped us to understand different perspectives on the activities of the ojhas and rivalries between ojhas. The contrasting and fragmented views on the witch belief system and associated violence we uncovered can be summed up in two major trends of thought:

- 1) Indigenous peoples' belief in a system of witchcraft is not simply the superstition of untaught minds; it is similar to the belief in the existence of superhuman or supernatural power, which is universally present in other religious or social groups.
- 2) There are some who question this belief in witchcraft. This was expressed by some

of the women leaders who had survived the witch violence, and who have received awards from the Government of India for running campaigns against witch branding and hunting. Our discussions with them indicated that there has been a major shift in the thinking of women who survived the witch violence or who were at risk of being accused of practicing witchcraft. These women, along with progressive villagers, were of the opinion that “there is nothing like witches, they exist in [people’s] minds to punish others and grab their property. We cannot be accused of being a witch based on somebody’s belief, without concrete evidence. If we are witches, then produce the evidence of use of our evil practice” (Chhutni Devi, Jharkhand in a discussion with Govind Kelkar). Importantly, the All Bodo Students Union has carried out regular campaigns against witch branding and hunting.

As part of building our research perspectives, we contacted key experts on indigenous issues. We

put the following questions to these key experts in order to facilitate discussion:

- What is the situation with regard to witch branding and persecution in the area?
- When is a woman or man likely to be branded as a witch?
- Is there any legal or community action to support the person who is branded a witch?
- Who are the ojhas? What is the basis of their power?
- As reports indicate, witch branding has increased during the corona virus period. What are the reasons for this increase in branding and persecution of women as witches?
- What are your ideas of how this practice can be ended legally and socially?
- Are current legal provisions sufficient to deal with witch hunting?
- What is required for providing legal aid and protection to the survivors? Can they be resettled in their communities?
- How have you influenced governments and other key actors in their response to the violent crime of witch hunting?

Prior to our fieldwork, we organised a one-day internal discussion on research perspectives and research tools. Questioning the dominant notion of strong objectivity in conventional research practice, our self-organised training was informed by the idea of a feminist standpoint based on the lived experiences of survivors of witch violence within an unjust social order. Such an approach is more relevant to producing knowledge that can be used for building a human rights-centred social system (Harding 2004).

We also discussed situational analysis, inspired by Donna Haraway's 'Concept of Situated Knowledges' (1991), and foregrounding a mode of analysis which makes witch violence more visible

and makes the silences of alleged witches speak for themselves on the subject of enquiry. Further, we discussed how ojhas (witch finders) use human and non-human ritualistic practices to identify and torture women, as well as men who come out in support of the women identified as witches.

With regard to research ethics, we conducted our fieldwork with care and respect for the interviewees, i.e., keeping strictly confidential the information we gathered from the women. Oral or written consent was taken prior to each individual interview and group discussion. We maintained anonymity when recording sensitive matters that emerged during our fieldwork.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Various social movements and indigenous peoples have been engaged in discourses of indigeneity and politics of identity assertion. The practice of witch hunts is seen as a marker of the exclusive identity of indigenous peoples, and is set against forces of globalisation and the related cultural homogenising of the Indian state, which attempt to bring in global standardisation and make inroads into a world dominated by western values and symbols (Nath, 2014; Gohain, 2007; 2008; Robertson and White, 2003).

We noted three streams of thought on witch persecution and witch hunts. The first can be seen in anthropological studies on misfortune and the community role of witch accusations within the cultural context of indigenous and rural societies [see for example, E.E. Evans-Prichard (1934/1976) and Mary Douglas (1970)]. They account for the development of the notion of witchcraft as a prominent occult praxis that occurs as part of conflict resolution systems in human existence. In this analysis, the practice of witch hunts as it exists today is located within a narrative of increasing inequality and the cultural and political marginalisation of indigenous and rural peoples in Assam.



Meeting with Tapan ojha in his house

Within historical accounts of colonialism and later struggles against the central government of India, witch persecution or killing is understood to be a part of indigenous identity, an action necessary to preserve the moral fibre of society. There have been cases where individuals who have killed so-called witches have gone on to surrender themselves after the act and justified their actions as upholding the moral fabric of their society, which Evans-Prichard sees as a moral stabilising influence on the social system of the indigenous people. These notions are part of the indigenous people's faith in supernatural powers, which are considered to be superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women living at margins of the society, are blamed for causing bad weather conditions, natural disasters, diseases, deaths, etc. Accused of causing these detrimental events, violence against the accused, such as flogging,

rape, burning alive and otherwise murdering the accused, is seen as a socially acceptable tool for weeding out anti-social elements (witches). The socially privileged kabiraj or ojha continues to be more powerful. He is seen as someone who is capable of driving out evil spirits from the bodies of possessed women and also as someone who not only heals but is also capable of causing harm.

The second stream of thought, as seen in post-modernist studies, is in the context of the contact between indigenous societies and capitalist modernism, as in John and Jean Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches as modernity's malcontents, and Peter Geschiere's work on Africa's capitalist modernism (2013). Silvia Federici's new book *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women* (2018) explains that capitalism and patriarchy together produce 'witches' who were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children.

Capitalist society has made women's bodies the fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women as midwives, abortionists, and herbalists with knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal power and create generations of subjugated women as a domestic labour class, a condition for capitalism. Older women were attacked because they could no longer provide children or sexual services and therefore were considered a drain on the creation of wealth in the social system. Across many of the research sites and also in several African countries, we noted that older women who could no longer provide children and sexual services to men were denounced as witches. They were seen as engaged in a demonic conspiracy, and therefore thought to deserve a brutalised physical elimination.

The third stream, in agreement with an earlier study (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020), combines a political economy approach with an analysis of culture and patriarchy. We relate cultural aspects of witch persecution and witch hunting to economic, social, and political processes of change as well as to the creation or strengthening of patriarchy within indigenous and rural societies. This is an attempt to explain what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the paradox of doxa", the historical structures of masculine order, with its associated social relations of privileges and injustice. The most intolerable conditions of existence can often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu 2001:1-4). However, there are, at the same time, processes of dismantling power structures and bringing in transformation in the social economic order, and feminist researchers have recognised that the analysis of the androcentric principle is necessary for an objective analysis of a social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we see a crucial role played by men's monopolisation of productive resources like land and housing, and of ritual knowledge, which is a socially higher valued knowledge. We have tried to understand the pathways through which witch persecution and witch hunting "either support or oppose the

structural transformation from subsistence to accumulative economies" (Kelkar/Nathan 2020:3). As explained in the preceding pages, we follow the standpoint of women persecuted or hunted as witches in indigenous and rural societies of India. The definition of a witch is "one who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Needham, 1978:26); later in 2004, this was modified to "a person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to other humans" (Hutton, 2004: 421). These definitions imply that there are people who use mystical or supernatural means to cause harm to others. Therefore, they suggest a justified belief in witchcraft, that there are people who exist to cause harm to others through supernatural or mystical means. What is important to note is that such a social belief results in a discourse that creates a reality that is manifested in practices of witch persecution or witch hunting. Based on a recent study, we would like to define a witch as "a person who is perceived to cause harm by supernatural means" (Kelkar/Nathan, 2020:4). In fact, people may not possess such occult power to cause harm to others.

Historical research suggests that the Rabha people had matrilineal system. However, assimilation with mainstream Hindu society shifted the system towards a patriarchal institutional system (Bujorbaruah, 2018). Once the Rabha switched over to the patriarchal system, women's role in all public and private decision making declined, bringing a deterioration of both women's status and knowledge. Shikha Das (2018), in her study of the Rabha people noted that property rights and the control of resources in the hand of the women later became a matter of shame, and a masculine system with men controlling land, forests and knowledge of how to treat illness with herbs became a matter of honour. In the process, powerful women came to be branded as witches. The popular term used by the Rabhas for a woman who is known as a keeper of evil power is 'tikkar'. It exists in every village in the form of the practice of evil power which has

the ability to harm other in the community and villagers can take advantage of this evil magical power for their own use (Das, 2018:90).

The customary laws of the Bodos relating to marriage and inheritance of property had provisions for the rights of women. For example, a woman who was married could exercise rights over the assets she brought with her from her parental house. Her husband or in-laws were not allowed to claim this property (Narzary 2019). In one of the marriage systems of Bodo people (Gwrajia Lakhinai), the newly married son-in-law was adopted to manage property in the bride's family. Over time and largely under the influence of the Hindu patriarchal system, these management rights became ownership rights for men, and deprived the wife of any share in her parents' property. In the late 19th century, the Bodos were noted as having many gender-specific discriminatory norms including child marriage, purdah, and other forms of women's dependency (Islam, 2012). Any form of material rights, including over property and lineage, for women became a matter of cultural concern, while masculine identity became something to be admired and acknowledged as part of the Bodo culture.

In recent years, civil society and academic discourse have largely concentrated on the 'purity' of indigeneity and traditional cultures; they have stayed away from recognising cultural diversity and plurality of perspective that come from cultural sharing and mutual learning from human rights-respecting practices in both indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. The idea of 'purity' of culture, like that of colour, caste, or race, especially in marginalised groups, generally ends in representing them as trapped in the past, and by implication, unfit to deal with human rights-respecting practices and their social and economic benefits.

In some indigenous societies, to halt cultural decay, younger women are told by village elders (all

male) that it is an inherent violation of indigenous culture to wear jeans, the clothing of 'others', or to communicate through mobile phones or adopt 'foreign' ways of worshipping or performing rituals. These practices are underpinned by a patriarchal greed for the control of land and other resources that women and girls might have had and legitimise the physical torture of women (and some men) who engage in 'unconventional' religious practices. This cultural gatekeeping promotes social injustice and is a violation of human rights.

This study is an attempt to introduce a human rights-respecting approach to cultural diversity with a focus on witch hunts in the context of indigenous peoples' social systems. It is essential to work for the erasure of witch hunt practices and see them as part of cultural identities of the past. Their histories must be understood in a manner respectful of the cultural rights of women and plurality of change from matriliney to patriliney and then to patriarchal societies and the adverse impact of this on women's equality and dignity. Of course, women's adverse social position was further complicated and strengthened by the colonialist attempt to control indigenous peoples' resources like forests and land. (Kelkar, Nathan and Walter, 2003). To avoid the processes of a market-led world, the associated patriarchal greed for power and control, and the commercialization and corporatization of forests, land and other resources, efforts must be made to maintain and promote the diversity of rights respecting-cultures in line with international standards of human rights for all women and men.

Factors in Witch Hunts

The most important proximate factors in witch persecution that usually bring forth accusations and violence are illness and premature death. The problem of illness is understood as having been caused by the spells of women using witchcraft.

This belief in the existence of witches and their malevolent power (the evil eye, the evil mouth) to cause harm to children, cattle, or crops is deeply seated in the collected psyche of many indigenous peoples in India. The community assigns itself the power to punish the alleged witch in a degrading way, such as for example, making her eat human excrement, pulling off her nails, gangraping her and so on.

Such violence on the basis of accusations of witchcraft has a number of causes and consequences. The literature points to struggles to capture land and related property by male relatives, social stress and change, reactions to growing inequality and uneven development through the market, and the reaffirmation of male domination as some causes of witchcraft accusations and persecutions. Most important, however, is the effect of witch persecutions on the formation of a culture and ideology that are not conducive to the development of women and their societies.

It has been argued that ‘the witch is not solely or simply the creation of patriarchy’, and that women are themselves engaged in fantasy, which enables them to speak and manage otherwise fears and desire (Purkiss, 1996: 2). It is likely that women, like men, in many indigenous and rural communities share the belief that the existence of witches makes society weak from within; therefore, witch persecution is justified. However, it is important to note that these treacherous attacks on women accused of being witches come from the immediate surroundings of the village or the home and family, with men in the dominant positions and heads of households. In these cases, women had put their trust in the village/household and worked hard for the people they lived and worked with, as we observed in our case study in Assam.

From this social perspective, the torture or killing of alleged witches is seen as an attempt to find the

person responsible for illness, death, or misfortune in the community. During a discussion, an ojha in the Rabha village in Goalpara district defined witch violence “an act of providing service to the village by eliminating the danger, otherwise the witch would cause further misfortune and deaths in this village... It is because of us that she would no longer be in a position to eat our villagers”. This belief in the ‘evil powers’ of the witch makes witch hunts possible in rural Assam and in other societies too, as observed by Geshiere (2013) in the case of African societies.

The persecution of women as witches has a number of consequences for women’s agency and development in the region. First, in areas where this is widespread, women are inhibited in exercising their agency in economic or other spheres for fear of being accused as witches. Women who do economically better through, for instance, wages from migration, are forced to hide their savings and not invest them in savings locally for fear of eliciting the envy of others, who may be resentful and suspicious of newly acquired assets, good harvests, or livestock. Second, there is the human rights violation of women and their families. Third, there is the general economic loss through destruction of property. Fourth, women are not able to assert their rights to land and other property, as was the case in traditional societies. Fifth, there are substantial costs of treatment associated with the injuries sustained due to the violence perpetrated against women.

Not all accusations end in the continued persecution of the accused woman. There have been some examples of resistance by the accused and their supporters, whether NGOs or family members, as we noted in some ad hoc reporting and in our earlier fieldwork. This study attempts to dive deep into the societal belief in witches, with the objective of strengthening resistance and policies to overcome this most degrading form of violence that is carried out in the name of culture, and to take a step

towards social transformation, where the concerned peoples can cherish an egalitarian system that promotes agency, equality, and dignity for women and other dispossessed groups in their societies.

The National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB) shows that a total of 2,468 murders were committed between 2001 and 2016 in which witch persecution was recorded as the motive. In 2016, 134 persons were killed for supposedly practising witchcraft and were accused of causing the illness or deaths of individuals or harming a family or a community. Table 1 shows the incidence of killings of persons accused as witches during 2001 to 2016; from 2017 onwards, the NCRB does not have specific data on killings due to witch persecution or killings of alleged witches.



Researchers with Usha Rabha, President of the Birubala Mission

Table 1. Incidence of killing (murder and culpable homicide) of persons accused as witches

| States | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2016 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------|
| Andhra Pradesh/ Telangana | 20 | 23 | 38 | 25 | 75 | 26 | 33 | 23 | 27 | 26 | 29 | 24 | 15 | 10 | 19* (8 + 11) |
| Arunachal Pradesh | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Assam | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | - | 0 | 1 |
| Bihar | 1 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 13 | - | 6 | 0 |
| Chhattisgarh | 16 | 4 | 14 | 11 | 9 | 10 | 8 | 15 | 6 | 8 | 17 | 8 | 7 | 16 | 17 |
| Goa | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Gujarat | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 3 | - | 10 | 14 |
| Haryana | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 28 | 34 | 30 | 26 | 32 | 58 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

Table 1. (Contd.) Incidence of killing (murder and culpable homicide) of persons accused as witches

| States | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2016 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Himachal Pradesh | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Jammu & Kashmir | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | 0 |
| Jharkhand | 22 | 28 | 19 | 28 | 26 | 30 | 50 | 52 | 37 | 15 | 36 | 26 | 54 | 47 | 27 |
| Karnataka | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 77 | 0 | - | 0 | 0 |
| Kerala | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Madhya | 13 | 24 | 29 | 14 | 13 | 13 | 14 | 17 | 25 | 18 | 15 | 11 | 11 | 24 | 19 |
| Maharashtra | 6 | 14 | 9 | 4 | 7 | 9 | 14 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 1 | - | 5 | 2 |
| Manipur | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Meghalaya | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 | - | 1 | 2 |
| Mizoram | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Nagaland | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| Orissa | 30 | 39 | 26 | 22 | 25 | 36 | 28 | 23 | 36 | 34 | 41 | 32 | 24 | 32 | 24 |
| Punjab | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | 0 |
| Rajasthan | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Sikkim | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | 0 |
| Tamil Nadu | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | 0 |
| Tripura | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | - | 0 | 0 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | - | 3 | 3 |
| Uttarakhand | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| West Bengal | 13 | 14 | 9 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | - | 1 | 3 |
| Total states | 129 | 153 | 151 | 114 | 197 | 188 | 179 | 176 | 186 | 182 | 242 | 121 | 160 | 156 | 134 |

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2015, 2016).

It must be noted that NCRB data are likely to be an underestimate of the real figures on witch persecution and witch killings. Some cases of such killings may be recorded as having occurred due to land disputes or other conflicts, thus reducing the numbers of killings recorded as due to witch persecution. Further, data on witch killings

do not record other forms of persecution of supposed witches, whether the branding of women as witches, or their brutal torture and the threats women face in their communities. It is only after a woman who is branded as a witch is killed that she would find a place in police records.

Table 2. (Contd.) Witch Hunts Cases in Assam

| District | 2010 | | | | 2011 | | | | 2012 | | | | 2013 | | | | 2014 | | | | 2015 | | | | 2016 | | | | 2017 | | | | 2018 | | | | 2019 | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|-----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|---|------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|--|--|--|
| | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | CR | CS | FR | PI | PA | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kamrup Metro | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Nalbari | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Baksa | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Darrang | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Udalguri | | | | | | 2 | 2 | | | 6 | 2 | 2 | | | 22 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 9 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Biswanath | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Charaideo | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hojai | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Majuli | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| South Salmara | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| West K Anglong | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| City Guwahati | | | | | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hamren | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Assam | 11 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 52 | 29 | 21 | 4 | 149 | 14 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 113 | 16 | 5 | 9 | 92 | 19 | 4 | 3 | 12 | 91 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 2 | 26 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 48 | 11 | 7 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 53 | | | |

CR= Cases Register, CS= Charge Sheet, FR= Final Report, PI= Pending Investigation,

PA= Persons Arrested.

Source: (Table 24.02 to 24.06) O/o the Addl. Director General of Police, C.I.D, Assam.

STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM - 2020

STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM - 2013 (Data from 2010-2011)

Source: (Table 24.02 to 24.06) O/o the Addl. Director General of Police, C.I.D, Assam. STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM – 2020

STATISTICAL HAND BOOK, ASSAM - 2013 (Data from 2010-2011)

Table 2 shows the number of witch hunt cases in Assam's districts. Seven out of 34 have not reported any case in the last decade. We were informed during our fieldwork that people are reluctant to report witch hunt cases to the police or to any government agency. Also, the police do not treat these cases with any seriousness, and it is only when a woman is killed that a case is filed under a section of Indian Penal Code. Further, these figures show that in 2012, 2013 and 2014 the number of people arrested for witch persecution were 113, 92, 91 respectively, and these numbers declined significantly during 2015, 2016, and 2017. It is likely that this occurred because there were a number of campaigns during this period demanding a legal act to prevent witch persecution in the state. Later, as a result of some enforcement of the 2018 Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, the number of cases declined, and there was an increase in the arrest of people engaged in persecution. For example, in 2018 only 11 cases were registered, and 91 arrests made; in 2019, this number of the registered cases was only 7 and 53 arrests made. A general assessment from our interviews showed that that numbers in the official records were an underestimation of the actual cases occurred.

Momoni Saikia and Natyabir Das said that "First it is very difficult to register as cases of witch hunting, and second, if civil society members are not present, the police is reluctant to register cases as witch hunts and would divert cases... In Goalpara itself it will be around 100 cases of witch hunts in the period from 2010-2019, while the data show [the] all-India figure is 105 total cases" (Interview with Aparajita Sharma). The question of low data on the official witch hunt cases was also mentioned by Lawrence Israly (a member of the Legislative Assembly of Assam) in a telephonic discussion with us.

The stylized public punishment of witches (who, in most cases, are women) is carried out by a

dominant coalition of men, with a local *ojha/kabiraj* in the lead. Such a coalition involves two sets of villagers: one that believes in witches and is convinced that they (the villagers) have the right to control village land and resources, and a second set of villagers, including some women, who are driven by their belief in the existence and power of witches to harm children and others. Women too, therefore, fear witches and support the effort to eliminate those accused of practicing witchcraft—or a woman who has dared to defy the social rules of submissiveness and gender norms of dependency and unfreedoms of women.

In numerous cases, the dominant coalition of attackers (or its leader) captures a large economic return by seizing the land and other assets of the woman attacked, driven out or killed as a witch. In some cases, alleged witches run away from the village to escape such organized violence. Importantly, violence against the alleged witches encompasses the use of both threats and acts of torture and killing.

The institutional structures of indigenous peoples in Assam and other indigenous societies in India have 'adherent' social organizations. The role of outside law-enforcing agencies, such as the police and judiciary, are neither fully understood nor accepted in indigenous societies; they adhere to their social organizations and traditional practices. The role of legal institutions to constrain or punish for the use of violence is generally acceptable in 'contractual organizations' which utilize both the state or third-party enforcement of contracts to maintain law and order as well as incentive-compatible agreements among members, such as in a large number of non-indigenous societies in the country. The witches and their power to cause harm and illnesses are embedded in the institutional structures and individual beliefs of the great majority of indigenous peoples.

The capitalist system is shaped by two forces: that of the nation state and the market and that of the individual. The intermediate communities are left out of this analysis, as argued by Raghuram Rajan (2018). In human rights-respecting cultures, it is necessary to recognise the rights of individuals and communities and, more importantly, the rights of women among them. Believers in witchcraft and those accused of being witches all have human rights and are entitled to a culture of dignity. For the former, their belief does not give them right to persecute, torture and kill any woman or man whom they consider to be engaging in witchcraft.

Witch Persecution and Resilience

What were the reasons why and when a woman was declared witch?

In the traditional Rabha belief system, daini puja (the ritual of worshipping a witch) is performed to please a daini so to safeguard crops from insects and to protect people and prevent illnesses like stomach ailments, fever, eye issues and so on. It is believed that people fall sick due to the evil eye of a daini, and that she is also capable of destroying crops and poisoning cattle, thereby

adversely affecting primary livelihoods. A similar belief system exists among the Bodo and other indigenous peoples in Assam. The daini (witch) and the ojha/kabiraj (witch finder and healer) constitute an inseparable part of the everyday rituals of the indigenous culture and the traditional knowledge system. The daini, who symbolizes evil, is mostly a woman from a marginalized household in the village. Her powerlessness is further exploited by the ojha (mostly male), by branding her a witch. In the 19 cases we collected information on during our study, the primary reasons for which the women were accused as witches were: conflict over land/property, jealousy, prolonged illness of someone in the village, spiritual possession (deu utha) and others. In most cases, it was found that there was more than one reason for such allegations, which not only violated the basic human dignity of the alleged witches, but further marginalized them. They were subjected to violence and trauma through torture and indignities such as hair-pulling, the pulling out of nails, being forced to eat human excreta and being driven out of the village to live a life of seclusion and insult. The women narrated these stories to us with tearful eyes and in choked voices.



Authors' discussion in Heera Rabha's house

Table 3: Reasons for women being branded as witches

| Name of the alleged witch | Ethnicity | District & Block | Reasons she was branded a witch | Who branded her | Role of ojha/kabiraj/deodhani | Year |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--|---|---|-----------------|
| Anima Basumatary | Bodo | Goalpara, Kosdhowa | Anima's husband works in the BSF and is well-paid. She is a good weaver and has educated her daughters. This caused jealousy . | A woman (Gita Khaklary) who had a love affair with Anima's husband | Gita's father was an ojha. However, Anima consulted another ojha who said she was not a daini but asked her to compromise rather than going to the police. | 12 January 2015 |
| Dukhuli Daimary | Bodo | Goalpara, Kosdhowa | Prolonged illness of the niece and jealousy of the accused owing to her popularity in the community | Brother-in-law's daughter/niece | Consulted an ojha | 2009 |
| Gavary Basumatary | Bodo | Kokrajhar, Bismuri | Spreading illness (fever) in the village and political rivalry between supporters of Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) | Villagers | An ojha was not consulted but political groups mobilized the local people. | August 2016 |
| Putuli Basumatary | Bodo | Kokrajhar/ Bismuri | The stepson wanted to take over the land and house and the daughter of an alleged daini/stepson's wife fell ill after birth of her first child. | Stepson | The stepson consulted an ojha for his wife's illness and before the ojha said anything, he started calling his mother a dayni, to which the ojha also agreed. | 2019 |
| Masi Brahma | Bodo | Kokrajhar /Nayek Goan | Land and control over resources like a well | A neighbour whose land shares a boundary with the accused's land | The neighbour themselves performed a puja to cure the illness. | 2018 |
| Rabiram Narzary | Bodo | Kokrajhar/Bismuri | A boy died during an accident suffered while playing football in the field opposite his house. | The boy's family | The dead boy's family consulted a deodhani who accused Rabiram of being a witch and causing the death. | 2017 |
| Deepali Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara, Baijiana | Jealousy of an ojha and the failing health conditions of a woman living next door | A neighbour who was suffering from prolonged illness after miscarrying her second child | Deepali Rabha who is a deodhani performed puja/rituals in the ojha's house. The ojha whom the neighbour consulted was jealous of Tapan ojha's popularity. | 2021 |

Table 3: (Contd.) Reasons for women being branded as witches

| Name of the alleged witch | Ethnicity | District & Block | Reasons she was branded a witch | Who branded her | Role of ojha/kabiraj/deodhani | Year |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------------------|---|---|--|------------|
| Heera Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara, Krishnai | Resentment over her agency/management skills and capabilities and of property and familial relations. She is also a vegetable vendor and doing well. | Villagers, mostly young men. The village elders supported. Heera. | An ojha was consulted. | April 2011 |
| Jumila Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara, Kosdhowa | The sister-in-law wanted to seize her land and property. Jumila used to worship the god Shiva for peace of mind, and this became another reason for accusing her of practicing witchcraft. | Sister-in-law | An ojha was not consulted, but neighbours were mobilized. | 2015 |
| Kamaleshwari Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara, Krishnai | Associating with a dayni in her village and causing illness | Villagers | An ojha was consulted. | 2014 |
| Khedai Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/Kosdhowa | Independence of thinking: Khedai refused to marry her daughter to her neighbour's son. | Newly married wife of the neighbour's son who was seen under the spell of possession. | An ojha was consulted. | 2001 |
| Megheshwari Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/Krishnai | Jealousy of her popularity and good weaving skills and the prolonged illness of a neighbour, premature death of a girl in the same household. | Neighbours | An ojha was consulted. | 2007 |
| Pudumi Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/kosdhowa | Second wife to a man who gave her a separate house. The first wife and friends were jealous of her. The first wife wanted to take over the house and property . | Neighbour who was apparently her best friend | An ojha was consulted. | 2006 |
| Pakhi Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/Kosdhowa | Everyone was jealous of her weaving skills, income, property, and her adopted children who were attending convent schools. | Neighbours; a newly married woman in the neighbourhood was possessed | No ojha was consulted, but a statement was made by a neighbouring woman who was seen as possessed by a spirit. | 2009 |

Table 3: (Contd.) Reasons for women being branded as witches

| Name of the alleged witch | Ethnicity | District & Block | Reasons she was branded a witch | Who branded her | Role of ojha/kabiraj/deodhani | Year |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------------|--|--|---|------|
| Raneshwari Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/Lakhipur | A stepdaughter wanted to take over land and property . She was also jealous of her stepmother's popularity | Stepdaughter | Did not consult an ojha but mobilized local people. | 2005 |
| Bibha Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/Kosdhowa | Illness of a neighbour | Neighbour's family | An ojha was consulted to treat the illness. | 2005 |
| Buduli Rabha | Rabha | Goalpara/Lakhipur | Unconventional religious practices . She worshipped Mansa Devi and offered sacrifices to Shiva. | Husband | Did not consult an ojha but mobilized villagers. | 2019 |
| Basanti Barman | Raj Bongshi | Goalpara, Jaleswar | Conflict over land | Her brother-in-law and nephew wanted to seize her land after the death of her husband. | Did not consult an ojha. | 2012 |
| Jyotsna Rai | Raj Bongshi | Kokrajhar, Dotoma | Jyotsna's husband is differently abled and his family wanted to remove his claim to the family land and property . The villagers were jealous of her capable management of the family resources, and of her children doing well. The brother-in-law and neighbour also had a sexual interest in her. | Villagers and brother-in-law | Did not consult an ojha. | 2010 |

Land and Property: An analysis of the above 19 cases shows that in all the cases there were multiple reasons for branding the women as witches: in 7 cases a conflict over land and property was the primary reason, while in 6 it was causing illness and in another 4 cases jealousy was the primary reason. In one case, unconventional ritual practice was the reason and in another a woman's capability and assertion of independence was the reason. Conflict over land and property emerged as the primary reason among our interviews. Elsewhere in a study of 5 states (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Telangana) it was noted that of the 122 witch persecution cases, 42 were related to grabbing land from the women who were persecuted as witches (Kelkar & Nathan, 2020:72).

The other two factors that emerged in branding the witch were a woman's assertion of independence, if she was seen as capable in making her own decisions and decisions for her family and resources. Heera Rabha's response to our question: "What do you think was the reason for calling you a witch?" said, "I am taking good care of everyone in the family, including my stepdaughters and mother-in-law. My husband left drinking after he married me. Both my husband and I work hard and earn well and also help others in times of ill-treatment from their own family". Heera Rabha had to face tremendous difficulty after her neighbour called her a witch. Heera helped her neighbour's mother-in-law and also managed her resources well. She did not indulge in consuming alcohol or drugs. She was a vegetable vendor and used to sell vegetables in the market. Her neighbours were jealous of her and regarded her as very successful in business and a good manager of resources. During a trance ritual of being possessed by Bunbahi Devi, a woman named Heera a witch. An ojha was called, and he validated the claim of the woman who made the accusation. However, some elders in the

village supported Heera and settled the matter in Heera's favour. Nonetheless, Heera and her family went through torture. In other case, Jyotsna Rai explained how she struggled against the takeover of her land and property and resisted the sexual advances of her brother-in-law (husband's older brother) when her husband was away working in Kerala in 2017. Jyotsna's case shows women's resilience and resistance against the community led persecution of women as witches. During this struggle she did seek help from the police and a lawyer, who provided only 'half-hearted support'—the attacks on her have continued. Now the matter of land seizure will be decided in court and both Jyotsna and her husband are together in this legal battle.

Historically, both the Rabha and Bodo (partially) societies were matrilineal societies which over decades have transformed into patriarchal societies. In this transition, women's control over land and property has become a contested issue. Women held important positions in matrilineal cultures; they treated illness, predicted the future and acted as intermediaries between the common people and forest spirits. With the switch to patrilineal and patrilocal systems, this traditional knowledge was met with social disapproval. Such women were not trusted but rather feared and avoided in order to keep common women and men free from harm and illness. Women's roles as healers who used salt and herbs to treat illness and in land management was forcibly taken away by men, and women were relegated to a position of caregiving at home and made economically and otherwise dependent on men. When they tried to argue for their earlier rights in the fields of knowledge and resource control, they were denounced as having evil power and persecuted and killed (for detailed case studies on Thailand and Malaysia, see Kelkar Nathan and Walter, 2003).

A major feature of this belief system is that witches cannot be stopped once their deeds are set in motion. Hence, they need to be physically eliminated. In the 7 cases in which land was the primary reason for branding a woman a witch, it was noted that woman often faced the predicament of being branded a witch after the death of their husbands, as was evident in the case of Basanti Barman and Jumila Rabha. In the case of Jyotsna Rai, the husband was seen vulnerable and suffering from some chronic illness or physical disability and the child was also suffering from some infirmity. Therefore, the likelihood of branding the wife/mother as a witch increased. In such cases, branding a woman as a witch forces them to leave the village and attacker (in most cases a close relative), who can then possess their land/ property conveniently. In the cases of Raneshwari Rabha and Putuli Basumatary (a Bodo woman), their stepchildren didn't want to share property and land with their stepmother, leading to a horrifying tale of witch hunting. In the case of Masi Brahma, her neighbour had the ulterior motive of wanting to

take control of her property. So, she was branded a witch and every effort was made to force her and her family out of the village.

Land is a key resource for subsistence. Ownership and control of land gives women (or men) recognition as full members of a family and community, and the freedom to decide one's life path and choices. In the change from matriliney to patriliney and a patriarchal social system, women's independence, so necessary for the exercise of their voice and agency, was lost. Women lost the status of being landowners/controllers and became dependent on men for their day-to-day needs. This transition also changed social norms and became part of everyone's belief system, establishing and reinforcing patriarchy and disallowing women freedom, inheritance rights, and resource control. Any transgression of these social rules made a woman a likely candidate to be branded a witch and punished in brutal ways for daring to act in a way that was not in accordance with indigenous cultures (for more analysis on land rights, see Kelkar and Krishnaraj, 2012).

Box. 1

Masi Brahma

Masi Brahma lived with her parents and brother. They worshipped Shiva and Kali (a god and a goddess). There was a well in Masi's house and the water from the well would overflow and block the passage to the neighbour's premises. Their next-door neighbour was a local healer who earned a living through the use of tantra/mantra (ritual chanting). Many patients who came for solutions or treatment to the local ojha's house complained about the water logging in the passage, and it affected the ojha's business. During Kali Puja, the neighbours took the water logging as a reason to brand Masi Brahma a daini. Their ulterior motive was to grab her land and property and force her out of the village. Two villagers attending the puja in a highly intoxicated state barged into Masi Brahma's house and asked the father to drink with them. When he refused, they took out a khukri (a sharp dagger) and tried to kill him. Masi and her father had to run for their lives as the villagers kept shouting "Kill those dainis". The next day, they were forced to accept that they were dainis in a public meeting and also light 3 lamps (jewari) in front of ►

the idols of Shiva and Kali in a public temple. Although the lamps were lit without difficulty (it is a belief that a lamp would not light if she was a daini), the villagers called a car, forced them to get into it and gave directions to the driver to drop them somewhere far away from the village. Masi and her family kept pleading for mercy, but the villagers threatened them to kill them if they didn't leave the village. Local villagers even attacked the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) office when some students tried to help Masi and her father.



Jealousy: This is a major reason for which women are branded as witches and tortured mercilessly. Anima Basumatary faced the trauma of being branded a witch due to her husband's love affair with another woman (Geeta) who, out of jealousy, accused her of being a witch. Geeta approached an ojha and, in a trance during which she was possessed, branded Anima a witch. If Anima

were made to leave the village, Geeta could live with Anima's husband. The ojha validated the allegation and the village believed it. Anima faces the trauma of being called a witch even today, and her educated daughters are finding it difficult to get married, as they are seen as likely to be witches as well. Pudumi Rabha faced torture after she was branded a witch out of jealousy by her neighbour.

Box. 2

Pudumi Rabha



Pudumi and Tiki Rabha were friends and used to stay in the same neighbourhood. One day Tiki Rabha invited an ojha to perform jara phuka (a ritual performed by an ojha to ward off an evil spell on the patient). Tiki Rabha suffered from

bloating due to a stomach illness (pet phula). The ojha during the process identified the cause of the disease as a daini who had cast an evil spell on her. Tiki Rabha named her friend Pudumi as the witch. On hearing this, the villagers barged into Pudumi's house and dragged her by her hair across the village in the late evening. Her husband managed to escape. She had two children, one a 3-month old and the other a 2.5 year-old son, who were seen clinging to her side. The Goan Burha (village head) asked them not to run in this manner, and the villagers then dragged her to the deep dark Maikuwa jungle and tried to kill her and her two children. But she managed to run away.



Medicinal Plants at Madhav ojha's House

Illness: Unable to pay for medical services, villagers usually consult ojhas, although we were told that an ojha also charges a 'hefty amount' for his services. Lack of health infrastructure and lack of transport facilities make people visit ojhas/kabirajs to be cured of their illnesses. Besides, there is also a strong belief in the medicinal value of local herbs and plants and illness is largely seen as a result of an evil eye or witchcraft. This occurs in remote villages far away from block or district health centres and without any transport facilities. Deepali Rabha, a deodhani¹ herself, was alleged to be a witch by another deodhani, who was apparently known to be associated with a more powerful ojha in the village or in another village was engaged in treatment of the illness of her neighbour, who became weak after a miscarriage.

We learnt in the field that branding of women as witches becomes intensified during the rainy season, owing to the sudden onset of water-borne diseases like diarrhea, malaria, jaundice that have

serious consequences and can be fatal. So, women are alleged to be witches and made responsible for causing these illnesses and deaths. The actual problem is that 97% of water sources are not safe for drinking and the nearest Primary Health Centre is approximately 15 km away from the villages. (Gita Bhattacharya, one of the key informants who was formerly the Director of the Assam Mahila Samaita Society).

Women are thus branded as witches not on the basis of on any evidence but simply on allegations validated through tantra/mantras (ritual of chanting) performed by an ojha. In some cases, though fewer in number, people inflict physical and torture and harassment on the alleged witch even without an ojha playing any role in it. As a result, the woman has to live with the humiliation all her life, and this often translates into the intergenerational exclusion of her daughters/sons and their continued humiliation in the local community, as the 'children of a witch' are considered likely to be witches too.

1. A woman assistant to the ojha or kabiraj, who assists the ojha during shamanistic dance (called ojhapalli) in Assam. In solo or group performance, comprising 3 to 4 women, this dance is associated with the worship of snake goddess Mansa. Generally, a deodhani dances to the song sung by the ojha.

Box. 2

Megheswari Rabha,

Megheswari Rabha, who was accused of being a witch multiple times, is living a life of shame and humiliation. First, her neighbour, who was ill, called Megheswari a witch with the help of the local ojha. This was followed by accusations from a school-going girl who saw Megheshwari moving 'headless', on the street and then another woman who developed some illness and started having hallucinations of Megheshwari. Following this, Megheshwari was tortured, paraded naked, and forced to leave the village. During our interview, she repeatedly said she is waiting for the last day of her life; even after her death the villagers will not allow her to use the public graveyard, and she will have to be cremated in her own backyard.



Men as Witches

Among the 19 alleged witches is Rabiram Narzary, a Bodo who was branded a witch. During a local match at the football ground in front of his house, the ball hit the head of a young player who died as a result of his injury. On the tenth day after his death, a deodhani announced that Rabiram was a witch who was responsible for the death of the young man. The villagers barged into Rabiram's house and started beating and kicking him. Somehow, he managed to inform the police and he was saved by the police's intervention. Although Rabiram is now allowed to live in his house, nobody from the community, including his brother, is allowed to interact with him. Unsupported and isolated, Rabiram has become almost voiceless; his stepson calls his mother a daini and gives no support to the family.

In an earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan 2020) we

noted that men are usually branded as witches for three reasons:

- 1) When a man is seen to oppose witch branding and is actively engaged in protecting his wife or another member of the family from torture;
- 2) When the household has accumulated wealth and refuses to share this with community or relate to the community on equal terms in communal dancing, drinking etc; and
- 3) When a man is engaged in accumulation through exploiting others of his community. We were not able to get much information from Rabiram, except that he himself believes in the concept of a witch and her evil power. We may make an intelligent guess that he thinks that young player died in front of his house because of an unidentified witch's spell on him.

The Ojha: Power and Influence

Our field investigations showed that the ojha or kabiraj is a key player in the entire witch persecution complex. There is, of course, the role of conflict relating to land/property, illness, jealousy of the accused on the part of the aggrieved person, which is supported by rumour and a belief in the evil designs of witches. However, in the end, it is the ojha or kabiraj who is called upon to identify an alleged witch. Although he avoids directly naming a person in most cases, he uses his skills to indicate a definite person, mostly a widowed, single, unsupported woman, as the witch who has caused illness or harm. He also suggests using tools such as a fishnet and a needle to poke the entire body of the woman in order to get a confession from her that she is the witch. Once she has confessed, she is then likely to be tortured in brutal and inhuman ways, including making her eat human excreta,

pulling out her nails, and gangraping and parading her naked throughout the community. All these acts are done publicly, with the community's approval, and under the direct or indirect supervision of the ojha/kabiraj.

During our interviews with an ojha in a village in Goalpara district, he explained that “witches are part of our kusanskar (negative culture) and parampara (tradition). People believe in this culture and don't question it”. Ojhas are supposed to be the protectors of culture and meant to protect the people from any misfortune as well as foretell untoward incidents.

In another village of Goalpara district, we met Kabiram, a popular 63-year-old ojha (name changed to protect identity), who shared with us his knowledge of how he identified witches.

Box. 4

Ojha Kabiram

Yes, there are many witches in these villages. We know how to identify the evil spell of a daini on a patient. In most cases, a patient would shout and yell loudly about her/his illness. This illness is different from others; and the patient seems to be under a spell, which only an ojha and kabiraj can identify. In such a case the ojha/kabiraj will hold the little finger and toes of the feet and press them hard for a while. This will make the patient shout even more than before. Then we will cover the patient with a fishnet (Jaal dhario) and then hold the ear. Thereafter the patient will say if she has been possessed by a daini or not. The ojha alone cannot do anything. They do it in consultation with the villagers. These things cannot be done alone.

In our village, one woman was identified as a witch and killed. She ate the kaleja (liver) of a girl and killed her. Then we caught hold of the daini and chased her out of the village. If we get to know that someone is a daini, we destroy her house, seize her property, torture her, and chase her out of the village, then she is killed.

It was me who identified that the girl was killed by a daini in the village, she was found sleeping in a room on a mat covered with a cloth. When the villagers came to see me and narrated the incident, I went (as kabiraj) with them and found a woman who was made to confess that she did eat the liver of the girl and killed her. She was old and abandoned by her family. Now the villagers use her land for agriculture. The daini is a pishachi/rakyoh (demon); she knows ►

the mantra (chant) through which she eats the liver. She consumes only human beings... Only a kabiraj/ojha can identify a daini. Sometimes, a deodhani also knows how to identify a daini. We get more cases during the rainy season.

He added that there are witches who cannot be identified by present-day ojhas. Earlier, ojhas who were learned and led a pious life knew how to do it. He said there were instances when he was young many ojhas would kill daini (witches). But now they do it for money if they are unable to cure a particular patient. It is all fake. People are illiterate and they believe the ojha or anyone who brands someone as a daini.

Contradicting himself, he added "My main work is to cure illness... I don't know how to identify a daini... I perform Mansa pooja (a ritual of chanting mantras and villages come with

offerings to Mansa Devi, the snake goddess, for 3 nights and 3 days and perform ojhapalli dance and sometimes with deodhani (women who assist ojhas and go through trance during this ritual)...I can treat and cure jaundice, fever, piles, paralysis, breathing problem, insomnia, stammering, arthritis, etc. I was trained to be a kabiraj by my father-in-law, who also trained me in how to make medicines, combining a number of herbs. I do pooja every Tuesday and Saturday and after that I prepare medicines. It is God who helps me in curing many people with different illnesses.

He also mentioned that during the last rainy season, he had slipped and hurt his back and got treatment from a medical doctor. When we asked him why he did not treat himself, he answered that, this would take a lot of effort in making the required medicine.

The preceding discussion with the ojha shows:

First, the charge of being a witch is made possible by rumours and gossip that create a social environment in which a person can be branded a witch, as discussed in Stewart and Strathern (2004). When the ojha is brought in to identify an alleged witch, the identity of the woman to be charged for causing harm or illness (and therefore the witch) is already known in the community, and this charge does not require any evidence of actual harm or causing a person to become ill or die. The ojha Kabiram himself said "I have never seen a witch in person".

Second, making of the allegation that someone is a witch is a matter of belief and does not require

any concrete evidence of the so-called witch's evil deeds.

Third, what causes witch persecution is the growth of structural capitalist relations connected to patriarchy, and the male desire for control over land and resources. In the uncertainty of poor health conditions and economic situation, what was relatively stable in egalitarian societies with women's rights to land and forests (though only user rights like that of men too). In this situation, cultural beliefs have become a tool for the oppression and exploitation of women and marginalised groups, resulting in stronger capitalist relations that favour patriarchal forces becoming dominant in societies that were relatively egalitarian in the past.

Indigenous Beliefs in Witches

The belief that illness, death, and misfortune are caused by the wilful interventions of individuals with special powers or magical knowledge is pervasive throughout Assam. As a result, belief in witchcraft exerts a powerful influence on many aspects of day-to-day life; this becomes a significant vector for community-approved witch violence. Furthermore, rather than declining thanks to modern education and exposure, belief in witchcraft is proving to be resilient, with research-based data claiming that belief in witchcraft and the accompanying violence against witches are increasing. Elsewhere, a study by one of the authors (Govind Kelkar) noted three conditions for this belief to result in witch hunts. These are: “first, the belief that these are human beings who cause harm to others; second, the idea that such harm can be caused by those who have acquired supernatural means and can use these supernatural means; and third, that there is collective/community acceptance of action against witches, that is persecution of witches or witch hunts” (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020:25).

Belief in the existence of witches is mirrored in the popular story ‘Pita Lubhiya Daini Burhi’, in which a young boy is attacked by a daini who likes eating pitha (a popular snack in Assam). To keep him safe from the daini, the mother of the boy teaches him a mantra/formula that involves mixing some mustard seeds, a strand of a woman’s hair, dried chillies, and a hen’s feathers into the pitha and then cooking the pitha over an open flame. The boy is praised for his strength and courage in driving away the daini from the village (Rabha, 2003).

Another myth is the ojha’s ability to wield power through a ‘ban mantra’, i.e., hitting a person with an invisible arrow to make him unconscious. The ojha uses this invisible arrow on his enemies or the people who question his magical power during

the ritual of Mansa Devi. During the course of this ritual, a deodhani who is spiritually possessed falls into a trance and may predict something about the village or villagers. This is considered a message from a supernatural power and is beyond the purview of any questions. These are some of the ways through which an ojha/kabiraj can establish his power and influence in Rabha and Bodo societies (authors’ interview with Usha Rabha). People’s faith in a deodhani is also seen during the ojhapalli dance, as well as in their willingness to go to a deodhani for their knowledge of medicinal herbs to cure people of various kinds of illness and impending harm to cattle and farms.

Birubala, who was recently honoured with a Padma Shri award by the Government of India



Birubala Rabha

for her efforts to end belief in witchcraft and the associated violence against those accused of being witches, stated during our meeting with us that “Bishashes kore, manu rahe daini ase, puja kore, nedekhae bishashes kore (There is strong belief in our community that witches exist, there is need to brand them and chase them away through performing puja/rituals)”. The belief is there, even though nobody has seen a witch.

Birubala herself was branded a witch when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Also, she gave birth to a son with some physical infirmity. She has challenged the community by saying, “If I was a witch, he would have been killed by me. But he is perfectly fine and doing well in life.” When she refuted the claim that witches exist during a public meeting, she was threatened with being cast out from her community. However, she continued to live in the community and refused to accept that she was a witch or that witches exist. Belief in the witches is learnt through books and also from previous generations. In her work on the Rabha and Bodo peoples, Kashyap explains this social system of witch hunts as “structural injustice, based on rumours and gossip in everyday life. The role of youth in the entire system of victimization and acting as the major force to supply the punishment goes to extent where they decide upon the death penalty of the alleged victim. Through these actions of torture and death, the youth seemed to have managed to flip their position of subordination into a powerful weapon to shape the truth to their own will” (Kashyap, 2018:84).

Putuli Basumatary, a Bodo woman from Kokrajhar said, “There is no logic in the belief about witches. If someone is called a witch, they will not leave her. My mother was called a witch, and today my stepson is calling me a witch. I raised him like my own son”. Another Bodo woman from Goalpara district said, “People in our Bodo community believe in witchcraft, and they will kill or force [people] to leave the village. It is widely believed in our culture. I had to abscond for almost a week,

otherwise the villagers would have killed me. Even now many in the village don’t like my participation in the social activities of the village” (Anima Basumatary).

Illness and misfortune are generally understood as having not only natural causes but also social causes, and the exercise of witch branding is to find out who is responsible. But why are almost all witches women?

Belief in witchcraft thrives on a patriarchal platform; in many cases women were branded as witches owing to their increased assertiveness or agency and increased economic control. (Drucker-Brown, 1993; Kelkar and Nathan 2020). Furthermore, as a result of changing gender relations owing to economic growth and capitalist systems, men feel they are losing control over resources because of the instability of land and property in newly introduced capitalist relations in indigenous societies. Neighbours and family members become a threatening force, whether as instigators themselves or through the strength of other instigators, and function as inactive spectators of brutality and murders of the alleged witches.

The reasons for witch hunts in the majority of cases we have described were related to struggles over gender relations. Indigenous ways of thinking and their myths and stories have created two categories of human beings: women, any of whom could be a witch, and men who are witch finders, albeit not all men but only some who have knowledge of mantras and training from an ojha/kabiraj. Women who transgress gender boundaries or manifest their agency are in danger of being branded and presented as witches.

Legal Dimensions to the Belief in Witches

India has the largest recorded number of witch persecution cases. The country also has the largest number of states with specific laws in place to prevent witch hunts. These have been enacted in

addition to the Indian Penal Code. States that have laws to prevent witch hunts include Bihar (1999), Jharkhand (2001), Chhattisgarh (2005), Odisha (2013), Rajasthan (2015), and Assam (2015 which became effective in 2018). The Assam Act, called the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act made witch persecution non-bailable, cognizable, and non-compoundable. The act was reported to be good in the sense that it could lead to a reduction in the witch violence. However, some, like Shankar Prasad Bhattacharjee, an advocate at the High Court in Guwahati, Assam, have expressed doubts over its legislative effectiveness saying “how can a deep-rooted social practice be challenged by law... people who practice witch hunts are so blind to the fact that until and unless you make some effort to enlighten them about laws and the consequences of their actions, I don’t think there will be any effect”.

Admittedly, little work has been carried out on the impact of the new law on the prevalence of witch hunts in Assam. Our discussions with key persons who have worked on witch violence in India suggested that anti-witch persecution laws did not have any discernible impact on beliefs and the practice of witch hunts (PLD, 2015). One exception in these interviews is Usha Rabha, who is in charge of the Birubala Mission office in Goalpara. She spoke of four cases of attempted witch persecution which were registered under the anti-witch violence law of Assam. We also noticed fear of legal punishment among ojhas and kabiraj, who, while narrating stories of finding witches, would in the same breath would tell us “I am not engaged in any of the witch finding activities, such activities of witch finding and persecution were carried out by others... I would not like to name any of them.” Clearly, the ojhas are no longer as powerful as they were in the years prior to the passing of the anti-witch hunting law in Assam.

In the year 2000, in response to the killing of 5 persons on suspicion of being witches in

Thaigarguri village in Kokrajhar, the Government of Assam instituted a community policing project called Prahari. The objective was to prevent social conflict and to eradicate superstitions and belief in witch hunts, black magic, etc. The project worked to reduce poverty, illiteracy, and lack of awareness of modern healthcare in several districts of Assam including Jorhat, Dheemaji, Morigaon, Dhubri, Sibsagar, Hailakandi, and Kokrajhar. The project also offered community training in fishery and mushroom cultivation, created drinking water facilities and, most importantly, ran campaigns and workshops against witch hunts and formed Mahila Samitis (women’s councils) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the countryside.

An evaluation study conducted by the OKD Institute of Social Change and Development noted in conclusion: “Without doubt, [the] Prahari initiative is providing a platform to launch a proactive strategy against social prejudices through collective campaigns [and has] had definite positive impact on people’s overall attitudes towards superstitions belief systems. This was reflected in [a] reduction of witch hunting cases in the Prahari village” (Prahari, 2016:36). Nevertheless, these changes were limited, and the project could not sustain the momentum of change (ibid: 35) especially in areas affected by militancy, where the task became compounded. The police’s time and energies were needed to deal with militancy and insurgency in these areas of Assam and the organic connection with the Prahari project was lost or replaced with having to deal with insurgency and other social conflicts.

The ABSU (All Bodo Students Union) has also played a critical role and conducted many awareness campaigns in villages where the status of women is low due to illiteracy and confinement to their village and home. We were told by Khanindra Basumatray that Council Chief Pramod Boro has been taking action against witch hunting from his days in ABSU.

Box. 5

Khanindra Basumatary, General Secretary, ABSU, narrated:

The belief in witches and that witches should be killed is not only common among the villagers or among people with low literacy but also among educated people. I remember being told by a science teacher, I will also start believing in witches after I get married and have kids. So, the belief that witches exist is very deep rooted in the society. However, as ABSU we have done a lot of work to stop the practice of witch hunting. I remember in Chirang there was a case where an old woman and man were killed after an ojha named them as witches. It didn't end there, they also performed shradha (last rites) of the couple. The ojha refused of doing anything and after pressurizing him to tell the truth, he confessed that he did it for money. Sometimes the patients give him money and, in this case, too some villagers gave him money. The ojha was arrested and imprisoned in this case. In another case, a brother called his brother as daini and killed him for property. The villagers believed the accused and the case was brought to the ABSU very late. In another case a person was suffering from a bulge in the leg and stomach due to high sugar. An ojha branded a woman as a witch and made her responsible for his condition. Once a woman is branded a witch by someone and by the ojha,

then people believe that woman has to be a witch and will try their best to kill her.

Along with the police, we have organized many awareness campaigns. I myself have been part of many awareness campaigns. Witch branding is also used as a tool for personal or political gains. You will also find this in the villages that due to jealousy, hatred, greed for land property, this belief of simple people is exploited. However, as ABSU organises campaigns whenever possible, it is our prime agenda to stop the practice of witch hunting. We as ABSU give full support to the Pahari Project to end witch hunts. Police at the higher positions cooperate but at the lower level, cases of witch hunts are set aside as unimportant matters. We are committed to the cause of ending witch hunts as it is based on superstition and innocent people are killed, mostly vulnerable and weak women. If a woman is considered beautiful or seen doing good work, then out of jealousy also she is likely to be branded a witch.

During recent election campaign, wherever ABSU addressed meetings, ending the practice of witch hunts was one of the prime issues. Cases have come down but a lot of work needs to be done. Health and educational infrastructures are very poor in this Bodo region. Many people come up with health problems and there is no money to buy medicines

The Assam Women's Commission has also conducted awareness campaigns against witch hunts in villages. Although people have understood that women are branded as witches by ojhas to further personal interests or the interests of the family members or other known persons, continued belief in the existence of witches haunts alleged witches and makes them live in fear. As

Masi Brahma from Debargoan in Kokrajhar (who was branded a witch in 2016) said "I don't believe in witches and will never brand any woman as a witch, but people in the village do. They killed a woman some 15 years back after branding her as a witch".

In a number of cases, due to the intervention of the ABSU, villagers were unable to kill the alleged

witches and they continued living in their own villages. This was also seen in Goalpara among the Rabha people. The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council supported the fight against witch hunts and provided land for the Birubala Mission office to help spread awareness of witch hunts. So, although the passing of the Act against witch hunting is still to be translated into concrete action, it has been a boon for civil society workers. Bhumika Rai (from WinG-Women in Governance Team) explained: “It was very difficult before [the] coming of the law to work in the field as we were mostly mediators between two conflicting parties, and anybody would question our intention. It is largely believed in the villages that once branded a witch [a woman] will have to be treated like an outcast and cannot continue living with the villagers. Helping an alleged daini was risky for us and the villagers failed to understand our perspective. Sometimes they were also violent towards us. With the enactment of the law, it may become easier for us to establish that there are no witches and branding anyone as a witch is a criminal act”.

Conclusion: What Women Say to the State and Community

In India and other countries affected by the witch violence, courts have reduced the sentences of the perpetrators of violence on the grounds of a person’s (or of a community’s) belief in witchcraft. For example, the Calcutta High Court verdict of 18 October 2018, commuted a sentence of execution to imprisonment. While we do not support barbaric death sentences, we do question the sentence being reduced on the grounds of the accused’s cultural belief. In our discussions with witch violence survivors, women have a different idea of cultural justice from the persons who engaged in the torture and /or killing of the so-called witches. As Padma Shri awardee Chhutni Devi of Jharkhand, who was branded a witch by her husband and driven out of the home and village said, “the use of culture or belief in a legal system is nonsense... what

we propose is the use of concrete evidence. The perpetrators of witch hunts have to show us the evidence of our engagement in witchcraft”.

Likewise, in our interviews with witch violence survivors in Rabha and Bodo villages of Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts, women unequivocally stated the need for realising the cultural rights of everyone, and the importance of dignity and non-discrimination in community life. Geeta Bhattacharya, a leading member of the Assam Mahila Samata Society said, “If a community is not made sensitive about the human rights of women, it is difficult to end this practice of witch violence... Police is not ready to take-up their cases, the cases of witch violence... Only enacting a law is not enough, it has to be implemented and made enforceable without bringing in matters of indigenous belief and culture”.

Earlier research (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020) and our field research in Assam show that the socio-economic context of indigenous societies in India has changed from a non-accumulative to an accumulative economy (Xaxa, 2005; 2016). In the current economic transformation, we notice a paradox of increased hegemonic masculinity and women’s increased struggles against this hegemonic masculinity. Our discussions with the concerned thinkers suggest that the state-instituted enforceable measures are needed to institute a rights-based approach that embraces the dignity and equality of women. Usha Rabha, the President of Birubala Mission suggested a 4-point solution to eliminate witch persecution:

1. Building community awareness against the socio-cultural belief in witches.
2. Setting up decentralised healthcare infrastructure with attention to the reproductive concerns of women and girls and endemic fever, malaria etc. Make it so that ojhas are no longer powerful to validate the cause of an illness. We would like to add to this that

allegations of “cholera witches” in the present-day state of Chhattisgarh in the 1870s and 1880s were neutralised through easy access to affordable medicines for cholera (Macdonald 2021; Harrison 2019) as well as increased understanding among people that cholera is caused by unclean water and can be treated with oral rehydration.

3. Bringing in change in primary school textbooks through stories that say witchcraft and witches do not exist. This will help the new generation grow up in an egalitarian, gender-sensitive culture.
4. Building the capabilities of indigenous women and girls, with attention to human rights-respecting culture and scientific thinking, as well as new production technologies and gender-responsive egalitarian relations. These capability building efforts can be accompanied by women’s unmediated rights to land/property, and housing, making women economically independent and enabling them to live with dignity and the freedom to make decisions.

Individual jealousy over accumulation of resources or a collective frenzy to free society from the adverse effects of witchcraft are embedded in a belief system that views women as occupying a subordinate yet manipulative position, with no agency in decision making and ritual practices. Any potential transgression of these gender norms is likely to cause harm through death or disaster for the social group or the family in which these women live.

The role of the state in providing unmediated productive assets and resource-based equality and dignity to indigenous and rural women, social security, and freedom from fear of violence in domestic and public spaces is crucial in the attempt to overcome the issue of witch persecution and witch hunts. More important, however, is the withering away of beliefs in witchcraft through legal changes and by instituting policy and practice aimed at doing away with misogyny in social norms and imparting dignity to women in individual and collective attitudes.

A policy change in the belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft is also needed. Norms based on such beliefs can change through political measures to promote indigenous and rural women’s engagement with elevated socio-political tasks and roles. It is important to recognise that a structure of gender norms has internal dynamics of change, undermining the present patterns in gendered roles. Some mediating factors in this potential change can be access and control of technology, such as mobile phones, television, etc. There is a need to institute women’s resource rights to land and forests and recognise forces of gender-specific democratization brought about by the women’s movements, campaigns against the notion of persons acquiring evil powers and good examples of resilience and resistance against the belief in witchcraft and of women who successfully fought against being branded and persecuted as witches.

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Appendix 1

Districts Goalpara and Kokrajhar in Assam

Interviews with women survivors of witch violence conducted in August-September 2021

| S. No. | Alleged Witches | Community | Ojha |
|--------|---------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Heera Rabha (G) | Rabha | Tapan Ojha |
| 2 | Bibha Rabha (G) | Rabha | Madhav Barman Ojha |
| 3 | Raneshwari Rabha (G) | Rabha | Kabiram Ojha |
| 4 | Khedai Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 5 | Buduli Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 6 | Pakhi Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 7 | Megheshwari Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 8 | Kamaleshwari Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 9 | Jumila Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 10 | Deepali Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 11 | Padumi Rabha (G) | Rabha | |
| 12 | Masi Brahma (K) | Bodo | |
| 13 | Gaijrai Basumatary (K) | Bodo | |
| 14 | Putuli Basumatary | Bodo | |
| 15 | Rabiram Narzary (K) (Man) | Bodo | |
| 16 | Anima Basumatary (G) | Bodo | |
| 17 | Dukhuli Daimari (G) | Bodo | |
| 18 | Basanti Barman (G) | Raj Bongshi | |
| 19 | Jyotsna Rai (K) | Raj Bongshi | |

K=Kokrajhar District

G=Goalpara District

Appendix 2

Discussions with key experts on witch violence

| S No. | Name | Affiliation |
|-------|--------------------------|---|
| 1. | Gita Bhattacharya | Former Director, Assam Samata Society, Guwahati |
| 2. | Birubala Rabha | Activist and alleged witch |
| 3. | Usha Rabha | President, Birubala Mission |
| 4. | Preetam Brahma Chowdhury | Journalist |
| 5. | Khanindra Basumatary | ABSU General Secretary |
| 6. | Dr Natyabir Das | Gen Secretary, Mission Birubala |
| 7. | Chikimiki Talukdar | Assam women commission, Guwahati |
| 8. | Mamoni Saikia | Activist (Former Assam Samata Society) |
| 9. | Bhumika Rai | Activist (WinG) |
| 10. | Poonam Toppo | Activist, ASHA NGO, Ranchi |
| 11. | Neelesh Singh | GARIMA Project, Ranchi |
| 12. | Samar Bosu Mullick | Activist, Writer, Ranchi |
| 13. | Chhutni Devi | Saraikela/Jamshedpur |
| 14. | Dev Nathan | Researcher, Gurgaon |
| 15. | Virginus Xaxa | Researcher, Delhi |
| 16. | Sarika Sinha | Action Aid, Bhopal |



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