

# WITCH HUNTING AMONG THE RABHAS OF ASSAM : A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR WOMEN

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## **Abstract:**

Witch hunting is a burning problem among the tribal people of Assam. Like other tribes, the Rabhas are also facing this problem. Various causes and factors are connected with witch victims and witch hunting. Human existence is incomplete without women. They constitute half of the world population, contribute more than half of the duties and responsibilities to the family. Existence of the society is completely impossible without the female members. Both male and female members are equally important for effective organization and development of the society. Women are the most precious human resource and creator of the society. They are most victimized category over the world. Right of women is grossly violated in every sphere of life. One of the most deep rooted causes of women's human rights violation which has continued to be active from the older times in the world is witch hunt. Witch hunting is the strong superstition and prejudice of people in our society. It is a major challenge to women at present era.

## **Introduction:**

Witch hunting is an age old phenomenon. Witch hunting is one of the most brutal forms of violence against women. They constitute half of the world population. Witchcraft is not a new concept

and has been prevalent since the ancient time. Witch hunting refers to stigmatization of people belonging to specific groups, mostly women, by labeling them a witches or evil sprits who bring bad women to society. Witch hunting as a social ailment is spreading rapidly in last few years. Witch hunting is a stigma to the society as well as humanity. It has been remarkably noted that although the sufferer of witch hunting is both male and female but women victims are more in numbers. Existence of the society is completely impossible without the female members. Both the male and female members are equally important for effective organisation and development of the society. Women are the most precious human resource and creator of the society.

In earlier days, this practice was prevalent all over the world. However, advancement of science and technology and with the change in world outlook, this belief has gradually become outdated. India is a vast country with so much diversity in terms of heterogeneity of race, culture, caste, language and religion. Various tribal and non-tribal people are inhabiting in this country. The tribal people are found in every states of India. In India, the tribal and non tribal people practices witchcraft. It is widespread in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Jarkhand etc.

Much research has been done in this area of inhuman activity. Ghose and Bandyopadhyay (1994), Ghose (1991), Choudhury(1993), Kisku (1994), Mukherjee (1939) to name few, have tried to understand and analyses different aspect of the problem. They have also tried to associate this problem with the problems of the society as a whole. Ghose and Bandyopadhyay (1998) and Choudhury (1993) have argued that economic factors are the main reasons behind this diabolic practice. The greed of grabbing one's land or properties stimulate witch hunting among tribal. Kisku (1994) has viewed witch hunting as the result of ignorance of tribal about modern science and social outlook, as well as their low level of education and lack of consciousness about the true cause of natural phenomenon.

Assam is often called the gateway to North-eastern region of India where a large number tribal community. Much of the tribal people of Assam have ancient and strong beliefs in witchcraft. It has also strong tradition of witchcraft and is popularly known as a “land of magic and sorcery” (Baruah, 1961; Baishya, 1985). Superstitious beliefs are deep rooted among the tribal groups of Assam. Even today belief in magic and other supernatural agencies is quite widespread in Assam. From the ancient time, Assam is known everywhere as a land “tantric faith”. The tribal people of Assam believe in witchcraft since very ancient time. Actually, there was no written document found, from when the tribal people use to practice witchcraft.

In Assam, witchcraft is known as “*Daini Bidya*” or “*Bhutuni Bidya*” among the tribal people as well as among the non-tribal people of Assam. ‘*Daini* or *Bhutuni*’ means witch and ‘*Bidya*’ means craft. The word *Daini* is derived from the Sanskrit word “*Dakini*” as attendant of the goddess *Kali*. **Goddess kali** believed to be greedy. The word “*Butuni*” it is feminine form of ‘*Bhut*’. *Bhut* is a generic term and includes all kinds of spirit. But, it is believed that there is also a specific class of male spirit named *Bhut*. They can change their shape everywhere and at any time.

A witch is called in Assamese vocabulary as *Daini* which used to identify a male or female performing magical powers that it used to cause evil to the community. Generally, in most cases, by the Witch, women are alleged to use their evil powers to harm others. Though, now-a-days, the alleged witches are both men and women, but in many of those accused of witchcraft are simply vulnerable women and children, the elderly or mentally ill, and sometime the victims of an accuser’s personal grudge.

### **Objectives:**

The present study is confined to the investigation of the beliefs and practices of witchcraft mainly the tribal people of Assam. The aspect of witchcraft is multidimensional in nature. The main objective of the paper is to find out the root cause of the question; why this menace is prevalent in our society.

- i) To identified the issues and challenges of witch hunting.
- ii) To analyze some incidents of witch hunting that happened many in the state of Assam.
- iii) To understand the further with led to identify a person as witch.

### **Methodology:**

The data based on which the present study has been conducted were collected from the victims and witch hunting areas particularly Kamrup and Goalpara Districts of Assam. Basic quantative information was collected with the help of observation methods, non-participant observation methods, interview method and case study method etc. All secondary information relevant to the problems were collected from library works and various news papers, magazines, journals of the past and present have been gone through which were collected from different libraries. Sporadic reports from time to time, it is also heard that various killings are held due to belief in witchcraft. People are secretive about the happening at the initial time. Most of the incidents remain undetected.

### **Area of the Study:**

Assam is one of the states of India. It is situated in the North-eastern part of the country. Of all the seven states of North-East India Assam is the gateway of this region. The state is located in the tropical altitude 24.3' N and 28' N and eastern longitude 89.5' E and 96.1' E. spread beneath the foothills of the eastern Himalaya. Assam is surrounded by seven other states of India and two foreign countries. It is bounded by Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur in the East and the western border of Assam is hemmed by Meghalaya, West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Northern side of Assam shares its border with Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan and by Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura.

### **The Witch and the Witchcraft:**

The belief and practice of magic and witchcraft is most widely spread among the Rabhas, particularly in the Kamrup and Goalpara

districts of Assam. Witchcraft originally meant the work of a female sorcerer among the Rabhas. Sometimes the person may be male or female who exercises witchcraft is a public figure of fame and repute, while in other he / she may be notorious. Sorcerer may include the use of materials objects and medicines to invoke supernatural malevolence.

The Rabhas believe that a man or woman can convert himself or herself into a demon or witch with magical power. In Rabha language, a witch is called “*Tikkar Bai or daini*”. In case of a female person practicing witchcraft is locally called as ‘*Daini*’ or ‘*Bhutuni*’ and in case of a male they locally call him as ‘*Daina*’ or ‘*Bhutia*’. Sometime they are locally called as ‘*Daini Bidya*’ or ‘*Bhutuni Bidya*’.

According to Rabha people, the *Tikkar Bai* or *Daini* (witch) actually is a demon, to be produced from human beings. According to Rajen Rabha (2002), the Rabhas believe that a man or woman can convert himself or herself into a witch. By dint of magical power, the head can be cut off from his or her throat. They believe that he or she (only head) walks with the help of his or her tongue and moves very fast hither and thither. Witch can also climb up the trees to eat jack-fruit, mango, banana etc. Witches may be either male or female and they are commonly believed to have the power to fly, to move from place to place at high speed. They believe the witches or *daini* are active primarily at night. The witches perform most of their deeds at night and their usual way of movement is flying while the body lies in apparent sleep. The spirit of witch flies with flapping its wings like a bat. They believe that a witch or *daini* can see things in complete darkness as clearly as in the daytime or watch things happening far away and can see god, ghost and other natural beings that are invisible to common mortals. A witch or *daini* can instantly transform himself or herself into cat, bat, dog, bird, insect or other animals of its choice. Present Scenario of witch hunting in Assam.

In the north eastern region of India, which is home to diverse indigenous communities, the practice witch hunting is more prominent in Assam. As far as Assam is concerned, the practices of super-

stitious stigmas have an enormous effect on lives of victim. Witch practice is quite common among the communities like the Rabhas, Bodos, Missings, Adivasis, Karbis, Hajongs, etc. A witch in most cases is a woman who is alleged to be a partition of black magic and causes death to the village where she lives. The local *ojha* detects and identifies as a witches.

### **The Process of Identifying a Witch:**

There are several ways of identifying a witch among the Rabhas, among which are mentioned below.

1. Generally, in a village there is a traditional astrologer, who looks into the matter and reveals a women's name. She is the considered as a witch.
2. The second way of identification of a witch by covering the patient with a net. The person is then pricked with thorns and other sharp things until it become difficult to bear the pain and finely he or she reveals the name of a woman, who is the accused as the witch.

### **Findings:**

This researcher had interviewed a number of Rabha witch hunters from various villages of both the districts. The hunters were arrested and released from jail. In the present study, 66 males and females were found to have committed murder of witches. All of them were in the age group ranged 15 to 60 years. Majority of them were illiterate. When a man or woman was suspected as a witch or *daini* then the villagers call for a secret meeting. After that, the villagers decide to give the punishment. The punishment is very dangerous like, physical harassment, excommunicated from village, killing, cutting hair, burning alive or burning after death etc. Witch hunting cases among the Rabhas of Assam particularly Kamrup and Goalpara districts from 2000 to 2011. Out of 28 witch victims 26 were females and only 2 males were victimized as a witch.

**Table-1**  
**Year wise witch hunting among the Rabhas of Kamrup and Goalpara districts from 2000 to 2011**

Year	Districts		Total Number
	Kamrup	Goalpara	
2000	Nil	3	3
2001	Nil	2	2
2002	Nil	Nil	Nil
2003	Nil	Nil	2
2004	Nil	2	2
2005	Nil	1	1
2006	2	7	9
2007	Nil	3	3
2008	1	1	2
2009	Nil	1	1
2010	Nil	2	2
2011	Nil	1	1
Total	3	25	28

Table-1 shows the year wise witch hunting cases among the Rabhas of Kamrup and Goalpara districts from 2000 to 2011. **Out of 28** person witch victims cases 26 were females and only 2 were males. Out of 28 persons, only 3 persons victimized as witch in Kamrup districts and 25 persons. In the year 2006 the highest number of witch hunting were **committed**, 9 persons were victimized in this year. In the year 2002 there is no witch hunting cases found in both the districts.

**Table-2**  
**Year wise witch killing cases among the Rabhas of Kamrup and Goalpara districts**

Year	Districts		Total number
	Kamrup	Goalpara	
2008	1	Nil	1
2009	3	Nil	3
2010	1	2	3
2011	Nil	Nil	Nil
2012	Nil	1	1
Grand total	5	3	8

**Table-2 shows 2008 to 2012**, during this period, eight persons the witch hunters on suspicion as witch killed both males and females. The highest numbers of witch killing were in the years 2009 and 2010. In this, years total six persons both males and females were killed on suspicion as witch. However, in 2011 there is no witch killing case are found in Kamrup and Goalpara districts. In the year, both the districts killed 2008 and 2010 per year 1 person total 2 persons.

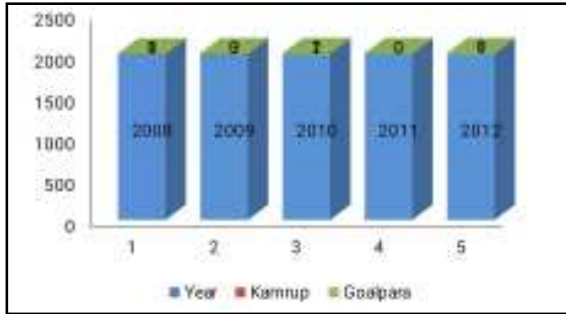


Fig.1. Year wise witch killing of Kamrup and Goalpara districts

Witch hunting is a major problem for women. In the man dominated society they have to become the victims of numerous superstitions social evil etc. The situation of Assam regarding women human right violation has been going from worse to worse. Regarding the condition of tribal women especially in Bodoland, we have noticed that there is a very gloomy picture of their family life. Superstitions, beliefs, black magic and demonology are integral to the tribal customs in the part of Assam. In tribal dominated areas a mere superstition of witch hunting has taken away a considerable number of lives of women. Many innocent villagers are expelled from the village on the charge of being witch.

The suspected women are publicly beaten, their heads shaved off, gang raped or parade naked in the village, all because they happened in places like Bodoland, Tribal dominated areas where there is almost no economic development with little or no access to basic education and health care. In Kakrajhar, Goalpara, Bishwanath Chariali of Assam, noticed some of these cases. In this kind of atmosphere people tend to develop a very strong superstitious beliefs and



anything bad that might befall on these villagers like bad crop, disease. Sudden death of someone or drying of well tend to be considered the work of some evil witch. It is women who are branded a witch.

In the tribal dominated areas of Assam, the status of women is very miserable. The victims of women witch hunting has often been from the ST communities and weaker section of the society. The reason of witch hunting has often been for political representation, property rights related and gender specific. Thousands of women were killed in that area on the charges of being witch.

According to Indian Human Rights 2006, in Assam lots of women become the victims of evil practice of witch killing. In majority of the cases it is difficult for the accused women to reach out for help and she is forced to either abandon her home and family or driven to commit suicide or is brutally murdered.

### **Role of Education in Eradication of women Witch Hunting:**

Education is one of the most important means for development of knowledge, skill and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. It is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls or women. If the women fail to receive education they cannot fit for facing the challenges of life. One of their major challenges is witch hunting.

Thinkers say that status of a society is determined by the status of women living in that society. A society, where no discrimination is made among the inhabitants, is regarded as good society. But, in our society there is always discrimination between men and women.

Education is regarded as extremely essential for consolidating ones status and position in a society which is largely driven by customs or traditions prevailing in a male dominated society. It is indispensable that education enables women not only gain more knowledge about the world outside of her home, but helps her to get status, position, self-esteem, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life.

One of the main problems before education is as how to root

our superstitions, prejudices & beliefs. Many ways and means have been discovered to root out the superstitious belief, but education is considered to be the best means for this purpose. In order to remove superstitions, prejudices from the society, we have to change the minds of the people. We will have to change the methods of their thinking and arriving at decisions through education.

The women of the tribal dominated areas must receive education to face challenges of life. Through education they can develop their knowledge and become empowered. It helps them to gain self-confidence and to be self dependent. To reduce poverty from the society the educational provisions for women should be made available in every backward, rural community mainly in tribal dominated areas. It is education which provides knowledge, awareness in regard to social, civic, political, economic and environmental issues and skills for securing employment and means of livelihood.

### **Suggestions:**

From the above discussions we can say that women are most victimized category in the male dominated society. To root out the prejudice and superstition of witch hunting, we should take up some steps. Through education the women develop their knowledge and skills and aware about their rights and power. Some suggestive measures are given below.

1. Positive attitude should be developed among parents so that they provide necessary support to their daughter to impart education.
2. Girls should encouraged to enroll themselves in the non formal education to continue their education to become self dependent and conscious about their rights and responsibilities.
3. To improve the knowledge and experience of women are encouraged to take part in the adult education programme provided by government.
4. Encouraging girls for all kinds of vocational and technical and professional education as per their needs, interests and attitude to become a productive member of the society.
5. Voluntary organization should be formed in those villages where

superstitions and beliefs take place & such organization should create awareness among the women to eradicate witch hunting.

6. Value based education can be imparted for all men and women of the society. The education should be emphasized to bring self confidence among them and it also helps them to face their problem of witch hunting.

### **Conclusion:**

It has been remarkable noted that although the suffer of witch hunting is both male and female but women victims are more in numbers. Belief in witchcraft has been widely associated with tribal societies all over the world. In Assam, it has been frequently reported to be a social problem under which women especially old and infirm, poor, are accused and killed as witches. Witch hunting is not doubt a violation of human rights. Unfortunately, it is still very common in Assam, mostly in the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Kamrup(R), Chirang, Baksa, Sibsagar Sonitpur, Udalguri, Tinisukia, Dhemaji etc. among the Rabhas, Bodo, Mishing, Adivasi etc. Although it is most prevalent in tribal dominated areas of the state, it is also spreading to other communities. There is lack of awareness and lake of medical facilities in the interior areas and people are still practicing age-old traditional method of treating their disease with the help of traditional medical practitioner. Because of this condition, some innocent women suffering and even died inhuman conditions.

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