Are women victims of patriarchal social system in the process of witch hunting? With reference to Assam, an analysis

Solomon Islary

Abstract: Witch-hunting a social evil that has been prevalent in most of the traditional societies; it, is based on the superstitious belief hanging in a balance of myth and reality. The terms such as *witching, witch doctors, witch-mongers, black magic spell, witch-finder,* are some of the terms that is quite relevant in traditional societies.

When one analyze the different terms and connotations of witch/witchcraft one of the most important thing that comes out both in the traditional or modern societies, eastern or western societies, developed or underdeveloped, women has been in the center of it, the so called witch has always been picturised as someone with an odd ugly look, having dreadlocks, crooked long nails, dilapidated clothes, carrying a broomstick or a rod etc. has often been used as synonyms with women.

Assam is popularly known as the 'land of magic and sorcery'. The practice of witch hunting in Assam in general and BTAD in particular is associated with the traditional belief on the existence of evil and evil-spirits and the power to harness evil spirit to perpetrate harm upon others with the help of the spirits on the will of the witches.

Keywords: *Witchcraft, Witch Hunting, Crime, Women, Rights, Superstitions, Tradition, Patriarchal Society, BTAD and Assam.*

Introduction

"Violence against women is a manifestation of historically un-equal power relations between men and women, which has let to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of full advancement of women" (Tanujha, 2011: 248). Though women have equally contributed towards the development of each and every society they have always been at the bottom of the ladder of any kind of rights and privileges that we as humans enjoy. They have been at the receiving end of all kinds of atrocities and crimes. Women's contribution in the development is hardly being recognized, women are not regarded as equal partner in the developmental processes though they have contributed largely to the development of each and every societal aspects, be it social, cultural, economical or political. The most important fact is that women are considered inferior to men in most of the traditional societies and hence there is an under-valuation and under-estimation of the contribution of women in the society. Men in most of the traditional society in

India prefer women to remain within the four walls of the house, rather to say bound within the kitchen.

Crimes that especially target women, such as trafficking, rape, kidnapping, and abduction, dowry death, domestic violence, sexual harassment, molestation and other related crimes assault the human rights of women as each such offence deprives them of the security of life and limbs and the basic dignity as a member of the society. Amongst them the most heinous crimes are rape and dowry death. Rape cripples a woman mentally and hurts her physically beyond imagination of anyone. Dowry death arises out of the mentality that denies the women equal status and respect in her-own house (Gir, 2007: 334-335). Beyond this basic recorded documented and segregated crimes against women in a patriarchal social system terming and targeting women as Witch and subsequently Witch-hunting is one such crime that has been quite relevant in most of the societies. Women often are soft targets of witch-hunting but this crime has often been not recognized or recorded as crime against Women.

Terms Relating to Witch and Witch-hunting:

There are various terms related to the concept of witch and witch hunting. In analyzing those terms and words we can hint out that though men are also victims of it women are at the center of this practice of witch hunting which raises a question to be answered, *Are Women Victims of Patriarchal Social System in the Process of Witch Hunting?*

I) Western Terminologies:

- **Spell;** to use magic/black magic on someone,
- **Enchantress;** a women who practice magic,
- **Hag;** an ugly, slatternly, or evil-looking old women,
- **Hex;** to practice witchcraft,
- **Sorceress;** women who perform sorcery or practices magic upon others,
- **Witch ;** one who is credited with supernatural power, especially women,
- **Enchanter;** one who enchants, especially a woman who is a sorcerer,
- **Witch-Craft;** the practice of magic, especially black magic, the use of spell,
- **Witch-Hunting;** hunting or killing of the one who practices black magic.
- **Witch-Branding;** terming someone as witch especially women,

II) Local Terminologies:

- **Diani/Diana (Assamese / Bodo):** one with power to use evil power against others; (specially Women, local term)
- **Oja (Assamese / Bodo):** traditional medicinal doctor, with some supernatural power, (local term)
- **Naikangra (Bodo);** one who can foretell the future or can point out the one who has done witchcraft against other or someone, (local term)

- **Deodini (Bodo);** one who can call out gods and goddesses in religious rituals or can also prognosticate who has done witchcraft against someone or individuals, (local term, citing women)
- **Daayan (Hindi):** female witches, one who can do harm through supernatural means,
- **Chudail (Hindi/Urdu):** female witches, monsters or demonic revenant etc. one who can do harm through supernatural means resembling women,

When one analyzes the different terminologies and connotations of the witch/witchcraft one of the most important thing that comes out is that since ancient days itself both in the traditional or modern societies, eastern or western societies, developed or underdeveloped women has been at the receiving end of witchcraft and Witch hunting. The so called witch has always been picturised as someone with an odd ugly look, having dreadlocks, crooked long nails, dilapidated clothes, carrying a broomstick or a rod etc. has often been used as synonyms with women.

When one analyzes the local terminologies diana/diani it also has the feminine outlook to it. Even the word diana/dianiin itself is feminine in character, when one looks at na and ni (nani) is a feminine suffix. Deodini also refers to women who can call upon god and goddesses.

Brief History of Witchcraft and Witch-Hunting in Assam

In pursing the history of witchcraft and witch-hunting it's often difficult to locate the exact origin of the practice of witchcraft and witch-hunting and also in understanding of the gendering of witchcraft but it's very clear that over the years in the history of witches, sorcery, witch-craft, witch-hunting etc. women are either the scapegoat of this practice or it can be stated that women are victims of patriarchal social system. There are different forms and ways and means of adopting the practice of witchcraft and witch-hunting. In most of the traditions this practice of witchcraft and witch-hunting is connected with socio-cultural practices, where women become the victim.

The word Diani/Diana is the local form of the word Witch. It is stated that the word *Diani* has come from the word *dakini*. According to Philip Rowson, the original meaning of the word dakini can be traced in the Tantra. In the Tantrik Buddhism dakini which means the female personification of the stage of a stage of wisdom. A popular image of Hindu goddesses Kali is found to be associated with many other images, such as shiva her so called husband and dakini and yogini her two associates. Thus the word diani has its root in Indo-Aryan language (Nath, 232), leading us to the conclusion that the word Diani/Diana had its origin in foreign language rather than having a local origin.

Though witchcraft has been leveled as adopted by indigenous community of Assam from other communities by different scholars and social scientist in the field, with whom they have come in contact within the modern web of migration, but there are various folktales that suggests that this practice of witchcraft was somewhat deeply rooted and is quite clearly visible that it originated from within the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the indigenous communities in Assam. In relation to this there are ample evidences to corroborate it, for example Mayong (Mayang) a place in Assam under Morigaon district is often termed as the land of black magic, witchcraft or the occult believing in tantras and mantras or witch doctors for healing of any sickness, aliment or misfortune, locally known as bej/bez or oja. People do believe in mystical, supernatural, or magical

powers and to do away with any kind of misfortune, sickness, curse etc through the use of black-magic.

Again amongst one of the major tribal community of Assam, the Bodos, this practice of witchcraft and witch-hunting is intertwined with socio-cultural and religious belief as reflected in various folktales and short stories, where one finds that by calling the gods and goddesses they can either to do away with misfortune or pave a way for new fortune. The existence of superstitious beliefs amongst the Bodo people has been prevalent since time immemorial. Bodo people believed in Diana/Diani (Witch), who can help get rid of any kind of misfortune, illness or sickness and even can direct any sort of misfortune on the enemy. It is believed that Ojhas (Witch doctors/traditional healers) can take the help of gods and goddesses to execute this act of sorcery or to heal the ailments.

Witch-hunting has been one of the out-come of the practice of witchcraft whereas it is only men who can become a witch finder or good witch. Although women participate in socio-cultural and religious rituals a woman's role is negligible and accorded with a bleak role and hence they are targeted as witches and thereby hunted.

Feminist Perspective of Witch and Witch-Hunting a short analysis

Witch-hunting a social evil has been prevalent in most of the traditional societies; it is based on the superstitious belief hanging in a balance of myth and reality. The terms such as *witching, witch doctors, witch-mongers, black magic, spell, witch-finder,* are some of the terms that is quite relevant in both traditional and modern societies. There are different theories to it, feminist perspective believes that witch hunting is related with the assigning of gender role in the society as given by the patriarchal social system, and devaluation of the social role of women, where women are the immediate victims of this system.

- Why should we speak of the witch hunts again? 'Again', given that in the recent years feminist scholars have lifted the witch-hunt from the historical limbo to which it was confined and assigned it to a proper place in the history of women in modern Europe and the Americas (Federici, 2018: 11).
- Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Mary Daly, and Carolyn Merchant, among others, have shown how the witch hunt served to deprive women of their medical practices, forced them to submit to their patriarchal control of the nuclear family, and destroyed a holistic concept of nature that until the Renaissance set limits on exploitation on the female body (ibid: 11.).
- As we have seen, the recent witch-hunts have spared no one. However, as in the European witch-hunts, those most frequently and violently attacked have been older women. In Ghana, they have been so much at risk that "witches camps" have been created, where those accused live in exile, after being expelled from their villages, at times, moving there "voluntarily" when they are past the child-bearing age, or remain alone, and feel vulnerable to attacks. Older women were also the majority of the victims in the Gusii witch-hunts of 1992-1995. The men

murdered there were guilty of association with suspected witches or were killed in their stead, when the women could not be found or they tried to protect them. Women are the main victims in Congo, South Africa, Zambia, and Tanzania. Most are farmers, often living alone. But in urban areas, it is traders who are more commonly attacked, as men respond to the loss of economic security and masculine identity, by discrediting women they see or believe to be competing with them. Thus, in Northern Ghana female traders have been accused of gaining their wealth by turning souls into commodities. In Zambia, those at risk are independent women, "who frequently travel as entrepreneurs and smugglers along the national highways"(Federici, 2008:11).

- Who is a witch? It is necessary to define the concept of "witch". A person specially of female gender, maybe considered a witch who acquires supernatural power, is capable of performing black magic or sorcery, and of causing purported harm to human health. Terms such as daayan, tohni, chudail, et al, are used to brand women as witch. The term tohna is used for men witches in the forest state of Chattisgarh. The term witch is popularly used for women. It suggests that it is gender attribute and practices of witchcraft are seen from gender perspective as in majority of witch killings, victims are women. Whatever the different practice and understanding of the terms "witch" may be, it shares a universal commonality, and that it is attribution of supernatural powers to a person by others. An attribute of a person as a witch is nearly always negative, fearful and destructive (Iqbal, 2015:111).
- In *Witchcraft, Women and Society*, Levack (1992) uses two approaches to analyze the literature in pursuit of an answer to the question: Why are women popular targets during witch hunts? In his introductory section, Levack raises the critical point that witches in all contexts have traditionally been women. First, he assumes that women have typically participated in roles (as traditional healers, midwives, heretics, and cult leaders) in which they have been portrayed as powerful actors rather than as helpless scapegoats. These roles are in stark contrast to the evil role of the witch. Levack contends that by performing these powerful roles, women are rebelling against the traditional view that they are passive and powerless. However, in contrast to Levack's assumption, the literature on witch hunts is uncertain as to whether women really have typically performed these roles. The data that Levack cites contradict these assumptions and do not support the notion that most accused women in witch hunts have been women with social power (Chaudhuri, 2012: 1214).
- Levack's second approach emphasizes the belief that women, because they are considered to be morally weaker than men, are more susceptible to the advances of the devil and, therefore, practice witchcraft more frequently than men do. This is a popular approach among historians, and it has been reflected in a number of publications. A problem with this second approach is its sole focus on witch hunts that have taken place in Western Christian communities. It is difficult to use this approach to explain witch hunts that have taken place among indigenous populations that encompass nature-based or animistic native religious affiliations. The approach is inadequate because communities with such affiliations have a fundamentally different view of witches. Members of such communities do not perceive witches to be in a pact with the devil (ibid: 1214).

- Researchers have different opinions about the origin of witchcraft. Most of the scholars believe witch craft to be fertility religion or cult. To increase fertility of men and women of their community they tried to apply sorcery which led to witchcraft. Generally, these activities of witches were believed to be useful. Gradually they started to harm people out of envy, hate, selfishness, power and wrath (Anju's, 2011: 24).

From analyzing the above perspectives of the Witch and Witch-hunt about the origin of witches, witchcraft, and witch-hunt there after one can very well assign that women are soft target to this practices, in the process of witch hunting men symbolized the witch finder (the good witch) and woman was assigned with the negative side of the witch hunt, she was being termed as evil, women were presumed to be witches and were besieged and persecuted for being evil witch in masses. It can be stated that the system of witch hunting starting from Europe, America, Africa and Asia or to one of the most infamous witch-hunt in the history of witch-hunting the Salem, Witch-hunt of 1692-93 all do have a close link that witch hunting was somewhat related with the assignment of gender based role in the society. And with the growth of capitalist system and globalization the fear of losing one's control over property and fear of losing the socio-political and cultural power to women in modern society leveraged the continuation of witch-hunting and women were the scapegoat to this system powered by gender role under the clutches of Patriarchal Social System.
In Tanzania alone, it is calculated that more than five thousand women a year are murdered as witches, some machete to death, others buried or burned alive. In some countries, like Central African republic, the prisons are full of accused witches, and in 2016 more than a hundred were executed, burned at the stake by rebel soldiers, who followed the footsteps of sixteen century witch finders, have made a business of the accusations, using the threat of pending execution to force people to pay (Federici. 2018: 3).

Witch-Hunting in Assam an Analysis

Witch-hunting is grossly seen amongst the most of tribal and traditional societies, witchcraft and witch-hunting is grossly seen being practice amongst some of the following communities such as Bodo, Rabha, Tea-tribes, Santhalis, Rajbongshis, Misings, Deuri, Ahom etc. It is to be stated that in the wake of witch-hunting, though harm or violence have been perpetuated to both men and women, women are the marginalized group who have been deeply affected by the practice of witch-hunting, they are being hunted down and killed; politically, economically and socially they have been subjected to discrimination and exploitation through the ages. One side is that most of the women in our traditional societies are dependent here even if they are not hunted; the loss of their bread earner cripples them physically and mentally. The practice of witch hunting leads to gross violation of human rights, often the victim is murdered in cold blood to hide political murder, grab property, silly envy, and petty quarrel amongst the villagers or so. The unabated practice of witch-hunting without proper trial and lack of strict laws to curb this practice is a serious issue and a matter of concern.

- **Assam Assembly Debate on Witch Hunting (01/02/2019)**

In most recent report given by the Mrs. Pramila Rani Brahma (State Social Welfare Minister) on 01/02/2019 on question asked on by Congress MLA Durga Bhumij during question hour he stated that in the past 18 years 2001 – 2018 around 180 people were killed on doubt of practicing witchcraft. He wanted to know what action has been taken against the killers and if the families of the victims have been compensated. In relation to witch-hunting amongst the four districts of BTAD, have witnessed more incidents of witch-hunting in Assam, Kokrajhar witnessed the highest, followed by Chirang, Udalguri and Baksa.

- Between ***2001 and 2017, 193*** people have been branded as witch and killed, out of it ***114 women*** and ***79 men***, ***202*** cases have been registered during this period, stated Additional Director general of Police (CID) Anil Kumar Jha. (Source Police Report)

- ***Dr Natyabir Das*** of ***Mission Birubala***, an organization which has been in the forefront of Assam's anti-witch-hunt campaign since 2011, said that between 2001 and 2017, Kokrajhar recorded the highest number of witch-hunting-related deaths — 61 (18 male and 43 female).

Causes of Witch-Hunting an analysis, Are women an easy target?

1. ***Dr Natyabir Das*** State Coordinator of ***Mission Birubala,*** one of the NGO which is leading the fight against Witch-Hunting in Assam, asserts patriarchal dominance over family property is often the reason behind witch hunting. In such cases family members begin calling the woman a witch. Later on superstitious beliefs and rumors are spread among the villagers about the woman in connivance with witch doctors," (Acharyya, 2017)

He also adds that victims are thrown out of their homes, treated as outcasts by the villagers and even killed. "There are also instances where women are accused of sorcery after they deny men sex," Dr Das says. Many young widows go through this ordeal, when men they've rejected accuse them of being a witch. Adding that patriarchy plays a major part in branding of women as witches Dr Das says that even older women are not spared. "These wise women normally command respect from the women folk in village. But they get victimized, as they create a support system for the women folks during the time of pregnancy and illness, challenging the dominance of the male quacks in the village," he said. (Acharyya, 2017)

Many murders do not get recorded as cases of witch-hunting in government files, but going as per incidents reported in the press, the figures of cases related to witch-hunting are normally four times more than what has been recorded by the government machinery," he says.(Acharyya, 2017).

2. According to Niva Devi, District Resource Person, Goalpara District Implementation Unit, AMSS (Assam Mahila Samata Society), the women within these communities become vulnerable

owing to a lack of support system within the family or community; for not being economically self reliant; and for lack of information about better opportunities (Chakraborty & Borah, 2013: 22).

3. Thus whether in public or in family rituals, women are virtually excluded from participation in worship. While women do participate in many matters of ritual, including preparation of the materials for the various sacrifices, they have a definitely inferior position in this regard and are not supposed to show familiarity with the various spirits, bongas. "A female who professes intimate familiarity with the bongas is looked upon as a witch and persecuted" (Nathan et al. 1996). The Santhal myth goes on with believe that the Witches, among the Santhal, can only he women, men are witch finders and women as witch, which is deeply rooted in gender segregation of the society.

4. Often single women are being targeted as witches in order to settle personal scores, to grab property, land and also exert the superiority domination over women.

In analyzing the above basic comments on causes of witch hunting it is quite evident that women in Assam in general and BTAD in particular (Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri) are strategically being targeted as witches, they are branded as witches and subsequently they are hunted and either their bodies are chopped into pieces or even buried alive. Women are worst to suffer from the practices of witch-hunting in Assam. Though there are various causes such as i) Superstitious Believes, ii) Lack of Proper Education, iii) Proper and reachable Health Care Facilities in and around, iv) Economic Backwardness, v) Empowerment of Women, vi) Lack of political will etc to the cause of witch-hunting after analyzing various terminologies and causes and cases of witch hunting in all parts of the world it can be stated that patriarchal social system is one such institution that has advantageously made a ploy to hunt women as witch.

References:

Acharyya, Kangkan. 2017. **'**Witch-hunting in Assam: A stringent law is the need of the hour to curb the practice',*Firstpost*, 23 April.

Anju's 2011. Witch Craft: Myths and Realities. In: *Bibungti, The Opinion*. Kokrajhar: Burlungbutur Publication.

Chakraborty, Joya and Borah, Anjuman. 2013. 'Witch hunting in Assam: Strategising Alternative Media for Women Empowerment and Overcoming Superstition', in *Journal of North East India Studies*. Vol. 3(2), Jul.-Dec.

Chaudhuri, Soma.2012.*Women as Easy Scapegoats: Witchcraft Accusations and Women as Targets in Tea Plantations of India, in Violence against Women.*Sage, retrieve from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233334882_Women_as_Easy_Scapegoats_Witchcraft_Accusations_and_Women_as_Targets_in_Tea_Plantations_of_India, on 01/03/2020

Daimari, Anjali. 2012. The Idea of 'Evil' among the Bodos Text and Context. In: Prasenjit Biswas, &. Joshua C Thomas (eds.),*Construction of Evil in North East India Myth, Narratives and Discourse*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

Federici, Silvia. 2008. 'Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today',*Journal of International Women's Studies*, retrieved from http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1219&context=jiws, on 12/03/2020
Federici, Silvia. 2018. *Witches Witch-Hunting and Women.* Oakland CA 94623:PM Press.

Nivedita Gir. 2007. 'Laws Institutions and Women's Rights in India'. In:Tapan Biswal (eds), *Human Rights Gender and Environment*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited.

Indian Express. 2018. 'Assam: Witch-hunting outlawed, grassroots awareness drive takes off' by Tora Agarwala, Guwahati, July 25, 2018

Iqbal, Mohammad Tarique. 2015. 'Witch Hunting: A Case Of Gender Violence In The Garb Of Vigilantism In India', in *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences.*

Nath, Janabi Gogoi. 2013. 'Witchcraft and witch hunting in Assam in historical perspective with reference to the Bodos.'Seminar/Conference, Proceedings of North East India History Association (26th Session), Manorama Sharma (eds.), North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.(19-Feb-2013)http://www.dspace.nehu.ac.in/handle/1/9360

Nathan, Dev. Govind Kelkar and Yu, Xiaogang. 1998. Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Struggles to Change Gender Relations, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 44 (Oct. 31 - Nov. 6, 1998).

Trivedi, Tanujha. 2011. *Women in North East India*, New Delhi: Jnanada Prakashan (P&D), 4837/24 Ansari Road, Daryaganj.

Bio-Profile of the Author:
Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, India.
Email: islary1984@gmail.com