

## **ROLE OF N.G.O.S, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM MAHILA SAMATA SOCIETY IN TACKLING THE MENACE OF WITCH HUNTING**

Jyotirupa Rout

Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

**Abstract-** The early modern witch craze that swept most parts of the Europe and that of America over a period of 300 years ended in mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In Assam it is commonly prevalent amongst the tea tribes concentrating in 850 odd tea gardens of Assam. Though various NGOs and other organisations such as National Commission For Women, Assam State Commission For Women, All Bodo Women's Welfare Forum, Bodo Women's Justice Forum, All Bodo Student's Union, Assam Adivasi Student's Association etc. are actively working to control and eradicate the menace of witch hunting in the area of study, one organisations that are prominently involved in their fight against witch hunting is Assam Mahila Samata Society. This paper throws a light on witch hunting and role of non-governmental organisation with special reference to Assam Mahila Samata Society in tackling the menace of witch hunting.

**Keywords:** Assam Mahila Samata Society, N.G.O., Witch Hunting

### **I. Witch hunting a worldwide problem**

The early modern witch craze that swept most parts of the Europe and that of America over a period of 300 years ended in mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century. William Monter estimates 35,000 deaths whereas historian Malcolm Gaskill puts the figure at 40,000-50,000 as victims of witch craft. Most sensational case of witch-hunt in British North America is Salem Witch trial in 1692-93. In these cases, over 150 people were arrested and imprisoned and 29 people convicted of *Capital Felony* of Witchcraft. 19 of the accused -14 women and 5 men were hanged. Through advancement in education, health-care and promulgation of anti-witch craft laws, the menace of prevalence of witch-hunt in the industrialised countries of Europe and America have been totally controlled, its prevalence in most virulent form is still found in many parts of the Africa and Asia including India.

## **II. Witch hunting in Assam**

In Assam it is commonly prevalent amongst the tea tribes concentrating in 850 odd tea gardens of Assam. The notable tribals among tea communities are Santhals, Oraons and Mundas. Further indigenous tribal people such as Bodos, Rabhas and Misings are highly susceptible to the belief in witches and practices of witch hunt in the most violent manner. Witch hunt is also prevalent amongst Deori and Karbi tribes in Assam.

However, the figure (from 2000-2014) as obtained from all the districts of Assam indicates that about 171 witch-hunt cases had taken place. District-wise figure of witch hunting cases are Kokrajhar-44, Chirang-18, Baksa-11, Sonitpur-10, Udalguri-09, Jorhat-08, Dibrugarh-05, Goalpara-31, Kamrup-03, Sivasagar-03, Nagaon-03, Dhemaji-02, Golaghat-02, Bongaigaon-01, Cachar-01, Guwahati City-01, Karbi-Anglong-01, Nalbari-01, Lakhimpur-01, and Tinsukia-01.

## **III. Role of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)**

Though various NGOs and other organisations such as National Commission For Women, Assam State Commission For Women, All Bodo Women's Welfare Forum, Bodo Women's Justice Forum, All Bodo Student's Union, Assam Adivasi Student's Association etc. are actively working to control and eradicate the menace of witch hunting in the area of study, one organisations that are prominently involved in their fight against witch hunting is Assam Mahila Samata Society.

## **IV. Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS)**

It is the most active and number one Organisation which has been extensively working in the field to eradicate the beliefs in witchcraft and witch hunting and also helping in identification of victims of witch hunt, their rehabilitation and also in awarding of punishment to the perpetrators of above abominable practice of witchcraft. It is an autonomous society registered in 1996 under Society Registration Act 1860. In Assam, AMSS has been implementing the national Mahila Samakhya (MS) program as envisaged in National Policy on Education 1986 and Program of Action 1992 published by Ministry of Human Resources Development, Govt of India.

### *Objective*

The main objective of the Mahila Samakhya program is to encourage, assist and promote collective reflection, decision making and group action by women as a means to their

empowerment and for equal participation in the process of learning for social change. This organisation is working under the State Programme Director Smti Gita Rani Bhattacharjee. However, the most active field worker totally dedicating to the witch hunting is Smti Mamoni Saikia, District Programme Coordinator of Goalpara District. The most prominent activist who herself was a victim of witch hunting and worked as a member of AMSS and rose to the stature of National Eminence is Dr. Birubala Rabha of Goalpara District. AMSS has mentioned the main process of identifying a witch is as follows:-

The Rabhas attribute physical ailments to the unhappiness of various deities; so they worship many deities to get rid of physical sufferings.

Rabhas believe that death and diseases are due to effects of various deities and spirits. In case of illness and other calamities *Ojha* (exorcist) is requested to find out cause through divination.

## V. Beliefs in witches

Two main causes attributed to witchcraft in their area of operation is the frequent occurrence of unnatural death or unknown diseases. Accordingly, the suspect is branded as witch and has to undergo the torture of tying her with a fish net and piercing her body especially with tooth of a pig, till she admits that she is a witch. Sometimes, persons afflicted with diseases pronounce somebody as witch and make responsible for the ailment.

### 6.0 Types of Punishment awarded in witch hunting.

AMSS has listed the following type of punishment meted out to the alleged witches:

1. Social Stigma: - Accusation as a witch is itself a social stigma for a woman.
2. Isolation: - The accused woman and her family are isolated.
3. Banishment:-The witch, sometimes the whole family is banished from the village.
4. Debarred: - The alleged witch and her whole family is debarred from participating in social and religious activities in the village.
5. Imposition of fine: The accused is imposed fine of Rs. 5000/- to Rs. 25,000/- depending upon the gravity of accusation.
6. Physical assault: The accused witch is publicly caned by the superstitious people.
7. Execution: - Killing of the alleged witch in the severed form of witch hunting.

## VI. Number of cases and types of witch-hunt

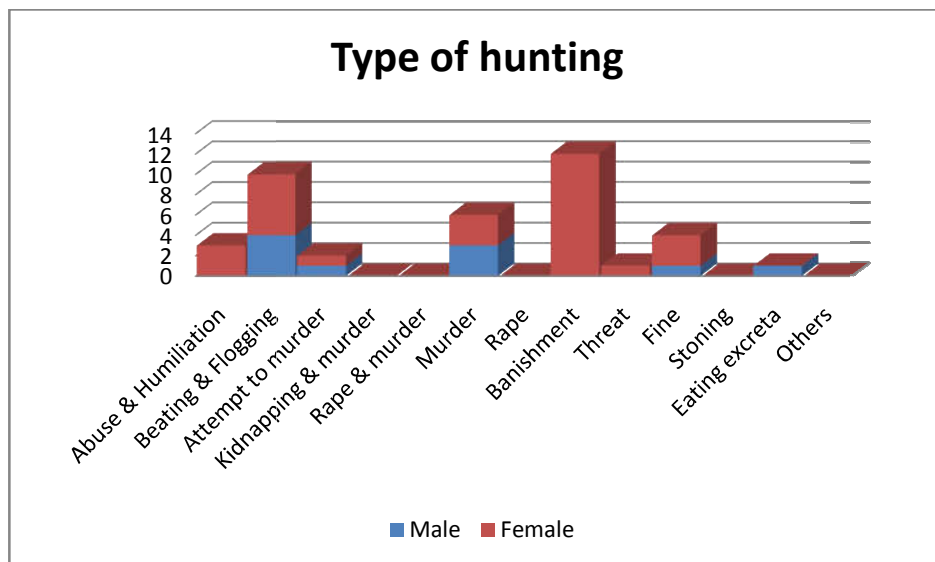
From 1998 to 2013, AMSS has intervened in as many as 51 cases of witch-hunting mostly in Goalpara district and a few in the adjoining district of Garo Hills. Majority of the victims were Rabhas whereas a few cases relate to Bodos, Garos and Hajongs. Out of 51 cases, they, with intervention of Police, district administrators, have settled 32 cases and the victims are rehabilitated. Other cases are still in the process of settlement.

## VII. Field Study

During my field study in the Goalpara district and only amongst the Rabhas, it was noticed that there were 31 serious cases of witch hunting involving 39 persons from the year 2000 to 2014.

## VIII. Type of witch hunting

Nature and type of witch hunting amongst Rabhas as per incidents and as per involvement of persons is represented as follows:-



	Abuse & Humiliation	Beating & Flogging	Attempt to murder	Kidnapping & murder	Rape & murder	Murder	Rape	Banishment	Threat	Fine	Stoning	Eating excreta	Others	Total
Male	-	4	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	10
Female	3	6	1	-	-	3	-	12	1	3	-	-	-	29

The actual causes of witch-hunt in these 31 cases involving 39 persons are as follows:-

	Property/Land dispute	Fight over agricultural implement	Jealousy	Vertigo	Drunkenness	Delirium	Superstition	Total
Incidents	5	1	1	2	2	2	18	31
Percentage	16%	3%	3%	7%	13% (both)		58%	100%

It is seen that Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) is very active in the district of Goalpara and intervened in 23 out of 31 cases surveyed. They have actively associated themselves with the victims in giving them justice with help of police and local civil administration and conducted awareness campaigns in the villages and also rehabilitated the victims of witch-hunt.

In case of Bodos, All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), All Bodo Women's Welfare Forum (ABWWF), Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF) and Bodo People's Front (BPF) are relatively less active in providing succour to victims of witch-hunting. ABSU intervened only in 6 cases out of 25 cases whereas ABWWF in 2 cases and BWJF in one case only.

In case of Santhals, All Adivashi Students Association (AASA) is involved only in a single case out of 26 cases.

It is found during my field studies that most violent form of witch hunting i.e. murder; kidnapping etc. is higher amongst the Bodos and Santhals, and comparatively less amongst the Rabhas. Whereas lesser form of witch hunting i.e. punishment, threat etc. is more amongst the Rabhas. Hence, it could be concluded that incidence and severity of witch hunting is less where NGOs are active.

### **IX. Suggestions**

In addition to liaising with district Police and district administration it is recommended that AMSS may widen its lateral networking with Self Help Groups, Mahila Samittees, Mahila Sanghas, Women Federation at Gram Panchayat and Block level, Adolescent Girl's club and Mother's group, ASHA workers, village teachers, school management committees etc so that there will be more awareness, better education, better healthcare and ultimately less and less cases of witch-hunt.

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