

## CHAPTER 5

### **Witch-hunting: Beliefs and Practices among the Bodos**

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## CHAPTER 5

### WITCH-HUNTING: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE BODOS

This chapter deals with the issue of witch-hunting prevalent in the Bodo community of Assam in the contemporary period. The belief in existence of witch persists almost in all human minds due to the mysteries of life and death. Amongst the Bodos, the natural disasters like flood, cyclone, earthquake and the human sufferings like illness, unidentified diseases and death are all believed as mysterious happenings driven by the supernatural powers. Following this kind of belief, most of the Bodos blame the witches of having supernatural powers. Witches with their power are believed to harm the community and bring misfortune to villagers; in turn, the villagers harm the witches. This retaliatory practice of the villagers is for the cause of saving the community. This is the simple idea of what witch-hunting means among the Bodos.

Witch-hunting has been seen as a contemporary practice among the Bodos. In the name of witch-hunting a large number of people, predominantly women are being humiliated, ostracized or killed. There is a need to establish the fact and the hidden reasons behind such practices but in addition to this, there is a great need for scholars to find out the factors leading to the belief in witchcraft and witches. Similar emphasis has also been given by some social activists, women's groups and legal officials these days, which has clearly been stated in the article "Witch-Hunting in Assam: Individual, Structural and Legal Dimensions", published jointly by three organizations viz. Partners for Law in Development (PLD), Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and North East Network (NEN). It says that, "*A large number of victims are humiliated through community punishments, ostracization and dislocation from their homes and villages, resulting in impoverishment and a life of fear and isolation. In addition to examining violations and motives associated with witch-hunting, which are the focus of most of the discussions, it is necessary to call attention to the underlying factors that enable targeting and victimization. The development indicators, deprivation, access to basic needs and governance conditions are aspects that must be spotlighted*". (NEN report, 2016)

Witch huntings in Bodo society involve three major outcomes, viz. - accusation of witchcraft, banishment/displacement of the witch and torturing/killing of the witch.

Among the Bodos of Assam, the practice of witch-hunting has been in existence since long till the contemporary period. The witch and the witch-hunters; or the accused and the accusers happened to be from among their own community. It is most often seen to be practiced by and against their own family members, relatives and people of the same village. The question that arises here is who is the accused witch (what identity)? What kind of witches is killed and who are banished/ displaced? What are the reasons behind witch-hunting amongst the Bodos? Why does the practice of witch-hunting goes on among own family members, relatives, people of the same village and members of the same community? Finding answer to such type of questions is a task that needs participation of the society that has this practice and gets associated with the incidence and stories of witch, witchcraft and witch-hunting. To find out the facts and reasons behind, here is the discussion with analysis of some of the selected cases of witch-hunting from the field.

Before going straight to the analysis of witch-hunting cases, some concepts need to be understood. About belief, Schwitzgebel (2006) said that it is the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without there being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with factual certainty. Another way of defining belief is that it is a mental representation attitude positively oriented towards the likelihood of something being true. The belief that is going to be discussed is the belief in witchcraft and the belief that witches exist.

The present research focuses on how is witch-hunting is practiced among the Bodos? The way of practicing witch hunt differs from society to society and depends on their cultural contexts. The hunting of 'witches' requires a strong belief in witchcraft along with powerful section of the insider society, their unity among themselves and their courage to practice witch-hunting. The nature of how the accused witches are hunted can be outlined as:

- 1) **Killing/murdering:** The killing or murdering of an accused witch is due when the sense of protecting the villagers or affected ill persons from the witch becomes stronger. It is done by not less than three people and not more than ten people. In some cases, they murder on their own wish and some murders take place on the order of and

deal with the main witch-accusers. They sometimes kill by coming/entering to the house of the accused witch and sometimes, catch the accused witch and kill in a far off place and leave the dead body there itself (river side most often), so that nobody can identify who were the witch-hunters. In some cases, the dead body of the accused witch is buried somewhere, so that people do not notice anything related to his/her death and even the police can't trace how that witch-hunting case was.

- 2) **Beating, hitting and cutting:** During the witch-hunting, when the anger and unity of the villagers grow to a height, beating, hitting and cutting of the witch takes place in front of the public, not less than 10 people and not more than 50 people of the village. It includes, beating with wooden lath, rod, bamboo stick, pushing and hitting on the wall and ground, kicking, punching, cutting the tongue, breast and hair and so on and so forth. The beating, hitting and cutting at times lead to death of the accused witch.
- 3) **Threatening:** As and when there are gossips and rumors circulated in the village from one person to another, gossipers' views about the witch's evil doing get wider and clearer, relatives and villagers go to the house of the suspected witch and harm him/her. They believe everything gossiped to be true in relation to his/her evil deeds. So, they get the strength and courage to blame her even face to face and threaten while dealing with her in their daily activities. The accused witch is most often threatened by words like:
  - a) *The village people are angry on you, beware.*
  - b) *You have cast a spell on that person, may be you will be chased out of the village soon or you might be killed or so, and*
  - c) *Just because of your presence, my work is not done today, you are weird as people said you are a witch."* and so on and so forth.
- 4) **Imposing fine:** While accusing a person as witch, the unity of the villagers plays an important role. According to the Bodo customary law of the village or the community, there is an announcement about the village meeting regarding any public problem is made from time to time. Whoever is found causing the problems in their society, are

imposed with fines. In the case of the problem of witchcraft in the village, the accused witches are asked a lot of questions during the trials. After the question answer session, if the accused witches are found guilty, they are forced to cure the ill person in the village and to ask for forgiveness from the family where death occurred by his/her witchcraft spell. The village leader organizes these types of trials/meetings; and at the end they announce the imposition of fine or implicit punishment.

- 5) **Burning alive and feeding excrements:** Sometimes when the accused witches fight back or doesn't admit that he/she had cast witchcraft spell on the ill person or dead person, they are forcefully fed with excrement or burnt alive. Excrements include urine and feces, which meant for the villagers that the spell of the witch becomes inactive forever. Burning alive meant examining whether the accused witches are really a witch or not. If he/she is really a witch, he/she doesn't get burnt and if he/she is not a real witch, he/she gets burnt like a normal human being.
- 6) **Social exclusion:** When the accused witches are seen as holding a good position, status and relation with the outsiders, the villagers find it difficult to directly kill/murder, beat, hit, cut the body parts, burn alive or impose fine. Hence, in this case social exclusion is done. It includes not inviting to attend familial and social functions like birth ceremonies, marriage functions; not giving a leading role in community festivals and other occasions or special events of the village. It also includes that the villagers feel scared to deal with him/her in their daily activities and get away from talking to him/her, not addressing him/her by name or relationship or calling by nick names kept by the villagers), not sitting with the accused witch on the same bench, not buying any stuff sold by him/her while vending, not passing nearby her/her house, not visiting the accused witches' house and not inviting them to their house.
- 7) **Banishment of witches:** In some cases of witch-hunting, the accused witches are banished from the village following the discussion taken in the village meeting. In some other cases, the villagers do not banish the accused witch but he/she is seen shifted to another place, far off town or village along with his/her family members. In such cases, the accused witch can sense the danger as and when she is accused as witch by the very society where she lives. The confusion in her identity and question

within herself arises due to the religious structure that is classified into binary oppositions. When the society considers her as evil, she tries to be homogeneous and intends to reunite with the society, but the 'identity' as 'witch' that is attached to her remains active and that tag and trauma remains for the whole life. Bodily she is targeted for torture by the witch-hunters in the name of socialization and community protection; here takes place the banishment of the accused witch.

Whenever there is conversation on the issue of witch-hunting, the first question that strikes one's mind is that, "does the witch really exist?" or "Is he/she really a witch?" and then the other questions follow on basis of contexts. There is a belief in the existence of witches and the practice of witchcraft among the Bodos. The strong belief in witchcraft in the society leads to the practice of witch-hunting. But it cannot be generalized that all the Bodo villagers living in the rural areas or remote areas are trapped with this belief.

Generally, it is understood that, witchcraft is an old practice and considered as a craft of the wise since time immemorial. The initial stages of witchcraft got its way with the birth of the religion. The reason for which the practice of religion was started is the same with the reason for the start of the practice of witchcraft. For example, the dread of occurrences of natural hazard and disaster; the fear of diseases, life and death; and so on and so forth has made social beings to think and design some techniques to fight back with such natural forces by means of prayers and rituals to the supernatural powers. These kinds of prayers and rituals are seen common in both religion and witchcraft. Some scholars regard witchcraft as a superstition and according to them there is nothing called witchcraft or witches for that matter. However, it is difficult in this part of the world to give a simple and general statement that witchcraft is a superstition when analyzing the unique experiences that are shared differently by traditional medicine practitioners, priests, alleged witch and his/her family members, villagers, neighbors and people from different villages who are known as *Ojah*, *Phadri*, *Daina arw daina ni nokhor*, *gamini mansifwr*, *gami khathini mansifwr* and *dosra gamini mansifwr*, respectively in the local language of the Bodo community.

In accusations of witchcraft, strange stories and narratives are observed. Such stories tend to come out as a product of their memory and creativity of their experience with accused witches, witchcraft and witch-hunting incidences. The societal influence also plays a major role in the sharing of their experiences. It is important to note that the interviews conducted amongst the Bodo community in the different villages in Kokrajhar, Chirang and Udalguri districts of Assam reveal their ideas regarding witches, witchcraft and witch-hunting that they came across in their daily life.

This chapter is based on primary data and deals with the beliefs and practices associated with witch-hunting of the Bodos. It consists of eight major themes of discussion and analysis which are arranged according to the field works done. The major themes are: the stranglehold of beliefs, traditional healing practices, sanctioning violence in the name of witch-hunting, loss of faith in Western medicines, growth of inequality, instrumental use of beliefs, enhancement of the feeling called “hatred”, and prevalence of witch-hunting.

### **5.1 The Stranglehold of beliefs**

Belief in witchcraft is understood as one of the strongest belief that leads to the practice of witch-hunting among the Bodos. It is first of all important to look upon how the belief in witchcraft has a close relationship with the religion. Coming to a broader sense of religion (not confined to any religious institution), witchcraft is generally understood as evil/harmful and so is associated with ‘Satan’ or the work of ‘evil-spirit’. It is prominent amongst the Bodos that religion is considered to be a tool for construction of ideology. The idea of ‘God’ and ‘Satan’ is seen as very much associated with the everyday life. Everything they do or speak are related to the idea of good and evil. For example, the Bodo people in their everyday conversation use phrases like “*Do not do/say this because it is bad.*” If cross question is given to them like, “*Why is it bad?*” Then their answer is straight away “*God will be disappointed with this act or words of yours.*” It means that whatever is good/holy is associated with God and whatever is bad/evil is associated with ‘Satan’. Nevertheless, the whole idea of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ implies altogether a construction of the society where they live. It is believed that prayers and rituals are common in both witchcraft and religion, but the ways of doing it differ. In order to

differentiate them, the concepts of good and bad as well as holy and evil are used in the social construction. Witchcraft among the Bodos is believed to be associated with the evil power. Religion is always associated with strong faith in divine power and regarded as holy and good in every sense: although, the power used by religion might be evil power or bad one.

Most of the popular beliefs get circulated among the Bodos are: i) Witches possess special spirit of animals performing services to the black cat, dog and snake. Witches use plants, herbs, hairs, pieces of cloth, nails, and spits and indulge in destructive activities. It is also believed that witches possess powers that can cure people of their illnesses and also use such powers to harm others, particularly enemies. They are known to have frequently visit the burial grounds and often prepare their concoctions from the ashes of the dead. These can be analyzed from the data collected from the field, by interviewing the people who live with such ideas, experiences and incidences. The comments/viewpoints/evidences to the narratives that the people make during gossips/interactions/discussions against the alleged witches occupy a strong belief in witchcraft. Some of their popular ways of talking about witches are-

- 1) *“Yes, that night it was she who came through the field with scary untied hair.”*  
(Konwar and Swargiari 2015, 138)
- 2) *“She came/comes in my dreams every night.”* (ibid, 138)
- 3) *“Even I saw her going by that road one night.”*
- 4) *“She visits the burial places every night and unclothe her body while doing her spell- rituals and while talking to the ghosts/Satan.”*
- 5) *“She took my cloths that were hung outside my room.”*
- 6) *“Do not throw away your cut nails and cut hair out in the open space or on the road side, the witches will carry them home and use them in spelling against you.”*
- 7) *“My sickness occurred because of the witch’s spell. We found the proof (consisting cloths, hair, amulet, nails and some other materials) while digging our backyard.”*



- 8) *“The trees at our house, particularly, coconut tree and betel nut tree dried up from top to bottom. Her spell couldn’t affect our family members, so it affected our trees. If it is not the proof of witches’ spell against us then what is it?”*
- 9) *“She went nearby their house in the form of a cat/dog just before the patient died.” (ibid)*
- 10) *“She sucked his/her blood, made very thin and then finally killed.”*
- 11) *“She did an imprint magic, so even the ojha cannot cure the patient if the witch do not release/open imprint.” (ibid)*
- 12) *“You will not understand what she will do at what time, so it is better not to keep her alive or at our village.” (ibid)*
- 13) *“She has eaten up my villager one after the other, it’s better to kill her or chase her out of the village so that she doesn’t get further chance to eat up the remaining members of our village.”*
- 14) *“I have seen with my own eye that she was looking at me so hard, with red eye.”*
- 15) *“Why don’t you carry your clothes inside your room, it is dark by now, who knows the witch will get the chance to carry your clothes away and then cast a spell on you.”*
- 16) *“Do not sing at night, the witch might listen your singing and extend a spell on you.”*

Here, the practice of witch-hunting has been studied as the result of the stranglehold of beliefs in witchcraft. As a major cause, the belief in witchcraft can be seen as the internal and cultural force of witch-hunting. There are some external forces that can direct causes of the practice of witch-hunting which can also be regarded as the hidden reasons or personal motives behind this practice.

Witches in Bodo society are accused of on the basis of assumptions, observations and gossips which do not have any scientific and factual evidences. Illustrative cases of how the strong belief in witchcraft leads to the practice of witch-hunting or accusation of witchcraft are given below:

Case 1

Name	Ms. N. Narzary
Age	35 years
Sex	Female
Status	Unmarried
Location	Belguri, Kokrajhar District, Assam

The family of Ms. N. Narzary survives on agricultural products from a small plot of land wherein they work on a *thika* system. The family being raised on as self sufficient with their bare needs, like a house to live, an altar for prayer, a kitchen, a granary, a piggery, well for water and a toilet. Both her father and mother died of some incurable and unidentified diseases in 2016, after the marriage of their son. They changed the religion from traditional *Boli Bathou* to *Bibar Bathou* when her parents' diseases were found to be serious day by day. She and her lone younger sister are living in the parental home, whereas the married brother has moved to a new house built in a reserved forest area. Shifting of household to a reserved forest area is one of the many traditional cultures of the Bodos which is popularly known as *hadan-sifainai* in their language. The brother lives with his wife in the *hadan*. She takes care of the younger sister and help her to study in the nearby her higher secondary school at a distance 15-20 km from their house. She herself dropped out of school from class V and remained uneducated due to poverty. Her younger sister now and then suffers from joint pain in her legs and both of them believe it to be the work of a witch. According to Ms. N. Narzary, their parents too died due to the diseases caused by witchcraft at different time periods. According to both sisters, there are three to four witches who are doing spells and working against their family towards destruction. She said, "*Witches eats up family members one after the other*". According to her, the proof and evidence are seen in their backyard wherein witches dug some pieces of cloths and a hand full of hairs collected from their house. They also have eye witnesses of those dug out materials. The woman is found to have strong belief on witchcraft, and so has a good collection of stories about witches attacking other families too.

Case 2

Name	Ms. D. Owary
Age	31 years
Sex	Female
Status	Unmarried
Location	Anthabari, Kokrajhar District, Assam

Ms. D. Owary (31) has been a patient of gastritis since 2006, who is still under a treatment by *Ojahs*. She along with a younger brother and a younger sister lives with parents in the household. They are self sufficient having the house to live, an altar for prayer, a kitchen, a granary, water-well and toilets. When her illness started, her mother took her to modern medical doctor in the nearest dispensary which is about 18-20 kms from the house. The prescribed medicines by the doctor didn't work. So they gave up hope on doctors and started getting treatment from the local medicine practitioners, *Ojah*. As advised by the *ojah*, this girl was kept hidden by the mother from the suspected witch, living next to their house by keeping her in a far away place so that the witch cannot reach her for the bad spell. But the ailment became more serious and she became very skinny. Now, they were almost compelled to take advice from another *ojah* of a distant village. According to them, the earlier *ojah* had added some more serious disease to the girl. They followed all the advices and medicines prepared by the new *ojah*. Finally, the ill woman said, *"I and my mother had to struggle a lot due to the witch's spell, I was about to die but it is the ojah who saved my life. If by any chance the witch attacks me for the second time, I will definitely consult that ojah again"*. She is a firm believer of witchcraft.

Case 3

Name	Ms. R. Swargiary
Age	36 years
Sex	Female
Status	Unmarried
Location	Anthabari, Kokrajhar district, Assam

In a village in Kokrajhar, there lives a family whose members had a strong belief in witch-craft. The old father (67 years) lived in depression with his one son (38 years) and two daughters (41 years and 36 years respectively) after the death of his wife. Ms. R. Swargiary narrated the incidence of her sister's death. The family survives depending on farming. In spite of difficult economic condition and having a small plot of land and a kitchen- garden, they manage day to day requirements. Both sisters could not complete their schooling and left at class-VII and the brother after higher secondary education. In 2010, the elder sister fell sick; she was taken to a nearby doctor, who identified the ailment to be gastric and prescribed medicines. Rather being cured, her sickness became serious. She became very skinny, vomited frequently and became unable to eat food. They consulted a traditional healer, the *ojha* who informed there is a witch living close to their house and this witch is the suffering to her. The family believed this and the patient since then has seen dream of the laughing witch having curly hair. One early morning, they saw the suspected witch and her husband come towards their house, but went back from the gate. That evening, one black dog came to their home, surround the house wall, and just after one hour of this incidence her elder sister died. These observations stood as proof for spreading or branding the nearest neighbour as a 'witch'. The younger sister Ms. R. Swargiary, who is still living said, "*Witch-craft is not a superstitious belief because what we have seen is not untrue*".

Case 4

Name	Ms. F. Daimary
Age	33 years
Sex	Female
Status	Unmarried
Location	Amtheka, Chirang District, Assam

In Chirang district, there lives a family whose members are mother (64 years), son (37 years), and three daughters (35, 33 and 31 years respectively). They have enough land for agriculture, and the son is employed as a teacher at a higher secondary school nearby their home. Since the death of their father, the mother took all the responsibilities of her

children. But suddenly, the mother suffered from fever and could not manage anything for them. So, the eldest brother had to take all the responsibilities for the family. Soon after some days, they were affected by some diseases one after the other, from mother to eldest sister and then to youngest sister. They strongly believe that, only because of the witches their family members are always ill, affected by different diseases, losing weight and unhealthy. They assume that their illness and physical sufferings are the work occurred by *dainani mwynthwr rainai* (spell of witch). According to them, evidences for this were shown clearly in one of their sisters' dreams. All the proofs are in front of them in the form of stories and experiences in dreams. As replied by Ms. F. Daimary, the ill person of their home was not taken to doctors when they were ill. She said, "*Doctors cannot do anything against such kind of diseases, only prescribes medicines for gastric ulcer and fever.*" They believe that it is the *ojha* who help them survive till date. The *ojha* according to them has the knowledge and power to identify who is working behind the illness. And interestingly, they told me that, the name of the witch identified by the *ojha* and the witch that came in the dream were the same person. This is how the belief in witchcraft practices exists and takes a major space in the everyday life of most of the Bodos of Assam.

Case 5

Name	Mr. R. Brahma
Age	68 years
Sex	Male
Status	Married and father of two sons
Location	Anthaibari, Kokrajhar District, Assam

In a village which is about 25-30 kms away from Kokrajhar district of Assam, there live Mr. R. Brahma, an old man of about 68 years who used to be one of the short story writers in the arena of Bodo literature. He lives with his wife and two sons. Both the sons graduated from college and University of the state. His family is socially, economically and educationally well off in their village. Mr. R. Brahma is addicted to alcohol and addicted to reading books as well. He has been accused of practicing witchcraft by two

of his nearest neighbors. One of his nearest neighbors died after a long treatment from *ojah* as the ill person was suffering from serious disease that includes symptoms like vomiting, loose motion, not being able to eat food and becoming thinner and thinner day by day. The family is economically and educationally not well off. The family members of the patient took her to the modern medical doctors and the doctors prescribed medicines of gastritis but the disease became more serious. According to the ill person and their family members, “*The doctors can’t identify the disease and medicines don’t work at all*”. So they took the suggestions and medicines prepared by the *ojah*. As the *ojah* told that it is the work of a witch who is living nearby her house, the patient saw the face of the witch in her dream. The ill person died and the family members said that, “*If he is not a witch then how can it be possible for him to come in the dream and how come their dog pass by our gate on the day when the ill person died?*” The face seen in the dream was that of Mr. R. Brahma. But it still remains for them as impossible to kill him, banish him/family or socially exclude them because they have a high status and position in the society where they live. Two sons of the accused witch have a good friend circle in the society and takes major roles in the community events and festivals.

## **5.2 Traditional Healing Practices**

Traditional healers routinely blame on evil-spirit and witchcraft if any kind of diseases are found incurable and unidentified by the modern medicinal doctors. They consider modern medicines as useless when it comes to witchcraft spells, magical work and supernatural attacks. The doctors generally admit that the patient has no any physical disease but only psychological disease. So, the traditional healers understand that the modern medicines are powerless against this kind of disease. The traditional healers have the knowledge and skills to offer counter-spells/counter magic to cure such kinds of ill person or patients. Some illustrative cases narrated by traditional healers have been discussed below for easy understanding.

Case 6

Name	Mr. B. Basumatary
Age	61 years
Sex	Female
Status	Married and mother of four sons
Location	Bwigriguri, Udalguri District, Assam

Mrs. B. Basumatary is an *Ojah* (traditional medicine women) who is popularly known as a *Guru sikharnai* (Person being re-birth by holy spirit) in her local area, continuing this social service since 40 years. She lives with her husband, Mr. R. Basumatary.

Mrs. Basumatary narrated about the rituals that she has been practicing since 1970s as a traditional healer. In the society she follows '*Bibar-Bathou*' (*Bathou* religion that worships by offering flowers) religion which falls under '*Bathou*' the traditional religion of the Bodos but holds all religious rituals as holy and significant. Whenever, the *Dev-Devi* demands her of the rituals of *Boli-Bathou* (*Bathou* religion that worships by sacrificing animals/birds) religion or *Brahma dharma* she offers and devote. These depend on what the disease is all about, whether physical or supernatural powers working behind the patient. For physical disease, the rituals are not much tough, but for any disease acquainted by supernatural powers, the rituals are very time and effort consuming. Sometimes the *Dev-Devi* enters into her body, takes the form of *Doudini* (devine human being, behaving as the God who works in the body) and interact with the patient or instruct the *Douri* (helper of *Doudini*, who is with normal human behavior) the whole night in empty stomach, in order to get in deep conversation for curing the disease. Bina Basumatary who becomes the *Doudini* instructs the message and words uttered by different entered *Dev-Devi* like *Mahadev*, *Bwiswmuthi*, *Bhogomothi*, *Afa Bathou Bwrai*, *Durga*, *Parbati*, *Bishnu*, *Krishna* and many more; on the other side, Rupnath Basumatary, the husband of Bina becoming the *Douri*, prepares the variety of the medicines and maintain the patient simultaneously, under the instruction given by her in this kind of ritual. She is not able to say or recall anything about the words, message

or instruction while the spirits of *Dev-Devi* left, and turned to a normal human being. It is only the *Douri* and patients who could remember the episode.

Another narrative about Mrs. Basumatary is about doing counter magic/exorcism against evil spirit. She said that a boy of about 16 years was saved from a very dangerous evil-spirit in the year 2008, by Mrs. Basumatary's counter-magic. Before narrating this life experience, she first said that in some cases, different *Dev-Devi* demands for different sacrifices depending on the level of the disease. Sometimes they demand for sacrifice of birds and animals; offering of land, milk and fire worship. In one case narrated by her, it was the ritual done by chanting mantras and touching the patient with *Bisdinkhiya bilai* (a kind of fern), *Khifibendwng bilai* (a kind of climbers) and raw cow milk for three days, as instructed by her *Dev-Devi* during her prayer. And when the patient was taken back home, Bina Basumatary held a *Jaiga* (sacred fire arranged for some rituals) worshipping the Lord Brahma in the name of the patient who suffered by having been mistakenly footed on the *Bisouri than* (the house/place of God of Snake). This ritual was done at her house, and the reaction continued in the patient's body at his home which is about 6 km far away. Lastly, when the Dev filled with satisfaction by all the rituals, he lowered down his anger and the disease got cured. Bina said that this kind of disease is unidentifiable and incurable by the doctors and *ojahs*. She claims herself as a *Guru* who is superior to *ojah* and which is generally called as *Baba* by the Bodos influenced by mainstream Indian culture.

### **5.3 Sanctioning Violence in the name of Witch-hunting**

Violence, be it mental violence or physical violence is understood as the major target in witch-hunting. In order to maintain peace in their society, the Bodos believes in killing or excluding the person who brings misfortunes, illness and death in their village. This is where the violence in the name of witch-hunting is sanctioned by their society/village. But, this is sanctioned only by the insider society because of their unity in beliefs and experiences. On the other hand the outsider society does not support or sanction any violence in the name of witch-hunting, rather they support in sanctioning violence against witch-hunting. According to the outsiders, witch-hunters should be punished by law because they violate human rights.



Shyamal Prasad Sharma (2016) referred to the writing of Deepshikha Agarwal (2015) that “In most of the cases, the police find it difficult to arrest the real culprits either because of the involvement of the entire community in such murders, or because the information about the murder reaches the police too late. As a result, proper investigation into a majority of the cases remains elusive, and courts often have to acquit those arrested”.

One of the informants in Kokrajhar opined that, “*Violence sanctioned in the name of witch-hunting is must for our society because in the village where we live, if we do not torture them, the number of witches will grow in future*”. Even though the government and the non-government organization do not support their views they believe that witches should be killed or thrown out of their village so that no harm occurs in future. The sanctioning of violence in this regard is accompanied by village meeting and public display of punishment to the witch. The villagers get together to watch the punishment and the confession in an open field of the village. It also holds as a series of performance because the village meeting consist of “the village headman and his people, the witch, the accuser and the witch-hunters” as performers and “the villagers and the neighbors” as audience. The whole village gets involved in process of witch-hunting one way or the other way round. This kind of violence can be called as a cultural violence. Again, the practice of witch-hunting where sanctioning of violence in the name of witch-hunting is seen also causes the belief in witchcraft to grow more active among the villagers and the neighbors. The following cases are narrated as an illustration of such kind of sanctioned violence:

Case 7

Name	Mrs. R. Basumatary
Age	46 years
Sex	Female
Status	Married and mother of one son and two daughters
Location	Daifangkhati, Udalguri District, Assam

Mrs. R. Basumatary, an LP school teacher by profession, originally from Ambagaon village in Udalguri got married in Daifangkhuti, Udalguri, to Mr. J. Basumatary, a clerk in district school inspector's office. At present she lives with her husband, two daughters and one son at a village called Saphaiti in Udalguri being accused, tortured and banished/displaced from village Daifangkhuti.

First of all she conveyed that she feels very sad when she tries to recall that incident. With a lot of mental pain, she narrated from the beginning to the end of the incident. She said that at first it was her husband's elder brother and his wife who accused her for practicing witchcraft on their son. Since childhood their son has been known to be physically abnormal. One night, near the toilet, he saw a big image of his mother, got shocked and started running here and there. As days pass by, every night the same shock and running here and there continued in him. Mrs. Basumatary's husband took him for treatment to a hospital in Guwahati. Prescribed for 3 months course of medicines, the disease seemed like cured. But unfortunately, the disease became more dangerous after one month. He run away every night and most often went to beat the people who took him to the hospital. The parents of the boy took him to *ojah* (local medicine man), finds better and one day called the *ojah* to their house for treatment. That night, the boy was bathed and left his clothes at the gate of her house. From that day itself, she has been branded as a witch. Touching the Holy Bible, she and her husband also confessed in the village church that, "*We do not know any kind of witchcraft and mantras*". After some days when she helped a poor diabetic patient from his village giving Rs.9000, but the person was not cured. Gossip spread in their village, their family members themselves submit that she practices witchcraft, so, it was easy to believe it strongly. Whenever any disease takes place in that village, it was most often Mrs. R. Basumatary who got to be blamed. It was 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2007, when people of their village called for an allegation meeting of Mr. S. Daimary who was also branded as witch. When Mr. S. Daimary was inquired he denied again and again. The people said that, the fire couldn't burn him and the sticks could not beat her.

As Mrs. Basumatary was also called to the meeting, she reached there by the time when the Mr. Daimary was forced to tell that Mrs. R. Basumatary is also a witch. He accused

her and spoke aloud in front of all gathered there. Mrs. Basumatary asked Mr. Daimary aloud, “*How can you say that I’m a witch, show proofs if you have any, and tell me who is my Guru, if I really learn any witchcraft?*” Some people advised her to run away at that time, but she didn’t run because she felt “*I don’t have any fault, I didn’t harm anyone and I don’t know to practice any witchcraft, so, people will neither beat nor burn me.*” But then people started whipping her with bamboo sticks and she was injured badly. She was taken to the hospital at 6:00pm that day. On 27<sup>th</sup> April, she came to the village by taking along with her, some members of Bodo associations like Women’s Justice, ABSU and ABWWF.

The villagers didn’t allow organizing any meeting there, rather threw stones and broke their house for returning to that village. Taking their two children, one in conceived state, the husband and she had to run away from that village and find a rented house in Udalguri town. Some days later when they wanted to buy land to build their house, they were not allowed to settle in and around some places. At last the Govt. employee of Agriculture department gave them a piece of land in Sapkhaiti. Their house in Daifangkhuti stands deserted and dilapidated today.

#### Case 8

Name	Late H. Boro
Age	44 years
Sex	Female
Status	Died on 11 <sup>th</sup> April, 2015
Location	5 No. Majuli, Udalguri District, Assam

Late H. Boro died because of a witch-hunting case at the age of 44 years. She was from one of the remote village of Udalguri district of Assam. She suffered with social exclusion of witch-hunting for fifteen years at the village, where she lived with her husband Mr. D. Boro, a son, a daughter and two grand children. They are a well-to-do family. It was on 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2015, that some youths of that village killed her and hid the dead body in the river side woods of their village. As informed about the incident by Mr.

Boro to the Village Headman, Mr. J. Basumatary, a group of police came to their village for investigation and took Late. H. Boro's body for post-mortem.

The people believed that Late. H. Boro's knowledge of the witchcraft practice came into being through their generational heredity. E.E. Evans Pritchard in his Book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* mentions that Witchcraft is not only a physical trait but also inherited. It is transmitted by unilinear descent from parent to child as believed by Azande Community of Central Africa (Pritchard, 1976). Some similarities are seen here because before her marriage to the present village, her mother was known as taking training of being *Doudini*. But according to the people, it is impossible to get training of such art because being '*doudini*' is a holy art by choice of *Sibrai* (God), chosen for particular women, to be a medium to always keep in connection between God and people. That's why it was believed that her mother didn't learn *doudini* but *daina* (Witchcraft). After some days, people started accusing her parents as practicing witchcraft and charged them of harming the people of their village. One day both of them burnt up themselves by kerosene and succeed suicide. And also, Late H. Boro's brother also has been often tortured by groups out of suspects.

Whenever any diseases affect their villagers, it is only her to be pointed out 'a witch'. Mrs. R. Boro is Late H. Boro's neighbor whose brother; brother-in-law and their father died one after the other in three consecutive years. Her neighbor Mrs. R. Boro lost all the male members in their family for which she most often kept crying. On 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2015 night, Mrs. R. Boro got possessed with the spirit of *Aii* (God the mother) while a village prayer was going on in the meeting organized to discuss budget of the forthcoming *Bwisagu* festival. She started shouting with the voice of *Aii*, saying "Mrs. H. Boro is a witch who ate up all the family members of Mrs. R. Boro. She is at present trying to kill her with unidentified disease and day by day she is going to destroy the whole village by spelling on you all, your turn is coming next. Mrs. H. Boro is practicing witchcraft very strongly, beware of her, you kill her before she harms your society any further."

The people believed it very soon because it was the voice of the God whom they rely on in their everyday life. Some youths got up immediately in anger and stepped towards

Mrs. H. Boro's house to enquire her. Her husband, Mr. D. Boro was also present in the prayer-meeting, but could not say against the matter because all of them requested him to shut up his mouth. All of a sudden the youths started checking things or medicines kept in their house. When her husband reached home running, he was not allowed to enter the house. He and his wife answered everything asked by the mob. But none of them were looked upon as they said. The mob started hitting with things around, kicked her, threw up the youngest grandson and slapped the granddaughter. Mr. D. Boro and son physically tried to stop the violence but the mob made it stronger and tough beating in a way to kill Mrs. H. Boro.

At that point of time her husband hurriedly ran to the *Gaonburah* (village headman) in order to report about the incident. It was about 9:30 pm which is to be counted as a late night for the people living in villages. The *Gaonburah* gave him shelter for the night at his place advising him not to return home that night. Early morning at 3:00 am, as he reached home, the family members informed him that Mrs. H. Boro was no more, and even the dead body is hidden somewhere. He searched the dead body in and around the village, but could not find, so he again ran to the *Gaonburah* to inform about the death of Mrs. H. Boro in witch-hunting case. By that time the *Gaonburah* had already called police for investigation in that village. The dead body was taken for post-mortem and only 4 (four) witch-hunters were caught and taken to jail, while Mrs. R. Boro and Mr. B. Daimary escaped that day.

#### **5.4 Loss of faith in “Western” Medicines**

Traditional healers blame on evil-spirit and witchcraft if any kind of diseases are found incurable and unidentified by the modern medicinal doctors. It is believed by the Bodos that, when it comes to witchcraft spells and magical work, if any patient does not gets cured by “western” medicines. In this regard, modern medicines are useless for them.

For a community or society where witchcraft is believed to be a magico- religious practice, all misfortunes, diseases and material threat are considered as the work of witch and witchcraft practices. Keeping this view in mind, the members of the community consult the *Ojah* who happens to be the “traditional healer” of the local area instead of

consulting the doctor, the “western medicinal practitioner”. For them going for western medicines mean a waste of money and time. One of the villagers said, “*Referring to my younger sister’s suffering, I can’t rely on the doctors because the medicines prescribed cost me so much but no improvement in her health could be seen. Instead, if I would have taken her to the Ojah at the initial stage of her suffering, she would have been cured by now, as she is in better condition at present. We will keep on going to that Ojah until she is fully cured*”.

There are also instances where some Bodo people first of all consult their diseases with the *Ojah* and then after a long time when the patient is not cured, they take treatment from the doctors. They give the western medicines as second preference. This kind of mentality grew among the Bodos because they feel like *Ojahs* are more approachable than doctors. Another important thing is that, the herbal medicines given to them by the *Ojahs* are more effective and low cost. They can also explain clearly about their suffering or illness as the *Ojah* understands their own local language, which they find it difficult to do with the doctors. The matter of distance is also very much relevant here. The hospitals where the doctors are available are far away from those villages where “loss of faith in western medicines” is seen. They mainly deal with local herbal medicines because it is available in their village itself or nearby places from the *Ojah*.

Traditionally the *Ojah* enjoyed a reputable status in the Bodo society. But after the influence of Christianity and Brahma religion among some Bodos, the knowledge of the *Ojah* is questioned and avoided by some of them. There came up the practice of pastors healing by prayer. Almost all the Bodo Christians believe in the healing power of the pastors. Moreover exorcism is very much in practice among them in the contemporary period. For a Bodo Christians, it is a norm to take doctors’ treatment first and if the disease seems unidentified by the doctors, they should consult a pastor, instead of consulting an *Ojah*. Here is the illustration with some of the witch-hunting cases which came up as a result of the loss of faith in western medicines:-

Case 9

Name	Mrs. S. Basumatary
Age	47 years
Sex	Female
Status	Married, have three siblings
Location	Smyrna, Udalguri District, AssaM

Mrs. S. Basumatary is one of the accused witches living in a village in Udalguri district of Assam. She lived in a village of her husband after getting married with a professor of a college. Being branded as witch by their own villagers, she and her whole family members shifted to different village which is about 40-42 kms away from the village where she lived. She has three children who graduated from different higher educational institutes in India and at present they are doing jobs with good salary. The family is well off in both economic and educational background. Her husband recently got retired from college. She has been a good house wife and mother, doing all the necessary stuffs for her family. She has also been engaged in government funded self-help groups and worked hard for maintaining an independent livelihood. She said that, *“It is a tragic story in my life when I was branded as witch by my own relatives and village members.”* Her husband has four brothers and one sister and everybody got married and live independently in their own nuclear families. Their land has been divided equally among brothers and they had a happy life after marriages. But the issue started was when one of the brother’s daughters suffered from illness. When that daughter went for studies in city, her illness gets cured and when she came back home, the illness gets very serious. She was taken for treatment to modern medical doctors and used the prescribed medicines but was not cured when she stayed at home.

They invited a pastor for prayer and healing. When the pastor prayed and read aloud the bible verses, the ill person reacted abnormally. Then, after some sessions of fasting prayer, the ill person spoke aloud from the bed that, *“Don’t read the scripture, don’t pray, and don’t let me go away.”* Then the pastor asked *“Who are you?”* According to the family members, pastor, church leaders and other village members who were present

during the fasting prayer session, the reply of the ill person was the reply of the evil spirit that she was possessed with. The reply revealed that the spirit was of Ms. S. Basumatary which is accompanied by four friends, who were named one after the other. The other four names of evil spirit supporting in the possession of her were from different communities and places, one was a Santhal from Jhargaon; the second was a Monpa from Arunachal Pradesh; the third was a Bodo from Sapkhaithi and the last was a Nepali from Golmagaon. The family members got angry with their relative who was named as the head of the evil spirit leading other evil spirits to the ill person. As a result, witch-trial was arranged as a form of village meeting in their village playground and Mrs. S. Basumatary was accused as a witch. She was requested to dislodge the spell and evil spirits that have been employed in the illness of her own relative daughter. She could not do anything at that time and even today because, *“I didn’t know anything about witchcraft, I have never dealt with any evil spirit and I don’t know how to cure the ill person”* she said. But the accusers/villagers didn’t believe what the accused witch had said and also didn’t give an ear to the explanation by her husband (the retired professor) about the evil-practice of witch-hunting. As a result the accused witch and her family escaped the next day because they thought the villagers might kill them. They took shelter at their daughter’s place in Guwahati and then later shifted to a different village in Udalguri district. At present they are living in their new village. But the the tag ‘witch’ gives a never ending mental torture and trauma to her and her family. The tag follows her wherever she lives.

Case 10

Name	Mr. J. Boro
Age	60 years
Sex	Male
Status	Died in 2012
Location	Gwran Lagw, Kokrajhar District, Assam

In a remote village of Kokrajhar district of Assam, Mr. J. Boro, an old man of about 60 years or above has been accused of practicing witchcraft. He was popularly named as



‘Tiger Balm’ in his village and everybody was scared of passing nearby him or nearby his house. He lived with his wife of about 56 years of age. The family’s livelihood was based on agriculture. The old couple’s daughters got married to different villages and they were left in their house alone.

His family was not economically and educationally well-to-do. It was when the people of their village got different incurable diseases and meet death one after another. When the ill persons were taken for treatment, the *ojah* identifies that the illness is the work of the witch living in their village. It is revealed by the villagers that this old man had some knowledge of how to do some impossible things like magic and could solve hurdles of life in an easy manner. So, when the *ojah* points out a witch, people believed, that the old man known as tiger balm is the witch. One night a group of villagers planned to kill him and protect their village/society. Mr. J. Boro’s hut built of mud was broken and made a hole from outside and they entered one by one and finally killed the accused witch.

### **5.5 Growth of Inequality**

Inequality amongst the members of the Bodo community is mostly seen in terms of economic conditions and lifestyle. The growth of political awareness, power struggle and the sense of losing their glorious past have affected the growth of inequality. Looking at the field of gender and education within that society, inequality hardly matters.

With the rise of globalization and modernization in the country, the Bodos as a tribal group having backwardness in economy, education and health facilities finds it difficult to cope up with the needs and demands of the present times. They were once an equal and self-sufficient society, with all the agricultural products at hand and had a strong community tie. But later when the needs grew up in number, sense of insecurity and hard survival is experienced by them. As a result, inequality has created doubts among themselves, jealousy feelings instead of community feeling and inferiority/superiority feeling instead of equal feelings emerged among themselves. All these are based on present economic structure (rich and poor division) and their struggle for survival.

It is also seen that due to the political influences and cultural revivalism, inequality in power matters a lot in contemporary Bodo society. If any person having low power tries to take over his/her political power, challenge his/her power and achieve better life, the targets of spreading rumour starts. Gossips and rumour one can influence others very easily in Bodo community. And if the tag “witch” is included in those rumor and gossips, it is to be believed blindly. It is because they have the idea and experiences of witchcraft and witch-hunting in their society.

Again, *Hadan-sifainai*, a practice of “shifting to forest reserves” is the reflection of poor economic background of the Bodos living in Assam. Till date, some of these people are seen as shifting to plain area of reserved forests. Many reasons for such shifting can be seen.

- 1) First, they sense that they are not affluent to maintain their lifestyle (food habits, work culture, education and dressing style) just as their fellow neighbor does. And sometimes, if they try to be equalizing themselves with those affluent people, they are questioned about their “wealth” because the sense of jealousy arises.
- 2) Second, some of the Bodos are accused of being witches, practicing witchcraft and harming the village by witchcraft spells. Due to the accusation of witchcraft in their own village, they can’t stay in that village. Some of them they are forcefully chased out of that village; some are threatened to be killed; and some are socially excluded and ostracized in their own village. As a result they shift to the reserved forest area and start a new life with new society.
- 3) Lastly, it is generally understood that Bodos traditionally depend on agriculture and it is the main source of income and survival. As their family members grow in number after marriages of their siblings, they get separated but their share of agricultural land and its products are not enough. So, they shift to the cheaper land area *hadan* as they are not well off to buy land in their own village as the cost is so high. They prefer forest reserves because there is an easy access to land resources. They find easy to cope up with the people of their similar economic conditions. Such shifting has become one of the traditional cultures for them.

Nevertheless, this kind of cultural practice has in the recent times diminished to a certain extent as they do not based only on agriculture but added with other employments in government and private sectors. Their literacy rate is also seen increasing these days. So, based on their education level their employment level is also improving.

So, it can be said that witch-hunting is an outcome the growth of inequality within the members of the community due to weak economic background. Economic stability is an important thing that a society needs in order to be stable in the field of culture, religion, education, social and polity. Because, if there is no economic development, an individual generally can't focus in psychological development or any other developments be it social, political or cultural. For this, illustration with some cases of witch-hunting has been narrated below:

Case 11

Name	Mrs. L. Daimary
Age	46 years
Sex	Female
Status	Mother of one son and two daughters
Location	Badagaon, Udalguri District, Assam

A housewife named, Mrs. L. Daimary (46) living with her husband and three children in a remote village in Udalguri district, has been accused of witchcraft practices since 2006. In the year 2009, she was charged of practicing witchcraft and killing two of her nearest neighbor by casting spells on them. She said that, *“Once I had a record of arguing with one of the powerful men in my village. That might be one of the reasons why I have been targeted as witch. Because challenging an authoritative figure matters a lot in their society. That night if I would have walked through the village road, the villagers would have killed me. Next day, I was informed about the plan by my nearest neighbor. There was a spread of gossip in the village that, she practices witchcraft and took away the life of two people (one who died in 2005 and the other who died in 2008, both due to some serious diseases as per the medical practitioners) near her own house. By getting all these information, on Sunday, at the church in front of all the people coming for worship, she*

stood up for explaining about her false accusation. But everybody opposed her and did not give her time as soon as she started clarifying her innocence. She thought later on people will keep gossiping and branding her as witch, and she will not get chance to tell the reality. So, she asked some extra time for prayer and then prayed aloud to God in front of all present in the church service so that the people understand the reality. She prayed that “*If I am practicing witchcraft, lord let me suffer the whole life.*” From that day onwards she could live without fear but the villagers still believes that she practices witchcraft. It is very hard to wipe the tag out of the villagers’ mind. In any societal events and occasions, she is not invited or not regarded as a good member of their village. She was socially excluded for years but she decided to live happily, ignoring peoples’ gossips and neglects.

### **5.6 Instrumental Use of Beliefs**

During the early modern period, witches were feared because they could do things that others could not do. They had certain knowledge which was beyond the understanding of the people and the church, who thought that these powers could come from the devil. The same is the case with the contemporary Bodo society because it can be seen that discussing about the topic of ‘witch’ or ‘witchcraft’ itself scares people (with regard to field data analysis). Question arises here, why are people scared to talk about witch or witchcraft? The idea that strikes the mind of the people where witchcraft is a common belief of their social structure makes it convenient for them to think/understand about the evil power of a ‘witch’. The Bodos believes that witches are very powerful because they are in close contact with ‘Satan’ or some supernatural powers. Generally when anybody is in close contact with the powerful section of the society, that person is also considered powerful in human society. The idea of ‘God having the highest power in good acts’ and ‘Satan having the highest power in bad acts’ is a popular idea in Bodo society. So, ‘God’ and ‘Satan’ are believed as equally powerful but binary opposites. As a result of analyzing the beliefs and ideas of its binary opposition, it comes out to be like ‘witchcraft vs. religion’ is another binary opposite. The structure of belief centers on “witchcraft is evil and religion is holy”.

There are also other popular beliefs in circulation among them. If you speak something bad about a witch, the witch can hear them although she is far away. And the spell against them might start at any time. So, they scare the witch. Moreover, if the other people, the outsiders who doesn't believe in the power of witches comes to discuss about 'witchcraft' or 'witches' with them, they switch to another topic or discuss watchfully because they have been seeing that the government and non-Government officials and other social activists are trying to take the side of witches, support them and gives rehabilitation.

When there is any discussion among the insiders, on the topic of witchcraft, the central focus lies on the witches' negative points and characters. The word Bodo term 'nw' which means 'was told by somebody' is very much in use while they discuss about witches. For example, the lines like- "*Biyw daina Khamjananwi thwibai nw*" (Was told that the person died because the witch spelled against him/her); "*Biyw Daina Nongownw*" (Was told that the person is a witch) "*Dainaya simangao fwidwngmwn nw*" (Was told that the witch came in her dream); "*Dainaya jajwbbai nw*" (Was told that the witch ate up all); "*Dainaya gwthwisaliyao longthong khunanwi dongomwn nw*" (Was told that the witch was seen nude in the graveyard); "*Dainaya mwnayao be lamajwng thabailangw nw*" (Was told that the witch travels by this road at night) and "*Dainaya gwjanao rajlaikhwmanaikhowbw khwnajwbw nw*" (Was told that the witch hear the gossip even from far off place) and so on and so forth has used the word 'nw' in every line. It means that first hand information is very rare. There is no evidence that the narrator himself or herself has eye-witness about the incidence that was narrated. The stories were told by somebody through gossips and it passed down from one person to the other person's ear.

Just because these kinds of belief are seen in their society, some powerful section of the society takes advantage of the belief about witches and witchcraft. In contemporary Bodo society, they find it easy to brand anyone as 'witch' by spreading constructed evidence among the folks. Only the one who starts pointing out the 'witch' or his or her family members knows the real reason behind the suspicion, which may be related to personal motives like personal ill-will or property dispute. The rest gossips and rumor

handles till the target “violence” is given in the form of killing, ostracization or banishment from their society. Some of the illustrative cases are narrated below:

Case 12

Name	Ms. A. Boro
Age	45 years
Sex	Female
Status	Unmarried
Location	Debargaon Tiniali, Kokrajhar District, Assam

Ms. A. Boro (45), a spinster who used to be the daughter of a well-to-do Bodo family from a village in Kokrajhar district was accused of practicing witchcraft. Witch-hunting took place in her life after her parent’s death stayed with her younger brother, his wife and two children. She could not get married because she was not satisfied with proposals she got. Ultimately, she decided not to get married at all and stayed with her younger brother’s family. Her sister-in-law did not want her to stay with them and started spreading in the village that she indulged in strange activities which seemed to be like she was learning witch-craft and was gaining expertise on it. When villagers heard this, they believed in what she said and decided to stealthily kill her. The sister-in-law was happy as her intention of getting rid of her husband’s sister was about to fulfill. But the secret meeting of villagers was informed to a leading lady of the same village. The women leader talked to villagers and convinced them that they were misinformed about the lady who was innocent. The villagers didn’t kill her but then kept in mind that once a witch is always a witch. The tag ‘witch’ is not easy to be removed from the societal mindset, once she is branded a witch. At present when the people talk to the accused witch, they talk with full observation on her activities. She is regarded as an unfit soul in the society where she lives.

Case 13

Name	Mrs. G. Owary
Age	47 years
Sex	Female
Status	Died in July, 2016
Location	Aflagaon, Kokrajhar District, Assam

A woman named Mrs. G. Owary (47) who lived in a remote village in Kokrajhar district has been killed by her villagers on the charge of practicing witchcraft. She was a step mother to her husband's children. The children didn't like her regardless of her love and support to those children. Day by day the people of that village observed her activities by doubting that she is a witch. It was a time when one of her nearest neighbor died of fever and there were others who got fever one after the other in that village. The blame for all these evil/harm occurred in their village came to her and the village got united in thought. Even the husband could not stand against such accusation, because he was also being scared of being accused himself as a helper of the witch. One night, a group of young boys killed her by beating and cutting the breast. Nobody could lodge this incident to the police station, not even the husband of the accused witch. It is because he and his family members are scared of the villagers' attitude and moreover the families have to live by obeying the society and adjusting with them.

Case 14

Name	Ms. N. Basumatary
Age	45 years
Sex	Female
Status	Unmarried
Location	Ghoramari, Kokrajhar District, Assam

In a remote village of Kokrajhar district of Assam, there lived a spinster named Ms. N. Basumatary (45 years) who is banished from her original village due to accusation of

witchcraft and at present lives in other village 20 kms away from Kokrajhar main town. She is popularly known as ‘*Nasir dayna*’ at her original village and locality. She lived with her old mother, two younger brothers and a younger sister. Her youngest brother is a physically handicapped person who good at his studies and completed Master’s degree also. She herself was good at studies and graduated from a Law college. Since from 2007, when she lived at home, she has been branded as witch by her own village people. According to the people, both her villagers and locality people, when she travelled at night or evening time, she turns into a black cat and sometimes turns to a woman with long untied hair and white long dress. Some people said that, “*That witch used to tie up big bundles of long red and yellow thread which we generally use as raw materials for weaving. She fixed them in a height of trees, across the main road of our village that nobody can reach it. We could see that the thread started from her house and ended at the same house but it was impossible for us to see the knot of the thread, it was fixed round and round crossing from inside the trees without any fastened point.*” These worked as a full proof and evidence for the people living there. As a result accusation on the charge of practicing witchcraft went on more serious which made her uneasy, socially excluded and torturous to live in that village, so she left home shifted to other place. Nevertheless, she took a good care of her family members. It was after the marriage of her immediate brother that a new story of witchcraft accusation on his newlywed wife started eventually. When her physically disabled brother suffered from sickness and diarrhea, she and her younger sister accused their sister-in-law to be practicing witchcraft. For treatment, they took the ill person of the family to the civil hospital at Kokrajhar town which is about 25-30 kms away from their house. Prescribed medicines were taken regularly but he was not fully cured, so he went to the hospital again but the injection given to him took him into abnormal body reaction. The family members of the ill person got worried and ultimately, it was she who took him to the *ojah* for treatment and in way tried to keep him away from the sister-in-law who was believed to be casting a spell on his abnormal brother. The two sisters said that, “*She spelled for putting in tuberculosis, boil and diarrhea to their disabled brother to make him die.*” The family accused the brother’s wife as witch and threatened and tortured her mostly in absence of her husband. One night, she has been shot dead at her own house near the kitchen where she was preparing dinner for the family. The case of this witch-



hunting got spread fast as she shouted while dying and the villagers caught one of the shooters and others escaped as they chased them after the incident. The shooter/witch-hunter was arrested and later during the police inquiry he revealed the other two witch-hunters were also with him. It was also revealed by him that the family members particularly the two sisters had dealt with the process of hunting and they shot dead the accused witch because of the deal of Rs 1.5 lakhs. If the hunting comes out successful they were promised to be given Rs. 50,000 each for 3 witch-hunters. As revealed Rs. 50,000 was already given as advance by the sisters before the incident took place. The three witch-hunters were arrested by the police of Kokrajhar district. The eldest sister who was also accused of witchcraft practices earlier is at present known popularly as having power of both the supernatural and the outsider society. So when she came to the village once after the death of her sister-in-law in order to contribute money for *sradho* of brother's wife, the villagers caught her and hold a witchcraft trial against her. She was beaten, kicked and pushed hard on the ground by the villagers (insider society). Later both the sisters are handed over to the police for arrest.

### **5.7 Prevalence of witch-hunting**

Like other ethnic groups of the world, witch-hunting in Bodo Society still prevails in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Media reports, police reports and NGO reports has made it clear that in the recent years, there is an increase in the number of incidence of the same. As found in the field, there is an increase in the number of witch-hunting cases. There are many cases which are not reported to the police. They did not take any help from the legal system. This practice has also somewhat increased by the influence of media, when the news channels focus on the incidence of witch-hunting in the different parts of the state. It is because they interpret the news as a support to their ideas and beliefs in witchcraft. Because media most often publish news that mentions only the name of the person killed and the incident, nothing related to the motives behind the witch hunts. The recent news reports and news channels of the state focuses on the issue of witch-hunting in Bodo society and one such example is like..

“Yet another incident of witch-hunting, a farmer had been brutally attacked by locales in the village of Bishmuri, Kokrajhar on Monday. Reportedly, a farmer identified as

Rabiram Narzary was brutally attacked by the people of his village on the suspicion of Narzary practicing witchcraft. The victim was later admitted in the hospital in a critical condition. Previously also, a student was being killed in the village under the suspicion of practicing witchcraft”. This news got published in Assam’s ‘DY365 (A 24\*7 satellite news channel)’ reports on July 24, 2017.

It was reported by the media that, in 2011, Assam recorded 29 cases of witch-hunting, out of which 19 cases were from the Bodo community. In order to make an analysis based on the details of the victims of witch-hunting in 2011, the data is shown below:

**Table 4:** List of the Bodo people killed in the name of witch-hunting, in the year 2011

Sl.no.	Date of hunting/ killing	Name	Sex	Age	Place or District
1	January 1, 2011	Sarat Bindu Hazowary	M	65	Kokrajhar, Habrubari
2	do	Toposri Hazowary	F	57	Do
3	April 15, 2011	Purni Basumatary	F	57	Kokrajhar, Serfanguri
4	do	Modani Boro	F	55	Do
5	April 16, 2011	Bifula Narzary	F	40	Kokrajhar
6	do	Ram Narzari	M	45	Do
7	April 17, 2011	Sarala Brahma	F	52	Do
8	April 19, 2011	Suresh Narzary	M	50	Do

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9	Do	Laogi Narzary	F	45	Do
10	April 29, 2011	Jugen Boro	M	65	Udalguri, Mazbat
11	Do	Alasi Boro	F	60	Do
12	June 3, 2011	Saniram Boro	M	65	Baksha
13	Do	Suren Ramsiary	M	62	Do
14	June 3, 2011	Hagam Boro	M	60	Baksha
15	Sept. 18, 2011	Sumi Baska	F	40	Chirang
16	October 9, 2011	Bigiram Narzary	M	60	Kokrajhar
17	October 9, 2011	Urbushi Narzary	F	55	Do
18	Nov. 6, 2011	Ramon Narzary	M	55	Chirang
19	Do	Bulao Narzary	F	50	Do

#### Analysis based on the above table:

- a) Many of the areas where witch-hunting took place had witnessed ugly scenes of ethnic riots, movement victims, and army & police raids where innocent villagers were tortured. So, these scars stayed back in emotionally weak minds to haunt them time and again. Traumatic stress made these people behave in abnormal way.
- b) Some cases of post-menopause behavior in women were also doubted as witches amongst the ignorant people. Post-menopause behavior is a kind of behavioral syndrome that is present in human beings of the age of 40 years and above. As it

can be seen in the table that all of the victims are of the age of 40 years and above.

- c) Generally, the number of women-victim happens to be higher than the number of men-victim in different ethnic groups, but in the Bodo community both men and women has the same number, or with a slight difference. It is because along with the wife, the husband is also often killed. The husband is suspected to be helping his wife in the practice of witch-craft.
- d) Some study reveals that sexual abuse may also be regarded as one of the causes behind witch-hunting. It is heard that when some powerful people in the village fails to exploit the women sexually, the women is accused of witch-craft, only to eliminate future threat of being accused by women for sexual violence. However, this theory of sexual abuse can be rarely applied in the context of witch-hunting practices prevalent among the Bodos of Assam, because it is seen that the number of men and women being killed in the name of witch-hunting are almost equal to each other as shown in the above table. Also this theory fails to gather popular support because the women are killed, as shown clearly in the above table are all above the age of 40 years, which is generally seen to be beyond the sexually attractive age.

## 5.8 Discussion

Conversion of religion is one aspect that is seen common among the Bodos since the 1930s. It can be said that they are influenced by others very easily if we see the history of their change of religion. The Bodos' conversion from indigenous animistic religion, *Bathou* to Christianity from the late 1930s; *Bathou* to *Brahma* religion during the late 1980s is seen in the history. And at present the original form of *Bathou* has been divided into two major denominations viz. - *Boli Bathou* and *Bibar Bathou*. This shifted the idea of ritualistic practice from sacrificing to offering. It can be analysed that Bodos gets converted to different religion in search of stability in socio-economic field and find a peaceful life that can help in getting away from evil practices like witchcraft; evil spells and curse and so on and so forth. Such kind of conversions has led to the separation

among themselves and not much socio-economic stability could be seen having a base on religion. It is observed that conversion to other religion did not help in getting away from the belief in witchcraft and evil spells.

Due to the growth of inequality in religion, some Bodos arise the feeling of hatred among themselves. Even though their culture, traditions and beliefs systems are one, their people from one religion dislikes the activities the other religion. But it is important to note that witch-hunting that occurs in the Bodo community is seen within the same religion and same village. If that is the case, how can one say that the growth of inequality in religion has been one of the causes of witch-hunting? For example, when a Bodo Christian village experience that witchcraft is working actively in their village; the “witch” is identified and for them it is the work of the other religion. This is their idea that doing Hinduism/Bathouism rituals are evil and that it is harming their people in one way or the other. The same is in the case of Bodo Bathou, when someone in their village follows western cultures/Christian religion, they dislikes him/her. They believe in *gamiyao gajri hubbai* or *shua jabai* which means “Evil has entered the village or sin has touched”. And finally social exclusion and ostracization of witches takes place.

Moreover, the idea and value given to *ojah* earlier was equalized to sacred and holy and they had the most respectful position in Bodo society. It can be mentioned that among the Bodos of Kokrajhar district, now-a-days the ideas and acts of *baba* (astrologer or sage) are seen as gaining the most respectful status in the same society. It is because one *ojah* blames the other *ojah* as witch and there is a blame game going on in order to marginalize the status of one another. There is a pre-conceived notion among the Bodos that an *ojah* can both harm and save the lives of the people. But they believe that *babas* always do holy acts and so they are regarded as superior to *ojahs*. The witches are therefore believed as the followers of *ojah* who learn only evil practices and try to harm people.

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