

**CHAPTER 6**

**Conclusions**

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This chapter tries to sum up all the discussion incorporated in the thesis and highlights the contribution of the work. It also clarifies the hypothesis that the practice of witch-hunting as it has been carried out in Bodo Society, reveals that there is a deep politics related to it, rather than being just a religious or traditional belief that has been taken for granted.

Before summing up, it is felt important to note down some points that were observed while collecting data for the study. Interviewing the villagers looks very easy but by taking the issue of witch-hunting, interviewing them happens to be a hard task as it is one of the most sensitive issues to deal with. In order to find out the fact and ground reality of the issue of witch-hunting, the researcher should challenge to interview the accused witches, the accused witch-hunters, the accusers, the exorcist, the traditional medicinal practitioners, the family members of the accused witches and the villagers.

Majority of the informants often request the researcher not to go to the accused witches' house because they think that witches might attack or cast their spell. Some accusers and accused witch-hunters are conscious about the matter and they try to stop being questioned. Sometimes, they do not disclose everything they have seen and thought about their belief on witchcraft and the witchcraft accusations. So, it is necessary to convince them that it is educational research on 'witch hunt' which will not harm them. It is also important to inform the accusers and the villagers that the study won't involve police, media persons or NGOs. On the contrary, the accused witch and their family members should be informed about the involvement of police, media persons or NGOs in the present study.

While collecting data, the whole structuring of question sometimes has to be changed according to the context and situation, keeping in mind, where and whom the interview has been made. The friendly environment should be created first so that the interviewee feels comfortable to reveal whatever he/she believes to be true. Moreover, the interview

has to be planned with no any prior notice to the interviewee in order to expect the natural and genuine responses. But the data one collects from the field happens to be mostly incomplete, with no any valid evidence rather only narratives from their memories and creativity. It is because, the matters on witchcraft gets circulated during gossips in the form of narratives from one individual to different people, from one house to different houses and from one village to different villages.

The belief in witchcraft is so strong among the ‘Tribal Community’ that no amount of reasoning can dissuade the tribal communities of the belief and necessity of torturing or murdering the witches (Choudhuri, 2008; Sinha, 2007).

Understanding the viewpoint of all the accused witches; the accusers and the villagers, it is obvious to state that the strong belief in witchcraft among the Bodo tribal community of Assam has stimulated them to continue witch hunts. Deborah Willis when analyzing the Scottish and English witch-hunts came out with a conclusion that the idea of witch as a bad person is existed in the mind of the accusers. Burns (1959) also noted that, this analysis is influential among feminist intellectuals.

The issue of witch-hunting is prevalent in Bodo society even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Witches are accepted as reality and so the practice of witch-hunting. Witch-hunting cases are generally registered as a murder case. There are some cases where the victim of witch-hunting still lives but banished or ex-communicated. Such cases are most often left unregistered because there is either no one to complain to the police or they are not aware of the fact that police should keep record about it or the police get confused whether to register it as murder case/domestic violence/physical abuse/displacement. The exact number of witch-hunting cases is still not easy to find out as there is no any legal law made against ‘witch-hunting’.

The Bodos’ idea of magic (not confined to black magic or white magic) is akin to the idea of witchcraft. According to them, magic is witchcraft and witchcraft is magic and that they are directly proportional. They believe that those people who are magicians are witches, because they can use their supernatural powers in doing good as well as bad to

others. Magic/witchcraft is regarded as always bad in this sense and religion to be good. The two concepts 'religion' and 'witchcraft' have an opposite direction although their origin developed from the same root. Jonathan H. Thumra (2006) in his book *Religious Traditions of India* had also spoken about magic that it is thought of as at least potentially directed against the society, whereas this is not the case in religion. No religious teachings encourage the practice of witchcraft or magic, it is a personal choice in order to bring destructions and harm to others. Magic is a practical and aggressive acts performed as a means to an end, whereas in religion the rituals are not means to an end, but an end in itself. In magic, the rites carried out during the celebration of the birth of a child aim at the prevention of a child or person from death. But on the other hand in religion, the same ceremony is a presentation of a newborn baby, or a feasting or rejoicing because a new being has been added into the family. Such a ceremony is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. It expresses the feeling of the parents and the relatives of the child. On the other hand, magic is a rite to prevent death and is carried out as a means to an end.

Nineteenth century historians ascribed the persecution of witchcraft to religious hysteria. And when Margaret Murray proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect, popular writers trumpeted that the great hunt was not a mere panic, but rather a deliberate attempt to exterminate Christianity's rival religion. Today, we know that there are only a few evidences to support this theory.

In contemporary period, the Bodo Christians follow the same line of condemnation as followed by European Christians. They follow the condemnation of witchcraft as cited in Biblical verse, Exodus 22:18, "*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*". As found in the field, religion plays an important role in widening the belief on witchcraft practice and in prevalence of the practice of witch-hunting among the tribal society. Basically, the priest and *Ojha* play an active role in saving people from plague with the help of special knowledge or skills that they possess. They are thus significant religious and social figures in Bodo Community. Regarding the power and deep belief of the priest and *ojha*, it can be understood that their experiences are true to the best of their knowledge. The outsiders can't prove them wrong because, they do not have the capacity to experience

what the priest and *ojha* have experienced so far. But in relation to the belief in witchcraft and the existence of witch, their knowledge does not reach the level where the material world and spiritual world is differentiated. They consider everything as the work of either holy-spirit or evil-spirit that are led by human beings, and ignores the point that human beings are social being who construct the binary opposition idea of good and evil of the society and that this construction is led by human beings. Hence, it can be stated that, witchcraft and religion are the two different parts of the same root. If one believes in religion, one has the tendency to believe in witchcraft because both imply belief in supernatural forces.

It is the evil spirit that works in harmful activities, not the witch. In our day-to-day life, we meet only human beings. As the 'witch' is in the form of human being, he/she is blamed and not the spirit, because it is impossible to torture/kill the evil spirit. The witch is just a simple normal human being that can deal only with material world and not evil spirit. The priests and *ojahs* play as role enforcer in legitimizing witch-hunt by confirming the existence of witchcraft, identifying the accused witch, and then justifying a hunt against the alleged witch. Through exorcism they can control over the evil or harmful spirit. They are the people who use their power to counteract the power of witch and evil spell. The same kind of idea was also shared by Soma Choudhuri (2008) in her thesis regarding witch hunts among the Adivasi tribal community living in West Bengal. Almost all the priests and *ojahs* opined that witchcraft exists, but they said there is no need to learn that craft because it is evil and moreover suggests that we being a social being, should not believe/trust in such kind of evil powers. According to them learning of witchcraft and practicing witchcraft creates chaos in the society and adds to social tensions.

One could always find social tensions, perhaps because they always exist in any society. People deal with people and society deals with society, so societal tensions and issues occur due to competitions with one another living in the same society (the world). Mary Douglas also said something related to this argument. She says,

"Wherever belief in witchcraft was found to flourish, the hypothesis that accusations would tend to cluster in niches where social relations were ill defined and competitive could not fail to work, because competitiveness and ambiguity were identified by means of witch accusations."

It has been explored that, the ideological concept of witchcraft is basically guided by the religious institutions and the discourses about it which in turn lead to misconception and chaos in the society. Witch-hunting is the product of chaos and misconception that is prevalent due to the ideological concept of witchcraft which is always equalized to derogatory practice. It is never considered as profession although it is believed to be the work/practice of witches in their daily lives because negative connotations are attached to it and so believed to be always associated with evil. And just because the practice of witchcraft has no scientific evidence and only holds emotion and imaginable beliefs, it can be termed as 'superstitious belief' that is based on traditionally constructed ideas on witchcraft. Deconstruction of such ideas seems to be the most important task for those cultures where witch-hunting practices are prevalent even in this post-modern world of rational, technological and scientific thinking.

Witch-hunting cases amongst the Bodo community of Assam has a slight similarity and more dissimilarity with what Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English suggested (1973) in their book *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* said that "most witches were mid-wives and female healers". This idea is convinced by many feminists and Pagans that the great hunt was a pogrom aimed at traditional women healers. The Church and State sought to break the power of these women by accusing them of witchcraft and driving a wedge of fear between the wise-woman and her clients. But the idea cannot be generalized with the witch-hunting in the context of the Bodos of Assam. It is because there are a number of accused witches who are not mid-wives, perhaps in Bodo society, mid-wives are respected and valued. Moreover, the number of men and women accused of practicing witchcraft are equal, and we cannot say that female-healers are mostly accused. In fact, most of the accused witches are not female-healers amongst the Bodos. Both men and women are found to be in the category of *ojha* and so in the category of *dayna* too. The *Ojhas* are respected and valued unlike *daynas*.

Anjali Daimary (2012) also has explored the conflict between *dayna* and *ojha* and the marginalization of the former by the later. This kind of internal conflict between the two has been found in the study and discussed in chapter 3 and chapter 5. It is believed that only the *ojha* or the exorcists can identify witches and counter their power. So, it is their privilege to marginalize or subordinate the others having similar healing capability as *dayna*.

The strong belief in witchcraft leads to the practice of witch-hunting and the same practice causes the belief in witchcraft to grow more active in contemporary period. Traditional healers blame on evil-spirit and witchcraft if any disease is found incurable and unidentified by the modern medicinal doctors. Hence modern medicines are regarded useless when it comes to witchcraft spells, magical work and supernatural attacks.

The belief in witchcraft is strong in the Bodo society because of lack of rational thinking and ignorance of medical sciences. There is no medical college or good quality hospital that can meet basic healthcare needs of people in the region, they are lacking in awareness. Shortage of doctors and quality medicines has been found to be the main reason for the poor healthcare services. The doctors' unwillingness to work in the rural hinterland is another reason in this regard. The *ojha* is found to be living nearby their houses. With easy accessibility, less expenses and with no language problem, the people living in those areas prefer *ojha*, a local traditional medicinal practitioner more than modern medicinal doctor. Those people understand Bodo language and find it tough to explain their disease symptoms in Assamese language or any other language. The point is that the modern medicinal doctor doesn't understand their language and they don't understand the doctor's language. So, it becomes easier for them to go to the *ojha* and explain everything in their own language. This also makes the patients mentally satisfied and feels that the *ojha* could understand the disease and so he must be giving the best curable medicines. So, health facility is one of the major problems found in the field area, when studying the subject matter of witch-hunting. The Government of Assam is not giving attention to the backwardness in the field of health care facility, or if they have already noticed so far, the action of making health care development has not yet been started.

The historical and socio-political issue relates to the issue of witch-hunting in the context of the Bodos. A crucial period of their socio-political movement got started in the 1980s by some Bodo leaders and since then, the Bodo community has been experiencing a critical period of identity and ethnicity crisis, which in a way stimulates their antagonism characteristics among themselves. As a result, it gets reflected in the form of witch-hunting practices among themselves. Prior to the period of the movement, beliefs in witchcraft existed among the Bodos. They were scared of going nearby witches, the house of the witch and the people manage not to pass through the village where witches lived. But, it was only the late 1980s that the hunting of witches started and practiced to a great extends in contemporary period.

It is important to note that folklore is a societal construction. Folk-tales, novels and all the folk-literatures are produced by the members of the society, in order to shape the society in the right way they believe/think of. The belief related to magical transformation and magical powers goes in circulation among the people from ages which in a way lead to strong beliefs in the practice of witch-craft. It is also believed that, if the *ojah* can prepare love-medicines, he/she can also prepare hate-medicines. So the belief-structure of the society took a shape of binary opposition viz. - love/hate, good/bad, harm/protect, evil/holy and so on and so forth.

Gossip and rumors play an important part in the processes leading to accusations of any 'wrongdoing' which is similar in witchcraft accusations. When the idea of witchcraft is not overtly at work, rumor and gossip may work as a covert form of witchcraft against persons. Gossips are to be regarded as one of the oral-literature. The dreams, the incidence and the idea about witches and their practice of witchcraft get circulated among the members of the society via gossips and rumors. When the rumors spread wider, the sense of unity among the people's ideas grow stronger. It is important to note that women are very much engaged in such kind of activities. The person who gossips and the person who is gossiped are both women most often. It is like, women are involved in witch-hunting through oral, in the form of gossips and rumors; and men are involved in witch-hunting through action, in the form of beating, killing, hitting, and burning alive and so on as discussed in chapter 5 of the thesis.



Most often the whole village is involved in witch-hunting cases. Cultural violence of witch-hunting is also accompanied by performance. When there are any witch-hunting cases, it gathers audience for proof. The whole village is announced in advance about the village meeting to be held against a person's wrong doing. By hearing the word 'wrong-doing of a person/villager', almost all the villagers are aware of the fact that it is going to be a village meeting against a person whose name had already become popular that he/she is a witch. The people make ready themselves to watch the performance of witch-hunting that is going to be organized in the open field of their village. The villagers are an active audience to their cultural violence. This unity in thoughts was already built among the villagers/themselves. The accusation process is then led to inquisition process.

The spread of belief in witchcraft occurs due to lack of information among the folks who mostly are illiterate and finds hard to adjust with the changing aspects of science and technologies. In contemporary period, as the illustrative cases reveals, the inquisition process is seen very rare. There is a shift in the process of accusation. It can be seen that, there occur sudden attack, murder hiding, beating and torturing with a small groups, without examining or asking the accused witch of anything related to the practice of witchcraft. Understanding the viewpoint of all the accused witches; the accusers and the villagers, it is obvious to state that the strong belief in witchcraft among the Bodo tribal community of Assam has stimulated them to continue witch hunts.

The practice of witch hunting has been prevalent in Assam since 1980s, though it was never documented. A senior IPS official Kuladhar Saikia was the first to stress the need for a special law to tackle witch-hunting. He said that the police had tough problem in investigating the issue as in some cases the entire community or village got involved in witch-hunting. Villagers never revealed anything to 'outsiders'. In most of the cases no witness could be found. He explained the importance of understanding culture and problems at the grassroots level. This approach led him to infer that since witchcraft and insurgency were linked with poverty and lack of education, a different approach was required to deal with the situation. Saikia believes that witch-hunting could be eradicated by undertaking a common platform involving NGOs, women activists, administrative heads and the law-enforcement machinery. The little attention that it received was only when some organization had conducted a press conference. No effort was made to make

the people aware of the *Project Prahari* undertaken by the government of Assam to curb this social menace and superstition. It is important to note that *The Assam Tribune* rarely reports the work of Project Prahari.

The crusader Birubala Rabha has pressurized the state and central government to curb the social evil of witch-hunting by speaking in public and media. At present she runs the NGO Mission Birubala through which effort has been made to erase the notion of ‘witches’ from the minds of rural people. Such effort has helped her achieve the honorary doctorate degree from a university in Assam. She shared about her experiences in the media not only confined to Assam but the whole world.

Media not only brings the attention of the people towards the issue but also the attention of the policy makers. The mass media and communication is important in examining social problems, both how they are born and how they persist. It acts as a tool for social change therefore focuses on different spheres of development including the political, socio- economic and cultural. So, it should not fail to portray ethical news about witch-hunting and not fail to focus on the works and contributions done for curbing the practice of witch-hunting.

When there is any discussion among the insiders, on the topic of witchcraft, the central focus lies on the witches’ negative points and characters. It is seen as a contrast to the discussion among the outsiders, about the same topic. In outsiders’ discussion, the central focus lies on the witches’ trauma and the ways/process of marginalization used by the witch-hunters. The outsiders who doesn’t believe in the power of witches most often comes to discuss about ‘witchcraft’ or ‘witches’ with them. But experiencing this, the insiders 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 provide rehabilitation to the accused witches.

Witch-hunting is regarded as a serious social issue and the witch-hunters are regarded as criminals by the outsiders, no matter what cultural contexts and traditions they carry. It is because they are recognized as uneducated, uncivilized and superstitious. So, the

government is trying to curb this practice. The social activist and members of women associations are relentlessly working on appealing the government to enact a law against witch-hunting as soon as possible. A top-down model of policy against witch-hunting has been seen as effective in context of Assam. This can be stated based on the field data analysis which has been discussed in chapter 4 of the thesis.

The projects, movements or crusades undertaken by different organizations have assisted in the decision making process of the Government of Assam having brought to light certain facts about witch-hunting and the deep rooted belief on witchcraft. The insiders are considered as innocent, so it's the duty of the government to take remedial measures.

New Generation people of the Bodo community have got a changed idea on the belief of witchcraft and more about the practice of witch-hunting. Their belief got diminished because in the contemporary society, gossips and rumors about witches are not given much importance. Their interests in knowing about witches are rarely seen. Perhaps, their less interest shows their idea that "*Witchcraft is a superstition and the belief in witches is a superstitious belief*". Furthermore, as the young generation Bodos engage more with education and rational thinking, they get into finding solutions for diminishing such social issue of witch-hunting. They join hands with the outsiders and their effort in curbing the practice of witch-hunting.

Finally, it can be said that simply adopting a law against witch-hunting will not suffice. Along with the legal order and law, it is religion and education that can achieve success in eliminating both the belief in witchcraft and the practice of witch-hunting in contemporary period. For those people who are from the witch-hunting prone areas, higher education should be made easier and health facilities should be made accessible in order to curb witch-hunting not only from the societal practice but from the mentality of the society. A proper awareness programme with campaign, door to door education, field study about the issue in a contextual basis, distribution of leaflets against witch-hunting to the people is required. Furthermore, the specific nature of this issue as well as the commonalities that it shares with other such practices across the world need to be understood.

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