

Witch Hunting— An Unabated Social Menace of Assam

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Abstract

Assam, like many other parts across the country, often witnesses deaths, injuries and miseries resulting from witch hunting, an odious crime. Recurring incidents of killings in the name of witch hunting have alarmingly challenged the laws and various anti-witch hunting programmes. But what it is behind such a heinous practice and what renders this social menace unabated is really a matter of serious concern for every conscious mind. And this is the predominant focus of this paper. It takes up the cases of witch hunting in Assam with special reference to those of Thakurbila village of Goalpara district. Then it analyses the initiatives taken by Project Prahari and Mission Biro Bala to find out the reasons why these programmes are yet to put to an end this evil practice. Finally this paper arrives at the finding that there is always a wide space between the practitioners of this crime and the saviors— while the former is trapped in the traditional beliefs, the later is enlightened by the scientific mode of looking at things. It seems like the crisis will go unstoppably until both drop their biased stands and are ready to honour each other's belief and know-how.

Keywords: Witch-craft, witch hunting, Thakurbilla village, Project Prahari, Mission Biro Bala, traditional beliefs, scientific temperament

1. Introduction

Human civilization has witnessed pretty technological breakthroughs down through the years. Whether traditionalists believe or not, technological means have enhanced the quality of our lives. We could make our way from savage life to robot life through the use of new know-how. However, under these triumphs of science and technology lurks the shadow of superstitions— indeed, we very often indulge in some heinous practices in the name of traditional beliefs and become the victims of them pitifully. Witch hunting in Assam is one such heinous practice, which has wide-ranging effects in society. The acute menace that witch-craft and witch hunting are supposed to bring about has always been heart-breaking! Its remedial measures are perhaps rarer than any incredible thing that can ensure a healthy society.

There is still inadequacy in mitigating this challenge, albeit Project Prahari and Mission Biro Bala have been found to be up and doing in their missions. As this research finds, traditional beliefs have proved to be the major hurdle in removing this menace from society. As these beliefs are deep-rooted in the minds of the village community, the problem seems persisting as never ending problem. This paper has taken Thakurbilla village of Goalpara district particularly to give an account of the practice of witch craft; for witch-craft assumes different forms with the variation of locations, though its effects are similar everywhere it occurs. Thus this paper is based on the empirical study of the affected area and the personal interviews with Kula Saikia, the mastermind of Project Prahari¹ and Biro Bala Rabha, an activist as well as the founder of Mission Biro Bala².

2. Witch-Craft: Historical Evidences

It is, however, difficult to define witch-craft in an all-comprehensive manner because it assumes various definitions and implications with the changes of locations, cultures and traditions. But whatever be the differences in its forms, people across the world would opine that witch is believed to have some malignant power by the spell of which she inflicts harm on the people and the society above all.

Thus in a society where witch-craft is a religio-cultural practice, every calamity, natural or man-made, any misfortune, physical or mental, are attributed to the witch-craft and hence a woman, who is suspected to be a witch, is held responsible for all such calamities occurring in society. Witch hunting, as the practice implies, is the searching for witches and thus harassing and finally killing them brutally. Quite naturally, hatred, violent attack, mass-killing and even rapes etc are the pitiful outcomes of witch hunting.

History reveals that witch-craft and witch-hunting are nothing new in human civilization. The Assamese vocabulary for 'witch' is 'daini'. It is said that this word daini has been derived from Indo-Aryan term dakini.³ In Tantric Buddhism, Dakini is termed as the female Buddha of wisdom. "In general, the Buddhist term "Dakini" can be taken to mean goddess. In the Tibetan language this Sanskrit term is translated as Khandroma (mkha '-gro-ma) meaning "she who traverses the sky" or "she who moves in space". Dakinis are active manifestations of energy. Therefore, they are usually depicted as dancing, this also indicating that they actively participate in the world, or in the spiritual perspective, in both Samsara and Nirvana."⁴ There is also mention of witch-craft in Hebrew Bible: "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witch-craft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead."⁵ Assam was once famous for black magic. Even today tantric or occult rituals are widely practiced to avert evil spirits. The practice is so firm-rooted in some parts of it, particularly in tribal belts, that people think all their miseries to be due to some evil spirits and thus rush to the tantric (occult practitioners) or ojhas (local healers) for the remedies.

3. The Practice of Witch-Hunting in Assam — Thakurbilla Village is a Case in Point

As the sources reveal, witch hunting is prevalent in the remote areas of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Baksa, Goalpara, Darrang, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, and Dhemaji etc. districts of Assam. One incident of such heinous practice which shook the collective conscience of the country is the October 2013 witch hunting case of Majuli. As the report goes, "A remote Mishing tribe village called Shikari in Majuli river island in Assam has hogged headlines with reports saying from the village that about 35 persons in the tribal village are being persecuted by a section of superstitious villagers blaming them for causing illness to a 11-year-old boy in the village who have been bogged down by chicken pox. The 30 odd persons have been marked after a section of villagers believed that their names were uttered by the sick."⁶

Witch-craft and witch-hunting have been in practice in Assam for years. Remarkably, the way it is practiced varies from area to area within the state. As my personal witness claims, the cases of South Assam are slightly different from those of other areas. Unlike other parts of Assam, witch hunting is not so frequent in South Assam, though witchcraft is prevalent there too. Here in the present work, however, a survey has been made in Thakurbilla village of Goalpara district to find the causes of this odious crime, which seem to instigate the similar incidents in other parts of the state as well.

To look through the causes of this ill-practice, it seems relevant to summarize the backdrop of it. Witch hunting is popular in those remote areas where the people are deprived of having basic existential infrastructures like education, health care, sanitation and proper communication facilities etc. Thakurbilla is one such place where all these facilities are minimal or even a far cry! Unfortunately, when the people of these areas fall sick, they consult Bez or Oja, a local healer. Intriguingly, nobody knows what credentials of the Bez guarantee his treatment. Still in matter of healing their diseases, he is their immediate preference or even more so. As the Oja lacks adequate medical knowledge, he finds some supernatural factors in every case of the diseases. He often declares that the illness is due to the influence of witch. In such a situation, he can brand any person as witch, in most cases the one who is on bad terms with him or who does not have faith in his healing method or prediction. This is the case that happened to Biro Bala Rabha when she ignored Oja's treatment\prediction and took her son to a hospital.⁷ However, her scientific temperament earned her a life of chastisement and isolation, because her fellow-villagers boycotted her and eventually branded her as a witch.⁸ Consequently, she had to face all the disciplinary actions of those superstitious people and even life threatening from them.

Thus witch-hunting is still meaningful in those areas, which are far away from receiving the blessings of science and technology. Indeed, vulnerable are those areas, where the community pitifully lacks the awareness of modern infrastructural facilities in healing their ailments in particular and in meeting their basic needs in general.

4. Blind Faith Hinders Scientific Approach to the Problem

Recurrent incidents of witch hunting and the plight of the victims led Biro Bala Rabha and Kula Saikia dwell on the question—

How could this menace be handled? While Mission Biro Bala led by Biro Bala Rabha would fight against it from within, i.e., being within the community, Project Prahari steered by Kula Saikia dealt it from outside well-equipped with modern institutional amenities and fed by scientific temperament. The ways Kula Saikia could approach by were visiting the affected areas/families, inquiring to the suspects, prosecuting and delivering punitive measures etc. These are roughly the steps of the scientific approach that an IPS officer could adopt in identifying the perpetrators. However, all these actions are fairly conditioned by the scope of law and order within which he is placed and also by the cooperation of the people of the areas in question. So far as the cooperation was concerned, he was more likely to embrace hopelessness. His institutional techniques could not bring much good as the villagers showed unwanted cohesion in hushing the crimes up.⁹ Furthermore, the people are so much overpowered by their faith in traditional practices (which are nothing more than superstitions) that they would tend to be impulsive rather than being rational. They believe that their bond is based upon their faith and hence they do not want go against it in the fear of losing the bond. Fear of embracing new concept is at the root why they do not like to employ their reason, the instrument of scientific enquiry, in understanding of and facing any problem. Kula Saikia shared his appalling experience of his interrogation of a young man in relation to the murder of the latter's father. The young man, he said, joined hands with his fellow-neighbours in killing his father because he, like others, believed that his father was a witch, even though he confessed that his father was a very good man.¹⁰

Traditional beliefs are so deeply rooted in the minds of them that perhaps it held back Project Prahari's mastermind from carrying out his mission. He was, in fact, in an in-betweenness position— between a state of hesitation in breaking the tradition to reach out and remove the causes of the menace in one hand and the limitation of his own position that the modern institutional rigors reared by scientific temperament allowed him to do on the other.¹¹ Probably here Biro Bala Rabha's movement could take on the peril in a more effective way; because she was brought up amidst the same tradition even as she was inspired by the scientific way of looking at things. Again, her effort was not restricted by any modern institutional code. Even then, her activities may not be said to be beyond predicament, for her actions, which often led by her might, would risk her life at the hands of biased masses.

5. Conclusion

Both traditionalism and modernism are good enough so far as they do not weigh down the progress of the society. What is the use of holding on the age-old practices if they bring us heaps of miseries? Again, what is great in following modernism if it totally empties us of our precious traditional values? In fact, blind faith, whatever it is on, leads to extremism, which is not likely to bring any good in any sphere. In the context of the witch hunting in Thakurbilla village, it is inferable that the Oja, one who is credited to instigate such heinous crime, could turn opportunist at times because of the community's immense faith\ blind belief in his healing. Again, village community's immense faith on him was due to the lack of adequate medical facilities in the vicinity. This implies they lead a sort of life in which their belief is all what they should count. And this is the root of their miseries. This obviously points to the necessity of urgent uplift of socio-economic status of the community and the installation of a rational mindset. However, as the things cannot be changed overnight, we can better mend what we have already. Probably it would be a wise step to train our local healer in the light of improved skills so he can provide the village community at least with a rational explanation of their ailments. Once he is enlightened by the modern know-how, he would hopefully be able to put in check his vested interests. This way, we can create mass awareness among the people so they are not easily manipulated by any illogical force. Again, launching community management programmes may help remove the menace in the long run, if not work as a quick fix. Assam is traditionally rich in agriculture, arts and crafts. Furthermore, women-folk of the tribal belts are pretty assiduous. Thus adopting modern methods of agriculture, involving more women in the field of handicrafts and weaving may be some of the measures that can be taken up as the initial community management programme. That's how perhaps we could honour our tradition even as we adopt the means of science and technology.

Notes and References

Project Prahari was the programme launched with a view to removing the curses like witch-hunting from the society. This project was also of a kind of rehabilitation programme. Its founder was Kula Saikia, an IPS officer as well as the present DIG of Guwahati, Assam.

Mission Biro Bala is a promising project founded by the activist Biro Bala Rabha, who once became the victim of witch hunting. An inhabitant of Thakurbilla village of Goalpara district, Assam, Biro Bala Rabha was nominated for Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 for her relentless efforts to remove superstitions from society. She saved around 35 families from the jaw of witch-hunting!

See Chatterjee, S. K. (1970). *Origin and Development of Bengali Language*. Calcutta University Press, Calcutta., Reynolds, John Myrdhin (2009), "Wisdom Dakinis, Passionate and Wrathful".
vajranatha.com/teaching/Dakinis/.htm. accessed 1-12-2014.

Deuteronomy 18:10-12.

Majuli village in the eye of a storm over witch hunting episode,
<http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2013/10/16/majuli-village-in-eye-of-a-storm-over-witch-hunting-episode>
accessed 29-11-2014.

When her eldest son suffered from mental disorder, he was taken to the Bez, the local healer. Bez diagnosed it as a sure case of witch and he predicted that her son would die after three days. But Biro Bala Rabha did not heed to his prediction and took her son to a hospital in Shillong for better treatment. Fortunately, her son healed. Thus Oja proved wrong and this made Biro Bala lose all her faith in any local healer.

It is the verse uttered by the community to brand Biro Bala Rabha as witch: ghorore daini ghorore bhutuni ghorore korni ghorore barni. It means the witch or the evil spirit is already there in the house.

Kula Saikia said that nobody came out as a witness during the investigation. On interrogation, the people would deny their crimes in unison. Surprised, he said, there is tremendous community bond in these areas or how they could kill someone and keep quiet about it!

Breaking the Spell. *The Hindu*, Mar 20, 2012.

Kula Saikia said, "I couldn't have that heart to take on a practice continuing for generations. The community would have thought that I was questioning their age-old tradition."