

## WOMEN PLUS

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**W**itch-hunting is a criminal offence, where some women are attacked violently, tortured, assaulted mentally and verbally, and also killed in certain cases. Uneducated people having superstitious beliefs think that these women have unnatural evil power (black magic) through which they can kill people mysteriously, create influence in the body and mind of people, and bring about famine or natural disasters.

The reasons behind this include a male-dominated hegemonistic attitude of people in remote villages with no educational background — who blame women for everything bad that occurs in the surroundings, personal rivalry, greed to grab property forcefully and / or failure to engage in sexual exploitation.

In Assam, witch-hunting is mainly prevalent in 20 districts, primarily among different tribal and non-tribal communities, according to a recent study. Due to inadequate healthcare facilities in remote villages, if a person falls ill or dies, the superstitious people, mainly due to lack of proper education, believe that it is the act of a single woman or widow, known as witch or *dairi*, who uses black magic to kill people. The male ego of dominance, along with patriarchal mindset, looks down upon a woman.

In distant villages, due to the lack of proper sanitation and healthcare system, people, upon being ill, rush to *ojhas* or *deochhans*, on whom they have blind faith due to different tantric practices. For example, when

# An unfair world

Banning the practice of witch-hunting is the need of the hour.



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an *ojha* was unable to cure a lady's husband, who was suffering from cancer, then it was attributed to her witchcraft by one of their closest relatives. Bad harvest or sometimes conspiracy by close relatives to grab property or land by branding widows as 'black magic women' are also some of the factors.

As per available reports from the State Government, 107 people became victims of witch-hunting between 2011 and 2019. The highest number of witch-hunting deaths was reported from Kokrajhar, Chirang and Udalguri districts of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). Two people

became victims of mindless violence by a mob in Rahimpur district in Karbi Anglong on the night of September 30, 2020, on the judgement of a kangaroo court that these two people were witches who have brought calamities to the village.

In India, between 2002 and 2016, a total of 2,290 people became victims of witch-hunting, mostly women, according to a National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report. The hotbed of 'witch-hunting' is Jharkhand, where about 1,000 people have been murdered in the last 22 years.

Birubala Rabha, who was herself a victim of witch-hunting, decided to fight against the existent ominous system and started campaigning against it from 1996 onwards. Her sincere, brave efforts were antagonised by the local villagers in every possible way to stop her, but a resolute Birubala rescued 50 women from the clutches of the ominous forces. Here started her greater journey to eradicate the menace totally and, finally, 'Mission Birubala' was launched in 2012. Till date, the mission has around 1,000 members,

and around 200 cases of witch-hunting have been prevented. "I even got severe life threats, but I have dedicated the mission of my life for others," said Birubala Rabha.

Rabha's efforts prompted the Assam Legislative Assembly to pass 'The Assam Witch-Hunting (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015', which finally got the President's approval in 2018. This Act prescribes a person who identifies, calls, stigmatises any other person as witch or abets any such acts will be subjected to a prison term up to seven years with a fine of up to five lakhs. If anyone kills a person after branding him/her as a witch, then punishment will be given in accordance with Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. If a person commits suicide for being branded as a witch, the punishment may be extended to life imprisonment with a maximum fine of five lakh rupees.

The contribution of another person behind this legislation is former DGP of Kokrajhar, Kuladhar Saikia, who launched 'Project Prahar' which gave stress on special campaigning against the heinous crime of witch-hunting as an additional part of normal policing. The Assamese feature film *Aei Maatite*, released in 2017 and directed by Dr. Sitanath Lahkar, provides a vivid picture of this ominous social problem.

Greater social movement against the menace, stringent implementation of witch-hunting act, better healthcare, spreading scientific education by various NGOs in remote villages, along with stress on 'gender equality', may be some of the possible tools to stop the menace.