

Impact of Witch Crafts among the Adivashi Community in Assam: An Overview:

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Introduction:

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." 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." 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.

Objective of the study:

1. To the Witch craft practices in the study area of Assam.

Research Methodology:

The study has been undertaken with help of the secondary data. The secondary data has been supported from the published and unpublished materials and news papers etc.

THE PRACTICE OF WITCH-HUNTING IN ASSAM —

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.” 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. 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. 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.

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 way 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. 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 to 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.

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 between's 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.

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.

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

1. 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.
2. 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!
3. Chatterjee, S. K. (1970). Origin and Development of Bengali Language. Calcutta University Press, Calcutta,.
4. Reynolds, John Myrdhin (2009), "Wisdo Dakini Passionate Wrathful". mvajranatha.com/teaching/Dakinis/.htm. accessed 1-12-2014. Deuteronomy 18:10-12. ajuli village in the eye of a storm over witch hunting episode,
5. <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2013/10/16/majuli-village-in-eye-of-a-storm-over-witch-hunting-episode> accessed 29-11-2014.