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The 'witches' of Assam: Hunted, beheaded and raped

In some of the remotest corners of Assam, women, and sometimes men, are routinely branded witches and killed, beheaded, raped and force-fed excreta by raging mobs. Almost a year after the state passed a bill to curb the practice of witch-hunting, not much has changed, finds Amrita Madhukalya

Reported By:  | Edited By: Amrita Madhukalya | Source: DNA | Updated: Dec 05, 2017, 02:04 PM IST



Witches



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As she sits and chews *tamul* and *paan*, Birubala Rabha recounts the countless times she has stood in front of a mob of angry villagers, many of whom would be only too happy to harm her. "Last month, I went to this village about 15km away on foot. It was a rainy day and I was thirsty by the time I reached. When I asked them for water, they refused," she says.

In a while, the villagers brought out a woman who worked with her. She looked like she had been beaten up. "They were angry that I had stopped them from killing a woman in their village by bringing in the police a few years ago. That day, I was going to the village to hold an awareness meeting on witch-hunting," Rabha adds.

Over two hours of verbal abuses later, she was asked to sign a paper declaring that she would now no longer come to the village. "I signed it while they punched the woman... but let's see how they stop us," Rabha spits, anger writ large on her face.

Sixty-year-old Birubala Rabha hails from Thakurbila, a village on the Assam-Meghalaya border located in Goalpara district. It has a sizeable presence of NDFB and ULFA ultras. Thakurbila is technically 170km from Guwahati, Assam's capital, but getting there takes some doing.

Rabha, nominated by a state NGO for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, is a profile in courage in a society steeped in prejudice and belief in the occult. Her first brush with its pernicious impact was in 1985, when she took her eldest son Dharmeshwar, suffering from a mental disorder, to a local *bez* (quack).



Birubala Rabha 60

He told me that my son has impregnated a fairy and will die in three days. My son did not die,"

She later admitted him to a mental facility in Nongpoh in neighbouring Meghalaya, where he lives till today.

In 2000, Mamoni Saikia, an official from the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS), which works closely with the state government, held a meeting in Thakurbila. A few women told her about the problem of witch-hunting, and how they had faced harassment and routine beatings. But when Saikia asked the women if witches, or *dainis*, really existed, the only woman who said they don't was Birubala Rabha.

Her courage was remarkable, says Saikia. "This is a place where women need the permission of their husbands to come to a meeting, and where they are so shy that they run away if you ask them their names. For Birubala to have spoken against the whole village, she needed nerves of steel," she recollects.

Rabha remembers the day vividly. "None of the women spoke. I remembered how the *deudhani* (local priest) had lied that my son would die and told Saikia there are no witches," she says. "I said that these people script lies about the lives of innocent people, destroying homes."

Not surprisingly, she invited the ire of the village, who harassed Rabha into 'signing' a paper retracting what she had said. "I was removed from the secretary of the local women's organisation and they ostracised me for three years. The villagers came around only when they needed my help to release a local man from the army's headquarters after an ULFA insurgent had broken into his house and had lunch."



The numbers

In the remotest corners of Assam, a state usually out of sight in the mainstream imagination, a witch-hunting death is just a statistic. Women are branded witches, beheaded, force-fed excreta, burnt alive, raped with rods and – if lucky – chased out of villages where they've lived their whole lives. If you are a *daini*, no one will save you.

A PIL filed by Guwahati-based lawyer Rajeeb Kalita in 2013 revealed that between 130 people have been killed in about 17 of Assam's 27 districts between 2002 and 2013. In June last year, state minister Rockybul Hussain told the assembly that 93 cases of witch-hunting had been reported between 2010 and 2015. In these 93 incidents, 77 people, including 35 women, were killed and 60 injured.



Dibyajyoti Saikia

There are cases where sons are made to beat up their own mothers,"

"Villagers with whom victims have stayed for over three decades turn a blind eye when they are tortured. There are also cases where people in places where a woman tries to settle down after being chased away inform the people from the village she ran away from," she says.

In most cases, the victim is a married woman over the age of 30. Delirium because of sickness is sometimes a cause, but in many instances, witch-hunting is rooted in land and property disputes. In the worst-hit districts of Kokrajhar and Goalpara, abject poverty and lack of government facilities drive people to local quacks, who are quick to label the sick person a witch. There is, of course, no reasoning or logic behind doing so.

"Sometimes, when a person is delirious because of malaria or high fever and ends up saying incoherent things, villagers bring out nets usually used to trap animals like pigs to torture the patient. They stop only when the patient caves in," says Birubala. "In some cases, the patient is taken to a local priest, who will point out to someone and say that s/he is a witch."

The making of a 'witch'

Joshna Rai, 36, of Chandrapara in Kokrajhar district, says she lives in fear every day. Six years ago, her daughter's illness left them virtually penniless. Rai had to part with all her gold, the family shop and a *bigha* (roughly two-fifths of an acre) of land. Eventually, her husband had to go outside the state to work as a daily wager. In the midst of many crises, her niece came to stay with them and was delirious one evening.



Joshna Rai, 36

My brother-in-law, father-in-law, uncle and other villagers gathered. They could not figure what happened to her and soon started verbally abusing me. They called me a witch,"

Rai was beaten up and the family made to deposit Rs10,000 to stay in the village. She was also made to sign a paper confessing that she was a witch and responsible for anything that went wrong in the village.

She was not allowed to make a 'family card' (to help her get subsidised rations and other benefits from the state) and says that villagers collected money to kill her on two occasions. "One night they gathered to kill me, but a storm stopped them. Last month, I found that our bamboo boundary wall was destroyed," she says.

was branded because someone fell ill in her village.



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Ritumini Doley of Bahorphola village, who was married to a man from Majuli in 2004, has her own tale to narrate. "They started calling me a witch one day – a decade after I'd gotten married," she says. The reason: she would take her children to a doctor instead of the local *bez*. Doley was beaten up several times. "There was this young boy I knew in the village; he kicked me on my face," she recounts. She ran away to Bahorphola along with her husband and settled there.



Dibyajyoti Saikia, during a mediation with villagers in Nadhola village in Lakhimpur in November, 2015. (Image: Dibyajyoti Saikia)

When Dibyajyoti Saikia from the NGO Brothers went to mediate with villagers about Doley, he had to face over 400 people with machetes. Ritumoni Doley is today a crusader with the NGO.

Within Assam, some of the worst affected areas are Sonitpur, Udalguri, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Baksa, Karbi Anglong, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Goalpara, and Jorhat, says Dibyajyoti Saikia, who has worked extensively in these areas to curb witch-hunting. He is now working with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to help victims around the country.

Jealousy or greed for land and property are common motives.



Dibyajyoti Saikia NHRC

A majority of the cases I have dealt with are planned murders. There is always a conspiracy and plan to snare the victim. Even college teachers have been victims,"

Men fall victim too. "In September last year, I saved a man in Majuli by informing the local police – just hours before a village council was out to decide his fate," he says. The police came and dispersed the crowd. "In about 35 per cent of the cases I deal with, the victims are men," he adds.

While some activists believe there is no need for a separate law, Saikia says only fear of law will help curb the problem. "Simple reformation measures do not work in remote areas with low literacy rates.

A study conducted by Partners for Law in Development (PLD) with the North East Network (NEN) and AMSS, Witch Hunting In Assam: Individual, Legal and Structural Dimensions, researched the phenomena in several blocks in Goalpara and Sonitpur. It found that the practice is prevalent in the Rabha, Boro and Tea Garden Labour (TGL) communities that include the Santals, Mundas, Orangs, Kharias, Majhis, Gourhs, Bhumijis and Kishans. In all cases, the perpetrators are known to the victims. And in almost all instances, the victims' families face the brunt of collateral damage.

Conviction rates in witch-hunting cases are dismally low. Of the 93 reported cases of witch-hunting between 2010 and 2015, charge-sheets were filed only in 60 cases. Although over 450 arrests have been made, there hasn't been a conviction in even one case.

The way out

A senior IPS officer in the state says that none of these women have anything to do with the occult. "Calling them 'witches' seems to be the easy way of moving them out of the way, especially because many of these cases involve land. The police cannot be the solution, because we come in when the law is broken. In the interior areas, the police cannot reach the spot on time."

"Greater societal control along with poverty alleviation and education is needed," he says, adding that the police's Project Prahari, which is spread over 50 villages, focuses on the problem.

Monisha Behal of NEN says that local authorities must be involved to intervene and help facilitate police action.



Monisha Behal, NEN

The value of social processes, particularly those led by women's groups are significant. For instance, Mahila Samakhyas, mahila mandals, self-help groups and the local panchayat can be mobilised through a combination of rewards and penalties that hold them accountable for witch-hunting in their jurisdiction,"

Policies should also focus on restoring the victim's socio-economic status in her village, adds Behal. "The programme must include compensation, or where that is not possible, help the victim rebuild her life, family and livelihood elsewhere."

Until that happens, unshackling women branded as witches – and bound by illiteracy, poverty and the lack of effective government action – will be near impossible.

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The law

There is no national law on witch-hunting, though some states have passed

