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Perception of people and role of State in the prevalence of Witchcraft: A case study on Mayong village (Assam)

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ABSTRACT

The paper sheds lights on the issue of how due to age old superstition and dogmatic beliefs women and the minority sections of the society are being accused of witches and then killed in the name of purification rituals. The evil menace of hunting people down accusing them of sorcery is not a new phenomenon since the ancient time it had been the part of traditional practices. The prime focus of this paper is to throw some light on the issues in India relating to Witchcraft and Black magic. The paper is also a step towards addressing how despite of Government introducing many legislations and bills the practices of witch hunting and black magic is still prevailing in different part of India. States like Rajasthan, Haryana, Karnataka, and Assam are still in the evil clutches of this witch hunting rituals and in the name of religious beliefs humans are being sacrificed be it men, women or children. This paper is an attempt to explain and analyze the issues witch hunting as well as the perception of people and governments.

Key Words : Witch hunting, Salem witch trials, Mayong (The land of black magic), Killing

INTRODUCTION

The awful term 'Witch' comes from two different meanings. One use to term those who actually practice the dark arts of black magic, a sorcerer hence the term Witchcraft. Second the ones who are accused of being evil and supernatural. In this paper the term Witch is being limited to the second kind where a person is killed by wrongfully accusing him or her. The victims of these practices have been targeted due to several biased socio-cultural traditions of societies. The modern society claims itself to be a civilized one. Knowingly or unknowingly despite being civilized they are keeping their rationality aside and engaging in the awful act of killing people branding them as Witches. This practice came into societal scenario in the between 15th to 18th century in Europe. According to G.C. Nanda (2014) "Magic has always fascinated human minds weather it is children or grownups any forms of magic enthrall people"[1] .The famous Salem witch trials were product of this horrendous practice of witch hunting. Women were burned alive in name of practicing dark arts without any trials. In this paper will critically look into the matters like superstitions and baseless religious beliefs by taking a special reference of the States that suffers the most specially Mayong

1. Nanda G C (2014: 235)Mayong: The heritage of Black Magic and traditional treatment, *Int. J. Res. Ayurveda Pharm.* 5(2)

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a north eastern district of Assam. One of the report published by United Nations human rights council mentioned that in South African states the people are accused of being a Witch or practicing Witchcraft and then tortured brutally or killed just to get the organs of the accused.[2] There is a huge organ market cell running internationally. Thus this illogical belief is resulting in human rights violations. Today despite human civilization have progressed in scientific temper still there are societies which are in the clutches of ignorance and superstitions. Some of them are so abominable and wicked that life of a woman becomes inconsequential so much that torturing her regarded as elixir or universal cure of misery.[3]

The States like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan etc. are the places where the situation is unexplainable. One of the major reasons for the existence of such practices is that the people are mixing their baseless beliefs with religion as well as their culture. India, after independence is progressing fast in terms of scientific development and modernization but some parts of the nation are still in the evil clutches of sorcery and witch hunting rituals. Specially, the practice and tradition of witch hunting is very much prevalent in the tribal societies of the Central India. The locals in this region still believes in rituals perform by priest. For them if anyone is down with any sexually transmitted disease then rater then consulting a doctor the main cure in involving in a sexual inter course with a virgin. So from this one can imagine how backward this region is. They are still living in their own little bubble world far from main land population. The situation is so horrendous that one cannot even to what core a person go in the name of superstitious beliefs. In November 2014, one BBC report mentioned that they found 21 human skulls in the *Khusbhadra* River, along with bones, dried flowers and vermilions in Orissa. The locals as well the police feared that it could have been somehow related to human sacrifice or Black magic.[4]

In India the witch hunting procedure can be traced back to hundreds of years back. If it is not witch hunting then women were hurt and tortured in the name of something else. Due to social and religious structures of India, it is the women in the society that faces more discrimination and inequalities then the man. The existence of patriarchal attitudes and oppositions against women's right to inherit properties make them the victim of evil practices. Lack of education and lack of proper medical facilities have contributed the continuation of this antiquated practice of Witch hunting. The hunting of witch has been making headlines in all the local newspapers of Assam for quite a time. The fact is not only disturbing but it is increasing in an alarming rate. Assam, a state in north eastern India is popularly known for its aromatic and exquisite, evergreen tea estates along with its rich archaeological sites and wildlife. Despite of having so much development in various fields it's still somehow ignored from the mainstream world. The Mayang is a small village in the Marigaon district of Assam which is world renowned for its Black magic situated in the calm and peaceful environment by the bank of river *Brahmaputra*. Around 1000 women have been killed

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2. United Nations Human rights Council (2012) "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo " Retrieved from https://womenenabled.org/pdfs/Rashida%20Manjoo%20SR%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20Gender-Related%20Killing%20May%2023%202012.pdf

3. Shaffer Ryan (2014) "Modern witch hunting and Superstitious Murder in India" Science and Religion", *A program of the centre for enquiry,* Vol:38, issue: 4.

4. BBC report (2014 Nov 24) "India 'Black Magic' fears over human skulls find" Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30175795

accusing of practicing black magic. The humanity is so far dead that sometimes just in order to snatch the land and properties the neighbors with the help of local priest accused the victim family and once the villagers declares the family of practicing witch craft the whole family is cast outside the village or sometimes they are killed as well. According to the Assam parliamentary affairs, Minister Rokybul Hussain, at least 77 persons were murdered and 60 other were injured in witch hunting incidents across Assam since 2010 and interestingly enough 35 of them were women.[5]

Some cases that were reported bore testimony to the fact that the witch killing was an act of Land Mafia. They use the superstitions as a way to snatch a land they had previously eye on from the poor people. Another motive is the brainchild of *Ojaa* and *Beez* (The occult therapist) who are nothing but the con artist who earn livelihood by conning the villagers.[6] Witchcraft or witch hunting in India is heavily practiced with modus and motive changing over the time and space. Witch hunting practices are mainly found in the forest areas and hinterlands of central as well as north eastern states, because these places are heavily populated, densely forested but fare abysmally poor in economic development and with no access or little access to education and primary health care. The middle aged widow, elderly women, single women usually becomes the target of witch hunting. Whenever a woman comes out and rebel for her rights and subjugation against male domination or claims her ancestral property she is apprehended by the men assisted by the *ojha* who formally brands her as a witch and torture her both physically and psychologically.

Review of Literature:

The proposed issue has been the part of academic discussion since long and several scholars has produced the detailed research across the academic circles. Here is the concise discussion of important literature on the topic. Das Sujata (2011) has analyzed that the, Witch hunting is not a new thing, it traces its existence back to the dark period of 14th and 17th century. In Assam too practicing of witchcraft or black magic dates back hundreds of years too. Mayong a small village on the midst of Morigaon district is considered as a capital of black magic and now a major tourist hub. Many of the people claims that people from many far off places have come to this enigmatic place to learn and master the dark arts and spells. The tales of human sacrificed have been penned down in the contemporary literature as well as the folk tales. Sometime they even keep domestic ghosts-servants called Beera. The sad part is not more than few of these cases ever made progress due to absence of witness. Witch hunting is one of the social stigmas of Assam.[7]

Duell Mark (2012) has written that to own lands along Kenya's Indian Ocean coastline, the relatives of the land owners are allegedly framing them as Witches to intimidate the elderly relatives who own desirable areas. One elderly women *Sadaka Muruu*, 100 who owns 12 acres of coastal land was stripped naked and when asked by the neighbors the relatives said that the Grandmother was caught doing Witchcraft, later she was saved by *Teddy Mwambire*. Others have suffered a

5. Bhonde,Pranjali (2016 May 28) "It's 2016 But the Practice of witch hunting and killing in the name of superstition still persist in Assam,"*India Times*, Retrieved from https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/it-s-2016-but-the-practice-of-witch-hunting-killing-in-the-name-of-superstition-persists-in-assam-255657.html

6. Ibid

7. Das Sujata (2011, August 30) Witch Hunting in Assam- Capital of Black magic to national shame. Retrieved from https://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/witch-hunting-in-assam-capital-of-black-magic-to-national-shame/

much worse fate, with more than 50 people aged over 60 lynched over witchcraft accusations. Though the accused are brought in the court yet they cannot be convicted because of the lack of evidence.[8]

Mortimer Caroline (2016) has written that as a good luck charm 6 children's were sacrificed in the Ugandan elections. *Shelin Kasozi*, a charity says that this kind of superstitions are common as the locals still believes that sacrifice is going to bring good luck, power and wealth. The poor children's bodies were found with their ripped off hearts and livers as well their heads. The main reasons behind this human sacrifice are the corrupt witch doctors who have been exploiting the locals to perform these sacrifices. In many cases the people also sell and buy the body parts. As sick as it is sound the body parts are selling in very high prices. The easy targets of these awfulsacrifices are always the children, women and the elders. Irony is that they are targeted because they believed to be more 'pure' and 'spiritually clean'.[9] The concept of purity and impurity also played a vital role in perception making about the practices of witch hunting.

Madhukalya Amrita (2016) has written in some of the rural places in Assam. Men, Women are accused of being witch and tortured severely. They are killed, raped, beheaded and sometimes they are forced to eat human excreta by the raging mob. Though state have passed the bill to prevent the practicing of witch hunting, yet not much have changed. One of such victim was *Birubala Rabha* who was on the target because she raises her voice against this awful practice. People were happy to harm her because she wanted to help those women who were tortured and beaten by others to just to dominate them. She was nominated by the state NGO for the nobel peace prize in 2005. It is not always the women, man becomes the victims too. There is no as such national law to curb the witch hunting's, yet the states are trying to implement such law. In Assam the Prevention from witch hunting Bill 2015 was passed by the Assam Assembly.[10]

Singh Sahay Shiv (2016), has analyzed that on August 7th, five women were dragged out of their respective houses beaten, stripped naked and then killed by the mob with their axes which by the way is used for chopping woods near a Tamarind tree in Jharkhand. The tree witnessed this entire awful sick event of the night. These five women were killed because the villagers thought they were witches practicing black magic. Though the daughters of one of the victim managed to bring four constables but that was of no help as these constables were forced to flee after watching the raged of the villagers. The villagers do not stop even after killing the women they do not find peace even after committing this sick crimes they shunned the families of this victims from the rest of the village. Similarly on 9th December another woman was set on fire by her neighbor because she suspected that the victim *Susari Baru* was indulged in witchcraft. According to Xavier Dias, a social activist witch hunting is so frequent in Jharkhand that whenever a new epidemic comes that kills people or even their animals and if the villagers fail to stop it, they will look for witches so that

8. Duell Mark (2012, Nov 4) The pensioners being burned alive as Witches by their own families, so they can profit from lucrative land. Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2227693/Elderly-Kenyans-burned-alive-witches-refusing-desirable-coastline-land.html

9. Mortimer Caroline (2016 February 29) "Children sacrificed to bring good luck in Ugandan elections, says charity." Retrieved from https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/children-sacrificed-to-bring-good-luck-in-ugandan-elections-says-charity-a6903226.html

10. Madhukalya Amrita (2016, May 15) "The witches of Assam- Hunted Beheaded and Raped" Retrieved from http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-the-witches-of-assam-hunted-beheaded-and-raped-2212383

they can kill them in order to conciliate the satan.[11]

State response towards the issue of witch crafting :

The rich heritage of India and oldest civilization is quite famous across the globe. But along the history of goodness comes some curses too. One of the major social issues of India is prevalence of superstitions among the people. Superstition means any beliefs or practice which is explained by supernatural causality and is oppose to modern science. Usually it is believed that the superstition occurs because of lack of education among the masses. But in India there are certain cases where the educated and notable persons of the society have been involved in the Witch-hunting process. The concept of hunting women blaming them as witches is not a new concept. It has been practiced in past, primitive, medieval age and it's still going on this modern industrial period. In the past women were used to burned alive with her dead husband in the name of Sati voluntarily or without seeking her permission at all. So the age old Superstitious beliefs are prevailing in this country since time immemorial.[12]

Every region has their own beliefs and practices because of which introduction of new laws to prohibit such evil practices face large amount of hurdles. In India the society is mostly patriarchal in nature. This male oriented society mostly considers women as a token or a symbol of their families, who is mere to take care of them and their families. The double standard society on one hand worships the women in name of Goddesses and on the other hand kills them accusing them of being a witch.[13] According to the National Crime Records Bureau, over 2000 women are being killed from in 14 years in Jharkhand in the name of witch-hunting.[14]

Jharkhand is considered as being a hotbed for the killing of women in the name of witches, followed by Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Gujrat and Assam. A Comparative study done by National Crime Records Bureau, showed that after Jharkhand, Haryana also have been recorded numerous murder in name of Witch hunting. Though from 2012 till now because of the initiative taken by the government it have manage to keep the state clean but in 2001-2004 the numbers were worse and interestingly none of the cases of witch-hunting was recorded. Around 204 women were branded witches and killed off later. Because of these killings in the name of Witch-hunting and Superstition the Indian scenario is getting tainted with the bloods of innocent. In order to prevent such incident the Government of India has come out with some legislation. There is no such national level bill to be specific that penalizes the witch hunting; therefore most of the cases go under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) 1860.[15]

11. Singh Sahay Shiv (2016, December 24) "The Witches of Jharkhand" Retrieved from http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/The-%E2%80%98witches%E2%80%99-of-Jharkhand/article16933528.ece

12. Shaffer Ryan (2014, Vol:38.4) "Modern witch hunting and Superstitious Murder in India" Science and Religion, cfi, A program of the centre for enquiry

13. Mishra Archana (2003) "Casting the Evil Eye: witch trials in tribal India" Retrieved from https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Casting_the_evil_eye.html?id=vpF-AAAAMAAJ

14. Amitabh Srivastava (2016, June 20), "Over 2000 women killed in India for practicing 'Black Magic' in India" Retrieved from https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/over-2000-women-killed-in-india-for-practicing-black-magic-in-14-years-15280-2016-06-20

15. Black magic and witchcraft has killed 1,791 women. 2012. *Times of India* (December 24). Online at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-24/raipur/35992079_1_black-magic-witchcraft-health-awareness.

The witch hunting cases are registered under various sections like Sec 302-charge for murder, Sec 307-attempt to murder, Sec 302-hurting a human being, Sec 376-raping someone and last but not the least Sec 354-which deals with outraging a women's modesty. Apart from this the states have come up with their own legislations to protect and prevent the crimes against women. Some of these legislations are discussed below:

– Bihar is normally considered as one of the backward regions in India. But surprisingly Bihar was the first state in India to pass legislation against the Witch-hunting in the year 1999, the name of this legislation is "Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act of 1999". This act was introduced to prevent the violence against the women's in the name of practicing witchcraft.

– Jharkhand followed Bihar and introduced its own "Anti Witchcraft Act" in the year 2001 to protect the women against inhuman practices also to provide legal advice to the suffered victims. The section 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the act punishes any person who identifies someone as Witch or tries to cause damage to women blaming her as a witch. The section 7 of the bill forces the party who tries to instigate others to harm people, to go for a trial along with a fine of Rs. 5000.[16]

– The most recent bill on preventing superstitious beliefs among people is passed by Karnataka State Assembly (2017). The State cabinet of Karnataka headed by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has passed the bill of "Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman, Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill (2017)." This bill bans the carrying of religious leaders in the Palanquins in any occasion and most importantly the concept of "Made Snana" a practice in which the Dalit classes have to eat the food that is left over by the Upper class. This bill also bans the practice of performing exorcisms, forcing people to walk in fire in the name of religious beliefs etc. If anyone found doing such deeds will be punishable under law and will be put in the jail from 1 to 7 years along with a fine of Rs.5000-50,000.

Terrence McCoy wrote in the Washington post: 'In places where Superstition and Vigilantism overlaps and small rumors can turn deadly, nearly 2,100 people accused of witch craft have been killed between the year 2000 to 2012'.[17] Apart from these state passed legislation there are various NGO's and other bodies helping women to established themselves in the society and protecting them from various abuses and helping them to live a dignified life. Some of such organizations are:

– Partner for Law and Development (PLD)
– Rural Litigation and entitlement Kendra.

The practice of witch hunting and people's perception in Mayong (Assam) :

In the heart of the Brahmaputra river a State hiding in the dense forest of north- eastern Himalayas, named Assam is the most accessible area to all. With a hospitable population, exquisite cuisines, exotic aroma of tea leaves and a big artistic heritage with elegant Hindu temples like Kamakhya temple, it is one of the most tourist attraction places in India. In the beautiful land of Assam exist 'Mayong' a village in the *Marigaon* district not far away from the capital city of Guwahati. From cultural point of view it grabs a special place in India. Irony is that the same place is also named as the 'Land of Black Magic.' Mayong has witnessed many horrific incidents since time immemorial. The land is considered as the hot bed of Witchcraft and black magic. Still the

16. VaishnaviRimjhiim (2015, May 25) "Everything you want to know about laws which prevents witch hunting in India" Retrieved from https://blog.ipleaders.in/laws-which-prevent-witch-hunting-in-india/

17. McCoy Terrence (2016 Nov 8) "Girl, 4 decapitated in Indian ritual sacrifice " Retrieved from http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/11/08/girl-4-decapitated-in-indian-ritual-sacrifice.html

70% percent of the population in the Mayong region have blind faith in the herbal medicines available in the forest of the region.[18] This normally brings the *Goao Ojha's* or the Occult therapist in the picture to treat the locals using the herbs. Because of the lack of education among the people and blind faith in this *Ojha's* the superstitious beliefs takes place in the minds of this uneducated innocent people. The local are exploited to the core by this Occult therapist. In order to protect the people those who cannot protect themselves *Birubala Rabha* has been fighting to stop this witch hunting process since the 1990's. She is known as the 'Crusader against Witch Hunting.' Her journey to fight against this horrific practice was started in the year 1885 when her own son *Dharmeshwar* was denied of medical care calling him a Witch. She realized that in order to receive basic amenities she has to try and wiped out this evil superstitious belief. It's not only just the denying of medical attention sometimes in order to make sure one women is a witch or not the Occult therapist or the witch doctor sexually exploits the women and if the women raises her voice against it she is branded as a witch and burnt alive or in some cases if she is lucky enough her life is spared and she is just banished from the village. In 2015, the State Legislative Assembly of Assam passed the 'Assam Witch Hunting, Prohibition and Protection Bill' in order to eliminate the superstitious practices which leads to the murder of so called Witches. The former Chief Minister of the State, Mr. *Tarun Gogoi* showing his concern about the issue said that Witch hunting has become a major issue in the State.[19] The government is also attempting to curb the practices at various levels in the Assam.

As per the Bill passed by the Legislative Assembly, 'Every offence under this Act shall be cognizable, non-bailable and non- compoundable within the meaning of the Code' This act also points out that if any person intimidate someone or accuse or even defame someone of practicing black magic or witch craft and accuse someone a witch will be imprisoned for life with a fine of Rs. 5 lakhs. It is not just Mayong that faces the problem of killing people in the name of purifying the society. Many places in Assam face same problems as well. For example, in the river island *Majuli* many people are killed every year in the name of 'purification rituals.' Another such place is *Dhemaji* where women are killed cold heartedly in the name of witch hunting.[20] However, despite having the national as well as states legislation the practice of witch hunting and other superstitions which are anti-human still prevail in the Mayong village of Assam.

Conclusion :

Superstitious beliefs are nothing but the product of the existing social conditions of a particular time period. The concepts of this belief emerge because of people fear for a non-living, spiritual and material objects, or fear for other humans. Most of the Superstitious beliefs are transferred from one generation to the other. There are some common superstitious beliefs that are present in every society be it medieval or the present time that we are living now. This beliefs grows because of human ignorance, all humans have some superstitious tendencies. Some consider it as just a

18. Ojha, Sanjay. 2012. Couple branded witches, forced to eat excreta, drink urine. TNN (July 17). Online at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-07-17/ranchi/32713395_1_elderly-couple-robert-lakra-drink-urine.

19. Karmakar, Rahul. 2011. Rape behind witch-hunt murders in Assam, 6 held. *Hindustan Times* (June 23). Online at http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rape-behind-witch-hunt-murders-in-assam-6-held/article1-712799.aspx.

20. Das Bhargavee (2016). Witch hunting in Assam: Delving into the killer myth" Retrieved from http://mythicalindia.com/features-page/witch-hunting-in-assam-delving-into-the-killer-myth/

mere belief and hold onto them as respect to the elders others firmly believe it as part of their traditions and culture and practice it as well.

The famous Salem Witch trial is one of the classic examples where women were executed in the centre of the town accusing them of practicing black magic and sorcery. This killing of people in the name of witch hunting[21] started a major genocide since then and it is still going on. The studies have shown that there exists major prevalence of Black Magic in the entire world. From Europe to South Africa people still believe in Voodo and all other sorts of magical objects. India is not an exception. Thousands of people are killed in the name of Black Magic and Witch Craft. States like Jharkhand, Karnataka, West Bengal and Orissa are considered as the hot-bed to the Supernatural activities.

The studies also have shown that this Superstition occurs because of the ignorance of the people. Poverty and illiteracy plays and important role in extending people's beliefs in Witch craft and black magic. Same is the case with the the Mayong district of Assam. This district is considered as the 'land of black magic' Though Assam is slowly taking it's steps towards development yet somehow this small village of Marigaon district residing near the banks of river Brahmaputra is still clouded with the evil menace of witch craft and black magic. They too are holding onto their ancestral cultures and traditions. If someone tries to interfere in their beliefs and traditions they are bound to face major consequences. The above study have shown that though the administration of the respective States facing the problems of witch hunting and sorcery are trying real hard to implement the 'Anti- Witch hunting' acts in order to rescue the victims, specially the women's from being exploited. States like Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Karnataka etc. have already introduced the Anti-Witch hunting bill with some interesting penalties to the offenders. But ironically it is not yet implemented properly and is yet to achieve its desired goals. The States have passed this bill in their respective State Assembly's but the results are yet to be seen. Same case is with Mayong. The Anti-Witch hunting act was introduced in the State Legislative Assembly during the tenure of Congress Govt. under the former Chief Minister Mr. *Tarun Gogoi*. Nothing much has changed in Mayong even after the implementation of this act. People have little fear towards the authorities. But the fearless 'Crusader of Witch hunting' Mrs. *Birubala Rabha* with a NGO named '*Prahari'*[22] is trying to change the existing social norms of the Mayong village. Despite receiving major death threats she is fearlessly moving forward to abolish the evil practice of killing people by falsely accusing them as Witches.

Thus, from the overall study it can be conclude that though States are trying its best to eradicate all the superstitious beliefs among the people yet still thousands of people are killed in yearly basis in the name of witch hunting. The exploitation of women is increasing at an alarming rate. Women are burnt alive, raped, drowned and hanged because of other people accusations. Many NGO's along with the governmental agencies are working side by side to curb out the evil menace of killing people in the name of Witch hunting and Sorcery. Apart from government legislation the educational development and sensitization of people should be the part of curbing strategies so that one day these Superstitions will be withered out completely from the mindset of the people.

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21. Dr. Ramala Sharma (2014 Dec) "Witch Hunting- An Unabated Social Menace of Assam " *Journal of Education & Social Policy, Vol- I* Retrieved from http://jespnet.com/journals/Vol_1_No_2_December_2014/6.pdf

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