

Witch-Hunting among the Mising: A Study

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Abstract – Witchcraft is the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities that are able to be exercised individually or by designated social groups. It is found almost all over the world and the North Eastern region of India is not to exception to it. Mising is the second largest plain tribe of Assam. They inhabit in riverside remote areas of upper Assam distributing in seven districts. This paper deals in witch-hunting practices of the Mising tribe and tries to find out the nature and extend of it. This paper also deals in the role of civil society, Government and NGOs and tries to find out probable remedy to it.

Keywords: Witch-Hunting, Mising, Act and Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft broadly means the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities that are able to be exercised individually or by designated social groups. The witch is a person who thought capable of harming others supernaturally through the use of innate mystic power, medicines or familiars and who is symbolized by inverted characteristics that are a reversal of social or physical norms. The concept of witchcraft and the belief in its existence have existed since the dawn of human history. Forms of witchcraft vary from society to society. E. E. Evans-Pritchard while studying central African magical beliefs define witchcraft as some intangible inner quality of persons which may be unaware to them that they are a "witch", or may have been convinced of their own nature by the suggestion of others. In Anthropological terminology, a "witch" differs from a sorcerer.

The belief and practices on "witch" leads to serious type of violation of human right. Women, especially widows are the main victim of it. When a society believes a person is "witch" they torture the person and even take life of the person. It is become every day affair in some states like Assam. In Assam almost every day one family or person is accused of being "witch" and tortured like anything, many times behead the person. It is alleged that accusations of witch-craft are sometimes linked to personal disputes, jealousy, and conflicts between neighbours or family over land or inheritance.

The Editorial Board of Xth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held in Delhi in December 1978 published "the symbolic attributes of the witch". Here they define and conceptualized the witch and discuss practices of many instances of witchcraft around the world.

Research paper on "Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence" by Jill Schnoebelen in the year 2009 states that Witchcraft beliefs vary among cultures, but the term will be generalized here to mean "harmful actions carried out by persons presumed to have access to supernatural powers". The persecution of accused witches continues today in communities around the globe. These beliefs are held by both the educated and uneducated, the wealthy and the poor, the old and the young in many societies. According to him woman especially elderly woman are generally at high risk of accusation. Accused witches have been executed by hanging, drowning and burning at the stake throughout history.

Belief in witchcraft is found in many countries of the world and accusations of witchcraft are the trigger of serious forms of violence, including murder. Such incidents are common in places such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, Gambia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal and Tanzania. In Tanzania, about 500 older women are murdered each year following accusations against them of witchcraft. Apart from extrajudicial violence, there is also state-sanctioned violence in some jurisdictions. For instance, in Saudi Arabia practicing 'witchcraft and sorcery' is a crime. In a CNN news story in February 2012, a woman was reported to have been burned alive in central Nepal after she was branded as a witch. Burning women accused of witchcraft has been so alarmingly prevalent in Papua New Guinea that a law was passed by the government to prohibit burning those suspected of performing dark magic, according to the ABC News online site. As stated in an article on care2.com, a man in Uganda was believed to be dabbling in dark magic and he was promptly tied up and beheaded for it.

In India, witchcraft exists almost in all states. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 2,257 'witchcraft' murders have taken place across India since 2000. Haryana, for example, witnessed 57 'witchcraft' murders in 2010. Karnataka reported 77 'witchcraft' murders in 2011. Again, Andhra Pradesh has seen a steady stream of such murders, averaging 24 every year for the last six years. According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) from 2008 to 2013 Jharkhand ranks top in the list of witchcraft cases. Officials in the state of Chhattisgarh reported in 2008 that at least 100 women are maltreated annually as suspected witches. A local activist stated that only a fraction of cases of abuse are reported. Now states like Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh have enacted law to fight with the witch murder.

Witchcraft is strongly prevalent in North Eastern part of India. In Assam witchcraft is found almost among all tribes. In recent years the cases of violence against the so called witches is coming in large numbers in Assam. Around 100 women were killed as witches in Assam in the last five years.

The Government of Assam placed a bill in Assam Assembly on 10th August 2015 to prevent witch killing. But in the very next day on 11th August, one woman named Rinku Borah and her daughter Susila Borah were accused of practicing witchcraft and were tortured in Bahphola Dhonkhuloi Village of Jorhat District in upper Assam. The prime accused in this case are three women belonging to Missing tribe. In the same village few years back a woman was forced to leave the village after having declared her as witch. Police arrested ten persons in that connection. But accusation as witch is still going on.

Finally a law is enacted in the Assam Legislative Assembly on 13th August, 2015 as Assam Witch-Hunting Act (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) - 2015. It aims to punish an offender for declaring, accusing, torturing or killing any person as 'witch' with life-imprisonment and penalty up to Rupees Five Lakhs.

The Misings are the second largest plain tribe of Assam inhabiting mainly in Lakhimpur, Dhamaji, Jorhat, Gulaghat, Sibsagar and Sonitpur districts of Assam. As per 2011 census Mising population is 6, 87,310 (Male-3,95,790 and female-2,67,520) consisting of 17.76% of the total tribal population of the state (Census of India 2011). They are found in Districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Golagaghat, Darang, Tinsukiya, Dibrugarh etc. But more than 70% of the total Missing population lives in three districts, Dhemji, Lakhimpur and Jorhat. So these three districts were finalised as field for the study. A pilot study was done in the first part of 2017 and accordingly field visit schedule was prepared.

They belong to Tibeto Burman linguistic family of the Mongoloid morphological features. According to J J

Kuli, the Missing's religion is based on the belief in supernaturalism and animism. Sorcery and witchcraft are some of the traditional practices that often surfaces in the social life of the Misings. Missing family pattern may be called unique in the sense that two or more primary families live peacefully together in a single house. All the members abide by the orders of the head man of the family. The womenfolk play their assigned roles and they are not treated as subordinates. The oldest man in a family and the eldest members of a village are highly regarded. The worship of the deities is done on village basis. Marriage, death rites and most of the festivals are broadly speaking, community affairs of the whole village (Kuli 1992).

Missing practices clan exogamy and tribal endogamy in their matrimonial system. The Missing are adhering to the traditional system of paying bride price to the bride's parent on the day of the final marriage ceremony. Divorce is not absent in Missing society. The polygamy is prevalent in Missing society. Widow re-marriage is also allowed (Mipun 1993).

The society is divided into clans which are exogamous. Marriage must not take place within the same clan. (Kayung 1989).

The Kinship system of the Missing is, by and large, of the kind known as descriptive. The Missing are patrilinear and the descent is traced through the male line. After the death of the father the property is divided equally among the sons. (Bordoloi, B.N. Sarmah Thakur G.C & M.C. Saikia, 1987).

Their main occupation is agriculture but it is mostly at the subsistence level. The agricultural lands are suitable mainly for Ahu paddy cultivation (summer). They now cultivate different type of rice. They perform certain religious ceremonies connected with agricultural operations (Sarma Thakur 1998). Ali-Aye-Liyang, Sarag Puja and Dabur Puja etc are observed customize sowing, harvesting operations. There is no joint ownership of land(Kuli 1992).

Traditionally the Missing were great lovers of hunting and fishing but today hunting is almost extinct while community fishing has lost much of its original character. However individual as well as group fishing is done with much merriment. (Sarma Thakur, 1972)

The Missing observe taboos in respect of certain food items. The locally brewed rice beer 'Apong' serves as a drink and a food for everybody young and old. 'Apong' is considered to be the most prestigious item for entertaining guests and every family is expected to preserve some Apong for this purpose. (Kuli 1992)

The Socio- Political structure of the Missing is democratic. Every Missing village has a Kebang

which can aptly be compared with a village Panchayat. The elderly men of a village constitute the Kebang which is supreme in all matters within the village. The head of a Kebang is called 'gam', 'who conducts the proceedings of the 'Kebang'. The 'Gam' is selected by the members of a 'Kebang'. Although 'Gam' may be selected from a particular family for a few generations, the post of 'Gam' is not hereditary. Complaints, whether social or religious, are brought to the notice of the Kebang for trial, judgments and punishes of offenders. Of late position of 'Kebang' has been considerably eroded due to the existence of the Gaon Panchayat. The role of Gaonbura or Panchayat President has been felt more than that of the traditional 'Gam'. But Kebang is still a living institution and the people regard the decisions of the Kebang with catholic sincerity. Of late the Musings are becoming politically conscious and the Autonomous status has much to do in this regard (Mipun 1993).

The missing's religion is based on the belief in supernaturalism and animism. They believe that the spirit called 'uie' is the guiding factors of their life and there is spirit everywhere. The spirits, if not properly worshipped, cause sickness, misfortune and death. The 'Mibu' (village priest) is the only person who can appease the spirits. Pigs, fowls, 'Apong' etc. are offered in the name of the spirits. The 'Mibu' possesses supernatural power of finding the cause of illness and offers suitable remedies. The missing's are animistic in their religious outlook. Their religious philosophy is mainly based on animism. They believe SEDI MC:LO as the earliest representing father respectively. They also believe in the existence of ABO: TANI, KARSING, KARTAG, etc. as other deities like YARI, MUGLVNG, CSAR,ASI etc. are considered to be the spiritual beings possessing power much greater than man. The minute affairs of the individuals and then even the greater and important events of the world, they suppose to be under the influence of divine spirits and agents. They believe that these spirits delight in sacrifices. They call these spirits as UI. There are different kinds of UI such as TALCNG, DOBUR UROM, PO:SUM, GUMVN etc. sacrifice of animals are performed to pacify them. The MIBU is known as the priest of the society. He is believed to be empowered with some supernatural powers and on all important religious occasions he conducts as chief priest. Now, Hinduism has been following in some places in the religious beliefs of the people. The performance of worship in the NAMGHAR, recitation of KIRTAN and BHAGAWATA are some of the example. Moreover, literary has not touched the core of the society particularly those living in the remote corners. Sorcery and witchcraft are not uncommon (Kuli, 1992).

They observe various festivals according to their traditional beliefs and patterns during the year like Porag, Dobur etc.

A Missing woman is a cultural idol of the society. Apart from her daily activities she devotes herself in deferent constructive and productive activities of the family. The Missing women actively participate in the agricultural activities of the society. In the field, they have a hand in every aspect. Missing women are a symbol of handloom weaving and art of spinning. Most of the domestic requirements of cloths are met from the family looms. Every Missing women is a born weaver, Girls are taught spinning and weaving from every childhood. Animal husbandry is a common practice of the Missing women. They rear cow, buffalo, goat etc. besides these; they also rear pig and poultry which are sold for each income. Earnings from the animals go into the house of the women..

Socially, the Women status in the Missing societies is not considered equal to men. They are treated inferior to men. They are treated inferior to men in all aspects including education particularly in the rural areas. In village and other organizations, they are not given due place and their opinions are of no value at all (Ibid).

METHODOLOGY:

The study is done through extensive field visits and archival studies. Both primary and secondary data is used. A pilot survey was conducted to finalize the field keeping in view the frequency of incidents of witch-hunting. Structured interviews were conducted taking all sections of the society into consideration. Secondary data although a few, collected from all available sources. The report is prepared keeping in view its socio-cultural and economic-political implications. I visited Jonai of Dhamaji District, Dhokuwakhan and North Lakhimpur of Lakhimpur District and Majuli of Jorhat District (Now Majuli District). I visited the police Thana, interviewed village elders, victims, educationist, NGO's and different Missing Organization leaders.

FINDINGS:

After analysing the data, it is found that the practice of witch hunting is prevalent in Missing tribe. They believe in witch. But a regional nature is observed in the study. Even a single case was not found in Jonai of Dhamaji District and Dhokuwakhana of Lakhimpur District where Missing people is in large concentration, but it is very common in Majuli of Jorhat District and western part of Lakhimpur District. The witch-hunting cases are found only in remote village areas. Generally witch-hunting is a village affairs.

In most of the cases the villages first doubt a person (may be male or female) or husband-wife both as a cause to spread evil in the village. After minute observation for some days by a section of young villagers if they feel call a meeting where the

suspected person or persons are asked to plead guilty before the villagers. If they confess than, they are warned to give up all these or sometimes they are forced to leave the village. If they don't confess than after few days the youth of the village will bring them to jungle or riverside forcefully and secretly and kill. Next day the news of his or her death will be given to the family. Nobody of the village will raise any question on the incident including the family member. The villagers help the family in performing the funeral ceremonies. The village performs a purification festival every year, as a person is killed in the village.

This is done so secretly that even the nearby village people don't know about it. In my interview, the family members of the victim said that, as they have to live in the village so they can't go against the villagers. Many times the villagers call Bez (traditional medicine man) from nearby villages or sometimes from other districts also to know the cause of different problems of the village. The Bez with his special power find out the person or persons who are responsible for all trouble in the village. Then the villagers consider the person as witch and hunt it.

Total 51 cases were found in Majuli of Jorhat District and Lakhimpur District in my field visit. Only 5 (five) cases out of these were found in police record. The victim and his family members don't go against the villagers and don't report and seek any help from the police. The reported one case is in Lakhimpur and other four in Majuli district. Police just give protection to the victim. As there were no law to handle the mass people so they did not took any action. But after the enactment of the law, the police are now able to handle the cases. If the police doubt or get information of this type of incident, now they take prompt action. In Goromurh, Majuli the police was able to handle a case during January 2018, after the Act come into effect. When the police got the information, they went to the village and bring the victims safely to the Thana and warned the villagers of the consequences in accordance with the law. The victims were returned to the village and are still leaving there without any problem.

The practice of witch-hunting has no relation with clan. Member of any clan may be marked as witch. Generally older man and women and specially widows are considered as witch. If a person is considered as witch, than there is probability to consider other members of the family as witch later on. No single case is found where a child is considered as witch. Widow has a grater probability to consider as witch.

The main cause of the witch-hunting is different problems faced by the villagers. The region where this practice is found is generally underdeveloped in respect of education, health, transport and communication etc. So, when a problem arise in the

village like, dies people suddenly, some odd occurs to a family and some unknown disease seen in the village, they cannot realise the reality and become victims of dogmas. They cannot analyse it scientifically. They blame different sprits and gods and some persons with suspected activity. This leads to witch-hunting. No planned witch hunting for property and land is found in the study.

The awareness programme and quicker development will help to eradicate the inhuman practice. Two NGOs **Impact N.E.** and **Brother's** are working on witch hunting for last five years in Majuli of Jorhat District (now Majuli is District). They organize awareness programme and give legal aid to the victim and his family. The development in respect of education, health facility, transport and communication is urgently required. A section of educated persons of the tribe are organizing awareness campaign in the locality.

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