

From Victimhood to Activism: A Sociological Study of Birubala Rabha's Anti-Witch-Hunting Campaign

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Abstract:

Birubala Rabha is a female activist from Assam who has become a powerful voice against superstition like witch-hunting. These superstitions still hurt women and other oppressed classes of people in rural and economically backward areas. This paper aims to understand how she went from seeing the terrible effects of witch-hunting in her own community to leading a campaign that includes grassroots activism. Witch-hunting is not only a result of superstition; it is also affected by numerous reasons like poverty, illiteracy, social exclusion, and local power conflicts regarding land, property, and gender. This paper uses secondary sources like newspaper articles, articles, and other works on Assam. These articles show how Rabha's activism goes against traditional customs and give the females the power to fight against harmful practices. Rabha's work explains the importance of individual agency in effecting social change and safeguarding vulnerable populations. The research also explains the importance of addressing superstition and gender-based violence caused by intersecting social, cultural, and economic disadvantages. This study shows how important grassroots movements are, for fighting different social evils and making communities safer and fairer and documentation of the strategies, challenges, and successes of Rabha's campaign will definitely help the future generation to carry forward the legacy of Birubala Rabha.

Key Words: Witch Hunt, Superstition, Sociological, Myth, Activism

Introduction:

Human growth and progress are always affected by blind faith and superstitions. A society where illiteracy, inadequate education, and underdevelopment dwells, superstition and blind faith take place

easily. Because of social and economic inequality, a lot of people have to live in poverty. Because of customs and traditions, many superstitious practices still exist in the society. In fact, educated people often become superstitious and follow these unhealthy believes, even when they don't make sense or follow the scientific method.

Corrupted government officials slow down or stop economic growth and for that people who are economically backward and can't get minimum facilities like education, health care, or a healthy standard of living often become superstitious to escape their problems. People in many backward villages and towns in Assam and India still believe in different kinds of superstitions. These beliefs are very anti-intellectual and life-denying; they take away people's dignity and make them miserable. Superstitions cause a lot of pain in people's lives and take away their rights and freedom. We need to talk about witch-hunting in Assam in light of such a dark social background.

Witch-hunting is illegal. Anyone who encourages or supports witch-hunting is a criminal under Indian law. Unfortunately, the fear of witch-hunting has persisted despite the modern state. Human civilization and culture have been exalted by the triumph of modern science and knowledge. Superstition and blind belief, however, have persisted in human society despite such social advancement. There are still remnants of these illogical beliefs in human behaviour and thought in practically every nation on the planet. Such superstitions, which are frequently connected to folk customs and cultural practices, are also prevalent in Assam.

While some superstitions are extremely frightening and dangerous, not all of them directly impair human happiness or the welfare of the nation. One such terrible social phenomenon is witch-hunting. Witch-hunting cases have been reported in practically every Assamese district, endangering humankind as a whole. Despite of various scientific advancements, witch-hunting is still common in tribally dominated, backward areas of Assam. Ironically, when movements for women's empowerment and liberation are gaining traction some women in our society are still being accused

of witchcraft and killed in their villages at a time. The purpose of this paper is to understand Birubala Rabha's activism as an example of how to turn victimization into coordinated, socially conscious action.

Witch-Hunting in Assam: A Persistent Social Issue:

Several factors, like established cultural beliefs, economic pressures and the marginalization of particular communities etc. are responsible for the prevailing practice of witch-hunting in Assam. To understand this problem a proper strategy including community education, legal actions, and victim support is needed in different levels of society. In Assam, witch-hunting is presented in the sociocultural beliefs, though customs vary from community to community. Perceptions of witchcraft have historically been shaped by indigenous beliefs in ancestral spirits and supernatural forces. In many tribal societies people believe that during periods of misfortune or mysterious occurrences, women have been accused of witchcraft. These false charges frequently results in bodily harm, social exclusion, and even leads to death.

The practice of witch-hunting is popularly common in different tribal communities like the Bodos, Santhals, and Mising, where traditional healers, or "ojhas," are crucial in identifying alleged witches and diagnosing illnesses. The influence of patriarchal structures in these tribal communities made worse the situation by targeting of women, particularly those who are marginalized or occupy unconventional positions in society. Colonial policies are also responsible for such heinous witch-hunting practices. A complex interaction between colonial law and local customs resulted from the British administration's legal frameworks, which frequently ignored or actively suppressed indigenous practices. This historical context has left a legacy that still influences Assamese witchcraft practices and attitudes today.

Different districts in Assam, especially in districts like Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang, Tinsukia, Goalpara, Sonitpur, Kamrup (Rural), Cachar, Morigaon, and Sivasagar etc. reported several

cases of witch-hunting and crime against women's which results in social exclusion and violence. This practice still continues in spite of different legal actions like the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act of 2015. According to a *Times of India* report published on May 17, 2025, 32 cases of witch-hunting is reported in between the year of 2022 and 2024. This chronic issue emphasizes the importance of all necessary factors that include community education, legal enforcement, and cultural sensitization in order to successfully counteract witch-hunting in the area.

From Superstition to Social Awakening: The Journey of Birubala Rabha:

Birubala Rabha was a female activist who lived in the village of Thakur villa in the Goalpara district of Assam. She starts a new era for tribal women's by taking significant and daring actions to end the horrible custom of witch-hunting and superstition from society. In Assam, her bravery and tenacity served as a revolutionary example for the younger generation. Birubala had to suffer a lot because of this malpractice. Things became more difficult when Dharmeshwar, her oldest son, was about ten years old and he developed a neurological condition. His health rapidly deteriorated, and he frequently fainted as his condition got worse day by day. The family lived in a secluded rural area with no hospitals or doctors. Birubala brought him to Gauhati Medical College with considerable difficulty, and the doctors there determined that he had a nerve disease. However, the family was unable to continue his treatment because of their financial situation. Desperate and helpless, they went home and seek the help of local exorcists and healers (bej and deodhani), who were thought to possess supernatural abilities. Despite her reservations, Birubala sought a cure from a deodhani. The deodhani "read" her son's fortune and declared that a fairy spirit had taken possession of her son and the spirit was pregnant which would kill Dharmeshwar after two days. For two days, the frightened mother was unable to sleep. However, Dharmeshwar remained alive after two days. Birubala gradually came to the conclusion that these statements were merely superstitious. Even though she

persisted in seeking appropriate medical attention, her son's health continued to deteriorate, and eventually his mental state also declined. Because they thought he was possessed, the villagers became terrified of his actions and restrained him in a room. Ultimately, with assistance from the local government, the family was forced to send him to Shillong for treatment. When her husband also became gravely ill, tragedy struck once more. The vicious rumour that "the evil comes from her own house and there is a witch living there" was then spread by some of the villagers.

After a public meeting, the villagers labelled her a witch and shunned her family. Out of jealousy and hatred, some family members even attempted to attack her at night. She was also threatened with death. Nothing, however, could crush her spirit. Standing tall, Birubala Rabha's voice became one of the first and most powerful in her area to condemn blind faith and witch-hunting.

She started a fight to defend innocent lives accused of witchcraft, a fight against ignorance and blind belief. One instance occurred in 1999 when five women were charged with witchcraft at a public gathering at Lakhimpur's Dadan Temple. "A deodhani once said my son would die in two days, but he lived," she said, citing her personal experience as evidence. These witch doctors are all scammers. Birubala persisted. Walking from village to village, she raised awareness that witchcraft was an unfounded and untrue belief. She personally assisted in preventing the murder of about 35 women as a result of witch hunts. She received both national and international recognition for her efforts. She received a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in 2005 as part of the "Project Thousand Women" campaign. She subsequently won numerous honours, such as:

- 1) From Reliance Industries Ltd. she was awarded "Real Hero" in 2010
- 2) From the Tai Ahom Youth Council, she was awarded with "Birangana Mula Gabhoru Award"
- 3) "Jaimati Award"
- 4) "Samaj Pran Seva Award", and

5) From Gauhati University Ph.D. (Honoris Causa).

Many young people, both men and women, joined her journey after being inspired by her work. After an informal launch with the Assam Mahila Samiti in 2011, Mission Birubala was formally launched in 2012 with great support from people of Assam. In 2013, the mission, which sought to combat superstition and advance reason, was officially recognized by the state. With hundreds of members spread across 14 Assamese districts, Mission Birubala currently hosts workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns in rural and school settings. In a number of colleges and universities, including Dibru College, Dudhnoi College, and Dibrugarh University, the mission even set up operational cells. The Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian honour, was given to Birubala Rabha in 2021. She stated after receiving it: "Awards are nice, but helping others is more important."

We need to have courage and fearlessness. An era ended with her death, but generations are still motivated by her values of bravery, honesty, and compassion. Birubala Rabha went from being a poor tribal woman in an unnamed village to becoming well-known worldwide. She was the first woman from Assam to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Her strong voice will live on in history as a symbol of the oppressed. Birubala Rabha served as a beacon of light for society, illuminating the shadows of superstition and empowering those who had previously lived in fear. Her life continues to serve as an inspiration for future generations—a tale of bravery, honesty, and hope.

The Struggle for Reason: Scientific Temper and the Legacy of Birubala Rabha

The scientific temper and logical thinking are the cornerstones of the modern era. It's true that science has advanced remarkably over the last 200 years. Humans have sent missions to Mars, set foot on the moon, and most recently, India has successfully completed low-cost lunar and solar missions like Aditya L1 and Chandrayaan. Ironically, though, there are still people in that same India who use archaic rituals to find meaning in life and obfuscate science in smoke clouds. We frequently hear illogical, superstitious claims every day in India, from both the opposition and those in power. Many

of these are deliberately employed propaganda tools to incite mass hysteria and divert attention away from important issues. Such hysteria frequently conceals political and economic interests from the general public, who, regrettably, become both the agents and the victims of these forces. The phenomenon of mass hysteria has become so widespread in modern times that it has become difficult to distinguish between the educated and the uneducated. Whether it's villagers worshipping a wooden log, dancing around a purported "long-haired goddess," or applying vermilion to a white horse they think is a reincarnated deity. These are not essentially any different from mobs that beat a driver to death following an accident or lynch a woman as a "witch." Tragedies like witch hunts, vigilante murders, and "sopadhara" (child kidnapper) rumours have become commonplace news stories in Assam.

Even years ago, the same syndrome was prevalent. Some twenty-five years back, a 38-year-old man, just because he was not fair and lovely enough, was beaten to death after being called a "narbandor" (werewolf) a legend drawn from a TV show. Mob madness is horrifying. Today, this sort of hysteria is played out on live TV screens: unidentified "bearded men" assaulted as foreigners, couples attacked in public for "immorality," women filmed and ridiculed for consuming alcohol, or drivers lynched for accidents. The media, instead of deconstructing such myths, tend to sensationalize them, fuelling the lunacy. Police and civic authorities ought to have a major role to play in preventing and dealing with such happenings, but more often than not are seen showing lethargy. Administrative inactivity and inability to act in time only exacerbate the issue.

The hold of irrationality and superstition over our heads is hardly in need of further evidence. But of interest is the economic and political system which perpetuates such forces.

For instance, in a collapsing public health network, an impoverished man helpless to heal his or his kin's chronic disease resorts to self-styled "Godman" or faith healers in desperation. In a consumerist, globalized economy, where human anxiety, insecurity, and hopelessness are manipulated by markets,

the poor tend to resort to superstition. The ruling elites of any exploitative order well understand that ignorance and blind faith are their strongest weapons.

In order to manipulate individuals, they give them myths for keeping them away from actual issues by fear, confusion, and false hope. This is why superstition and hysteria tend to be deeper socio-economic manipulation.

It Is important to note that scientific education does not always result in scientific temper. Most educated individuals are very superstitious. Superstition is not even limited to villages and it has an equal following in cities. The line of luxury cars in front of a self-proclaimed miracle healer's residence is the same as the villagers waiting outside an old tree to seek "divine power."

As Bertrand Russell in "The Place of Science in a Liberal Education" wrote that, "The scientific attitude of mind involves the suppression of hopes and fears, loves and hates... until we become able to see things frankly, without preconceptions, without bias, and without any wish except to see them as they are." He also cautioned that though it is easy to understand what scientific temper means, it is extremely difficult to develop the mental discipline it needs.

In the current socio-political environment, beset by religious fundamentalism, superstition, and pseudo-scientific culture—making a real rational and scientific society is not an easy job. Textbook science alone cannot destroy blind faith.

The emergence of "cultural nationalism" and postmodern scepticism regarding rationality has complicated things further. In the midst of all this, the battle to establish a rational, scientific, and human society goes on. Birubala Rabha was like a ray of light piercing the darkness of superstition that has so long shadowed Assamese society.

Causes, Patterns, and the Persistence of Witch-Hunting: A Sociological Reflection on Assam's Struggle Against Superstition:

Witch-hunting is more common in illiterate, uneducated, and economically depressed societies. The victims and offenders both often belong to such marginalized groups. Their brains are filled with superstition and irrational thinking, which result in tragedy and disaster.

As there are no medical facilities available in the countryside, individuals resort to traditional healers like Ojhas, Kaviraj's, or Tantrikas assuming their ailment to be brought on by ghosts or evil spirits. The victim "witch" is most often a woman, frequently an old or disabled person, and serves as the scapegoat for the village's miseries.

Widows and unmarried women are particularly at risk. Very often, powerful men in society collude to accuse such women of being witches so that they can acquire their property. In other instances, when a widow denies sexual favours to a village leader, she is accused of being a witch and persecuted. Hence, witch-hunting very often camouflages behind it the patriarchal avarice and sexual lust for domination and wealth that take advantage of women's vulnerability.

In distant and hilltop villages, as a result of the lack of qualified physicians, the villagers rely on quack doctors and tantric. If these doctors are unable to heal a patient, they say that a witch or evil spirit is preventing the healing. The villagers, trusting them, then go out to hunt down the alleged witch. Victims like men, women, or even children are beaten, stoned to death, and their bodies buried or disposed of by being thrown into rivers.

Administrative negligence is another reason. In spite of strict laws and police patrol, witch-hunting still goes on in many areas of Assam. Political indifference is also responsible and political parties do not want to step in for fear of alienating tribal votes.

Witch-hunting victims, being illiterate and poor, do not have the courage or awareness to go to the police or court for justice. They accept their fate quietly for fear of social ostracism. When a family member is accused, the family as a whole experience's isolation and shame.

Some of the victims' corpses are mutilated and secretly buried to stop "rebirth" of the witch showing us the ghastly extent of such superstition.

Witch-hunting is a blot on human civilization. It is against fundamental human rights and should be eliminated root and branch. The culprits should be given the maximum punishment so that terror of the law keeps future crime at bay.

India has many existing laws against witch-hunting, but these are effective only with the intentions and activeness of law-enforcing agencies. Publicity campaigns, protest rallies, and legal literacy campaigns need to be conducted, particularly in sensitive tribal areas. Lessons on the wicked effect of witch-hunting should be taught in schools and colleges so that students grow up with a disdain for such violence. Eliminating witch-hunting requires long-term, systematic measures. Its roots lie in poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and poor healthcare. Centuries of political, economic, and social injustice have left sections of our society trapped in ignorance and deprivation.

Therefore, it is essential to build a system of social and economic justice, guided by honesty and equality, so that people at all levels can be enriched with knowledge, rational thinking, and scientific understanding. Without the active and sustained involvement of the people themselves, witch-hunting and this ancient barbarous tradition cannot be entirely eradicated.

As can be observed in various newspapers and journals, numerous people have lost their lives over time because of the devastating power of superstition. Sometimes this issue assumes a fearful form in society. In the Middle Ages, which were rich in superstition, blind faith, exploitation, and injustice, some sections of society misled and plundered people by exploiting religion. This ignorance,

irrationality, and cruelty formed a dark social atmosphere that even discredited religion. When clever and cruel men got the grip of religion and steered society in the wrong direction, the outcome was a degeneracy that resonates even today also we still find people becoming victims of superstition here and there.

At the same time, we have lost sight of the brilliance of ancient Indian scientists and scholars like Brahmagupta, Aryabhata, Bhaskaracharya, Yajnavalkya, Bharadwaja, Charaka, Kalidasa, Vatsyayana, Chanakya, and Vikramaditya, whose work once lit up the world. Thanks to them, the Hindu-Arabic numeral system engulfed the entire world. But in subsequent periods, we became infamous as an illiterate nation for the West which is a pathetic irony. Even the British, who arrived from overseas to govern India, appeared to lose their grip on reason during modern times.

One does not need to go far to see how many lives have been lost through orthodox beliefs and practices of the people that continue in our world. It is as hard to wake a man feigning sleep as it is to persuade those who refuse to doubt their blind beliefs and they believe that it is good not to "disturb their peace."

Even now, in most villages, individuals believe that no social work can proceed unless superstition is appeased. However, people cannot be easily released from these long-standing beliefs forever. Ironically, even educated people are victims of superstition due to certain social conventions and traditions.

We have to accept a plain fact: the quest for cause and effect is the basis of all science. Whenever anything occurs, our mind automatically searches for a reason. But when individuals don't discover that reason, they ascribe the event to divine providence or the hand of some god. In ancient times, these notions were prevalent. These illogical notions eventually spread to family and social

interactions, dictating how individuals perceived even accidental occurrences. This tendency continues to this day and will persist unless we take deliberate steps to address it.

While India has progressed much in terms of technology, we also see a pitiful irony. The late Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the great scientist and former President of India, envisioned a new India based on science and technology. And yet, ironically, today we see government-sponsored activities such as Namami Gange, where crores of rupees are being wasted in the name of rituals that don't even make sense scientifically.

These practices, conducted by the political elite, disperse an alternate mind set among common people. Social superstitions and blind beliefs still influence our lives, but there are no sure answers to what they really are or why they exist.

(RASHTRAKAVI MAITHILI SHARAN GUPT)

When individual superstitions become shared social beliefs like attributing droughts, misfortunes, or other natural disasters to "black magic" or "supernatural forces" etc. lead to hate and hostility amongst humans. The worst manifestation of this is the murder of an innocent person charged with being a witch.

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The belief in witches is a long-festering problem in most Indian states and has turned into a serious human rights abuse. In Assam, witch-hunting is referred to as dayan-tantra mantra. In these instances, a woman and sometimes even a man is accused of being a witch by members of her group, who accuse her of all calamities that occur to the group.

These people are charged with transferring uncontrollable diseases, particularly to children. Once labelled as a "witch," the victim is subjected to humiliation, mental and physical torment, and frequently violent public punishment. Occasionally, such individuals are driven out of their homes or attacked and harmed in front of villagers.

Whenever an epidemic, natural disasters, or any other difficulties hit a village, the people blame a woman, holding her responsible for the tragedy. This is an indication of how deep the role of social superstition is entrenched in our collective psyche. Alternatively, there are also cases where certain individuals carry out barbaric rituals such as animal and bird sacrifices in the name of maintaining traditional customs. In order to halt the spread of such poisonous practices, we need to develop a scientific thought and a rational social environment. Then alone shall we be able to free the community and society from superstitions. We need to challenge and transform inherited prejudices and old customs so that social ties and collective might become the instruments of good change and not weapons to suppress poor, working-class people in the name of blind faith.

Findings of the Study:

1. Continuance of Superstition and Shortage of Scientific Temper

The research discovers that deep-rooted superstitions, ignorance, and blind faith still prevail in the social awareness in numerous rural and tribal societies of Assam. In spite of advances in education and technology, scientific and rational thinking is limited, particularly in economically backward areas.

2. Gendered Nature of Witch-Hunting

The practice of witch-hunting is greatly gendered where women are disproportionately targeted, specifically widows, old women, and solo mothers. Patriarchal systems, in addition to economic reasons like property conflicts, render women easy scapegoats during times of crisis.

3. Socio-Economic Marginalization

The majority of cases take place in economically poor and socially marginalized communities, where poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy are widespread. Marginalized groups tend to internalize superstition as part of their cultural identity, sustaining the cycle of victimization.

4. The Quack Healers' and Local Power Structure's Role

The traditional quack healers such as ojhas, kabirajs, and tantric are responsible for provoking heinous crime like witch-hunts. Their supernatural ability of powers is widely accepted without proof. The village people or powerful men use these paranormal skills to settle their personal vendettas or to exert their authority.

5. Administrative and Legal Inefficacy

Despite of laws like Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015 witch-hunting still prevails in the society, because enforcement of this law is weak. In tribal dominated region apathy of the police, procrastination in investigations and political reluctance provokes this kind of barbaric activities.

6. Collective Psychosocial Dynamics

Witch-hunting is usually driven by fear or mob psychology which results in to "purify" their village. This explains a lack of moral thinking and reliance of masses on unreasoned explanations for bad luck.

7. Abnormal Violation of Human Rights

This study proves that witch-hunting results in severe violation of human rights including physical torture, social exclusion, media-economic exploitation, and murder. The victims and their families have to go through lifelong stigma, trauma.

8. Urgency for Awareness and Social Reform

The results stresses upon the necessity for grass-root awareness, education reform, and access to healthcare of the common people. Including lessons on scientific belief and critical thinking at the school level and awareness campaigns through community initiatives at the college level should be encouraged to eradicate such superstition.

Discussion and Interpretation:

The study indicates that witch-hunting in Assam is not only a survival of primitive belief but a multifaceted sociological phenomenon that has its roots in structural inequalities, patriarchal dominance, and cultural hegemony of the society. It acts as a device of social control that provides the power to the powerful groups or elite people by excluding the poor, the weak, and particularly women.

Émile Durkheim's Collective Consciousness Theory can be related with the findings of the study. Witch-hunting can be interpreted as a reflection of the community's attempt to reestablish its moral limits. As per the theory, when a society faces threat, such as an epidemic or catastrophe, the collective conscience may seek a symbolic scapegoat. This figure, the Witch is blamed for the community's misfortune and is punished in public ritual. Consequently, the persecution and sacrifice of the scapegoat serve to reaffirm the group's moral solidarity and a reestablish social order.

Marxist Theory approaches witch-hunting as a manifestation of class struggle and material oppression. It focuses on how superstition is used by the dominant class to maintain power over the oppressed. This perspective highlights that most accusations stem from conflicts over resources such as land or inheritance. The vulnerable, particularly women, who possess or stand to inherit property are often targeted.

The *Feminist Theoretical Framework* further highlights how witch-hunting reinforces patriarchal structures. It argues that women who challenge male authority, own property or financially independent are often targeted as witches. The labelling process of women as witch's functions as a social punishment for non-conformity to establish gender hierarchies and suppresses female agency.

Moreover, functionally, witch-hunting is an illusory solution that fuels reliance on irrational thinking and inhibits scientific and social development. The persistence of witch-hunting in Assam portrays a contradiction of Indian society, the advancement of technological progress and ingrained superstition. It symbolizes the uneven penetration of education, healthcare, and state cover into tribal and rural belts. When the state fails to inculcate scientific thought, social justice, and gender equality into its development process, witch-hunting will continue to be a sign of our collective moral failure.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Witch-hunting in Assam is not only a social malpractice but a manifestation of entrenched structural imbalance occurs because of poverty, patriarchy, illiteracy, and administrative indifference. The research paper finds that such practice is available where state systems are weak, healthcare is poor and education does not include scientific and critical thinking. Victims are mainly the most vulnerable poor women, widows, and those with minimum social protection. Behind the smoky screen of superstition, generally, there are economic interests, questions of property, or patriarchal dominance, masquerading as moral or spiritual purification.

Scientific advancement is not sufficient to build a rational society; it needs to be complemented by social change, political will, and moral education. Existing legal mechanisms of the state like the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015 are not enough unless firmly enforced and communicated to the masses. Finally, the struggle against witch-hunting is a fight

for human dignity and social justice. Constructing a society governed by reason, compassion, and equality is not just a constitutional responsibility but a moral obligation of all citizens.

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