

Witch hunting in Assam: Strategising Alternative Media for Women Empowerment and Overcoming Superstition

Joya Chakraborty, Anjuman Borah

Witch hunting is a superstitious practice that leads to the persecution and death of hundreds of women in India every year. This practice is prevalent in different parts of the country in various degrees and mostly single women and widows become targets of this least talked about violence on women. Empowerment of women and inculcation of scientific temper among the people can be seen as the means to root out such practices from the society. The present paper analyses the prevalence of this custom in Assam and through case study of the initiatives undertaken by Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) towards rescue and rehabilitation of the victims, attempts to understand the role of alternative communication strategies in mitigation of the problem. It is observed that AMSS uses an interesting mix of awareness and capacity building activities through women's collectives designed specifically to provide a grassroots support system within the communities.

Keywords: Superstition, alternative communication strategy, women empowerment, violence against women, witch hunting

Introducing superstition

The struggle between science and superstition has been a long standing one with each trying to overstep the other since centuries. A superstition is generally understood to be an irrational fear or reverence for something which cannot be examined or testified by science.

Superstition is a familiar term in an average person's vocabulary and people generally share a common understanding of the notion of superstition. Sheibe and Sarbin attribute such a common understanding to 'common experience' and 'common sense'. Traditionally associated with this notion are a wide range of phenomena, including magic, ritual, myth, and occult practices commonly prevalent in the society and generally regarded as erroneous beliefs - irrational, primitive, and based on inadequate information

Joya Chakraborty and Anjuman Borah are Assistant Professors at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam, India

(Sheibe & Sarbin, 1965; Dundes, 1961).

Majority of the definitions of superstition attest to this understanding as they emphasize upon the elements of 'fear' and 'irrationality' which blotch the 'belief' or 'objective scientific truth'. Bidney, who defines superstition as "a mode of fear based on some irrational or mythological belief and usually involves some taboo" maintains that beliefs which do not subscribe to 'irrational fears' should be discounted from the class of superstitions. H. J. Rose's definition which tags it as "the acceptance of beliefs or practices groundless in themselves and inconsistent with the degree of enlightenment reached by the community to which one belongs" also endorses this understanding. Puckett too takes a similar view when he describes superstitions as "those beliefs not receiving the sanction of the more advanced mores of that generation" (Bidney, 1953; Puckett, 1926). In spite of the commonness of these understanding, however, what one actually accepts as superstition is not really absolute and is guided by the 'degree of enlightenment of a given community' rather than the 'groundlessness of the practices'.

Dundes offers three basic categorizations of superstitions – signs, magic and conversions. Signs, consists of portents and omens which man may read and accordingly predict results. Magic superstitions correspond to conditions which rather than prediction serve as a means of production or predictions of certain results. As opposed to sign superstitions, human activity in magic superstitions is intentional. Conversion superstition is a hybrid category in which sign superstitions are converted into magic superstitions. This third category includes planting signs, wishes, and counteractants.

Apart from these, superstitions can also be categorised on the basis of their effects –

- Superstitions that cause harm e.g. surgically attending to birth deformities will enrage the gods;
- Superstitions that are neither harmful nor beneficial e.g getting frogs married will induce rainfall;
- Superstitions that are beneficial e.g. consuming un-ripe berries before Saraswati puja (the goddess of knowledge according to Hindu belief) will antagonize the goddess;
- Superstitions that have roots in common sense but may not be relevant in today's world because of changed circumstances e.g. cutting nails at night will reduce the fortune of one's father.

Of all the above types, the first one is of utmost concern from the socio-scientific point of view as it has the potential to cause harm to any individual. Such superstitions that interfere with healthy life options often get perpetuated due to illiteracy and ignorance. In addition, it is also asserted that superstitions, even though manifestly false, provide at times some want-satisfying, or utilitarian, function for certain sections of the community where such beliefs hold root (Sheibe and Sarbin, 1965). Thus, superstitions can also become life threatening at times when it is perpetuated with personal vengeance on socially disadvantaged individuals and communities.

Witch hunting as superstition

Witch hunting is one such dangerous superstition that kills. The belief in the practice of witch craft is part of almost all living societies and some traces of it can be felt at various degrees among all cultures. Prosecution for alleged witchcraft can historically be traced

back to 13th century Europe evoking gruesome images related to the infamous Salem witch trials (1692) where 20 people from among 200 convicts, mostly women, were executed for practicing witchcraft before the process got stalled through public outcry denouncing the execution. Historians and analysts argue that rather than religious extremism, the events in Salem, Massachusetts were sparked off by discords over share of scarce socio-economic resources between sections of local populace (Blumberg, 2007).

Various studies undertaken to understand the practice of witch hunting worldwide attribute it to different reasons beyond mere superstition. The vulnerable sections of the society are usually identified as witches with an aim to denounce them from the community and take control over their land, property etc. This is the reason why mostly single women and widows become 'easy scapegoats' and are branded as witches to divest them of their land and property, or punished for transgressing social norms or refusing sexual advances. Witch hunting is also understood as a manifestation of the low social status of women whereby male attitude of dominance and violence against women is legitimized by calling her a witch (Chaudhuri, 2012).

Witch hunting is a systematic act of violence against women whereby the entire community sanctions the punishment meted out to the person being accused of witchcraft. As a social evil it is more difficult to tackle because the stimulus of such action is often rooted in the traditional spiritual and cultural belief system of the communities which is misinterpreted by a select few to manipulate the situation. Thus witch hunting perpetuates through a conspiracy of ignorance, fear and vested interest.

Witch hunting in India

Witch hunting is one of the least talked about acts of violence on women in India. It is practiced in some form or the other in different parts of the country but mostly concentrated in the areas (states/UTs) of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and West Bengal. Here middle aged and elderly single women in tribal as well as non-tribal communities are orchestrated as witches, leading to social stigma, displacement, economic boycott, torture and even murder.

In a country which ranks at 129 out of 146 in gender inequality index with a score of 0.6, the highest in South Asia, each year an estimated 200 women are killed as witches in rural India. According to the National Crime Record Bureau during the year 2000-2001 there were 253 cases of Witch-hunting (126 cases in 2000 and 127 in the year 2001). Again between 2008 and 2012, more than 768 women have been murdered for allegedly practicing witchcraft. There is also research evidence suggesting that there has been a disturbing rise in witch hunting cases in 2011. The rate of conviction in cases of crime against women is the lowest in India (26.9 %) when compared to other crimes and adding to this crisis is the fact that there is no specific law in India to fight against witch hunting. Witch hunting cases are currently registered under sections 302 (murder), 320 (grievous hurt), 351 (Assault), 354 (Assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty), 364a (kidnapping for ransom) and 503 (criminal intimidation) (Ghosh, 2012; WGHR, 2012; HDR, 2011; NCRB, 2011; NAWO, 2006).

The practice of witch hunting in India is more prominent among the tribal or indig-

enous communities. They are also the people who usually inhabit the rough or mountainous fringe areas within the country characterized by limited access to livelihood opportunities. In the northeastern region of India, which is home to diverse indigenous communities, the practice is more prominent in Assam. It may not be simply coincidental that Assam also has the lowest gender development index among the northeastern states. There have been at least 65 cases of witch hunting reported during 2007-2012 from Assam alone. The practice is more prominent among the Rabha, Hajong, Mishing, Bodo and the Adivasi community in Assam.

The witch is called a '*daini*' in local parlance and believed to cause ailment to people, destroy crops and other livestock etc. She is usually identified by an 'ojha', 'bez' or 'deodhani' (all names for witch doctors) and either banished from the community or killed. Sometimes the designated family of the witch is levied a hefty fine by the community leaders, by which she may be pardoned of her ill deeds/intentions against the fellow villagers. The process of identification of the witch is specified by the witch doctor by looking into the symptoms of the patient. The alleged recipient of witchcraft is usually seen suffering from symptoms like, fever, cough-cold, delirium or hysteria.

As soon as it is believed that a disease has been caused due to the 'witch craft' people try to get rid of the spell through prayers and offerings. Boiled rice together with a cock reduced to ashes is taken in a banana leaf and kept in the middle of a road as an offering to the '*daini*'. People believe that without these prayers and offerings the patient would not survive. It is only after this that the option of medical treatment is explored. It is also believed that there are some diseases which cannot be treated by the medical doctor and needs to be addressed specifically by an ojha. Sometimes patients die due to delay in appropriate treatment. If the patient dies the belief of existence of a witch gets further vindicated and the 'identification' of the witch starts.

In the absence of any medical facilities in the remote villages, the patient is taken to the ojha. The patient, if suspected by the ojha to be under the spell of a witch, is covered by a hunting net and poked with a sharp object till he/she names the witch. In other cases the ojha performs some religious rites to arrive at the description of the person practicing the witch craft. Identified by this process, the alleged witch is then either lynched to death or forced to run away abandoning her family and property. Low levels of education and poor medical facilities are a driving force behind the belief in witchcraft among communities of Assam.

Assam Mahila Samata Society – A case study

Of the many women's rights groups addressing the issue of witch hunting in Assam, Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) an autonomous body implementing the National Mahila Samakhya Programme (NMSP) in the state since 1995 remains prominent for its role in spearheading the movement. The main objective of the NMSP is to encourage, assist and promote collective reflection, decision making and group action by women as a means to their empowerment and for equal participation in the process of learning for social change. Towards this end AMSS through its district implementation units has been mobilizing women to fight against the injustice, discrimination and domination that they face in the society – each unit focussing on issues specific to the local area.

Goalpara is one of the worst affected districts in the State in terms of prevalence of

witch hunting practices. 51 cases of witch hunting have been reported in this district alone since the year 1998 when the Goalpara district implementation unit of AMSS started operations. As such witch hunting has emerged as the focus area of AMSS in Goalpara. The unit has been working towards prevention of witch hunting based on an agenda for awareness generation and capacity building of stakeholders for participation in creating a protective environment. The organization works through the creation of village level *sangha* or women's groups who are sensitized about women's rights, health issues and superstitions that are prevalent in the society disguised as traditions. The AMSS has been successful in saving the lives of many women branded as witches and facilitating their rehabilitation. Of the 51 reported cases, 32 have been successfully settled and the victims rehabilitated.

Birubala Rabha – the making of an icon

Most prominent amongst the AMSS workers is Birubala Rabha, a 59 year old widow from Thakurbilla, a village on the Assam-Meghalaya border in Goalpara district. Today, Birubala Rabha is a name synonymous with anti witch-hunting activism in Assam and holds the record of being the only women from the North-east to be nominated for the Nobel Prize. She was nominated for Nobel Peace Prize, 2005 by an international association called '1000 women for the Nobel Peace Prize, 2005' in recognition of her effort to eliminate witch hunting. Birubala, who has been waging a long struggle against the practice of witch hunting in the state for the past two decades now has been instrumental in saving the lives of over 30 women branded as witches.

Until 1985, Birubala herself subscribed to the traditional beliefs and superstitions leading to the branding and ostracising of poor, helpless women as 'witches'. However, one incident changed the entire course of her life.

When the words of a *Deodhani* (One possessed by God) predicting that her mentally challenged son would die within three days turned out to be false, she was left thinking and began to question the inviolability of the words of these so called 'incarnations of God' based on which innocent people are named witches and persecuted by the society. Thereafter, every incident of witch hunting perturbed her greatly. However, held back by her lack of education and sense of powerless she could take no action for years as she had no idea how to fight.

Hoping to be able to do something, she engaged herself in the village Mahila Samity and subsequently in 1998 came in touch with the AMSS. For the first time she gained access to a forum where she could raise her voice against the practice of witch hunting which she termed as a superstition. As she continued to speak out against the practice and came in the way of the community's persecution of women suspected to be witches, she was socially boycotted in the village for more than three years. She however continued with the struggle drawing strength from the reflection that by fighting for the victims, she was fighting for herself, for womanhood. More than anything else, Birubala's battle has been against patriarchy and social structures that aid the subjugation of women. Given the fact that 33 out of the 35 people that she personally rescued are women, she labels witch hunting as a 'crime against women' by the community and the society. She believes that teachers, doctors and educated youths can play an important role in moul-

ding people's mindsets by explaining to them that witch-hunting is barbaric and that it is a way to torture women.

Birubala's efforts along with that of other sangha members of the AMSS seem to be steadily yielding positive results. Today Birubala is not alone and has been joined by many, including even those who had once taken the lead in her ostracization and character assassination. One activist has also mobilized a team of volunteers and launched a mission named after her – Mission Birubala - to fight the practice of witch hunting. Following is a discussion on some of the cases handled by Birubala and the AMSS team.

Junali Rabha - Case

On 17 May, 2001, when a woman in the Borjhora Dhaporbila village fell ill, Jonal Rabha, a mother of two children was accused of casting evil spells on the woman. She was branded a witch and a mob of villagers attacked her. She somehow ran for her life and took shelter in a nearby village Hatigaon. The Assam Mahila Samata Society and Dhirawati Mahila Samata Sangha came to her rescue. When initial attempts to negotiate with the villagers - to convince them that their accusations were baseless and that she should be allowed to come back to her home - failed they helped her file a case at the local police station. Finally a settlement could be reached with the villagers and on 2 June, 2001 she was brought back to her village. However, although the people have accepted her, she still faces discrimination.

Jogai Bala Rabha- Case

Jogai Bala's story is also similar to Jonali Rabha's account. One woman in her village had fallen sick and the Oja (traditional healer) was called in to treat her. As per the customary practice, the Oja kept on pricking her with the pointed teeth of a swine till in a state of delirium she uttered the name of Jogai Bala. The villagers lost no time in launching a brutal attack on her. Her son managed to save her but 65 years old Jogai Bala was compelled to leave the village. Her son then took her away to Tura in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya and kept her with him for nine years. Nine years later, the matter was taken up by the AMSS and she was brought back to the village. However, the incident left a lasting impression on the entire family. Today her daughter Manjula is an active AMSS worker and works alongside Birubala Rabha in her fight against witch hunting.

Khedai Bala Rabha - Case

Khedai Bala Rabha's account is a clear case of community sponsored violence against a weak and helpless woman to grab her land after her husband's death. When some villagers realized that a widow with two children would have no one to turn for support, they conspired to take hold of her property. They accused her of misleading a young woman through black magic and branding her a witch drove her and her two sons away from the village. She took shelter at a relative's place for three months. The AMSS took up the case and finally she was able to return to the villagers. However, the villagers have snapped all relations with the family and are living the life of socially boycotts.

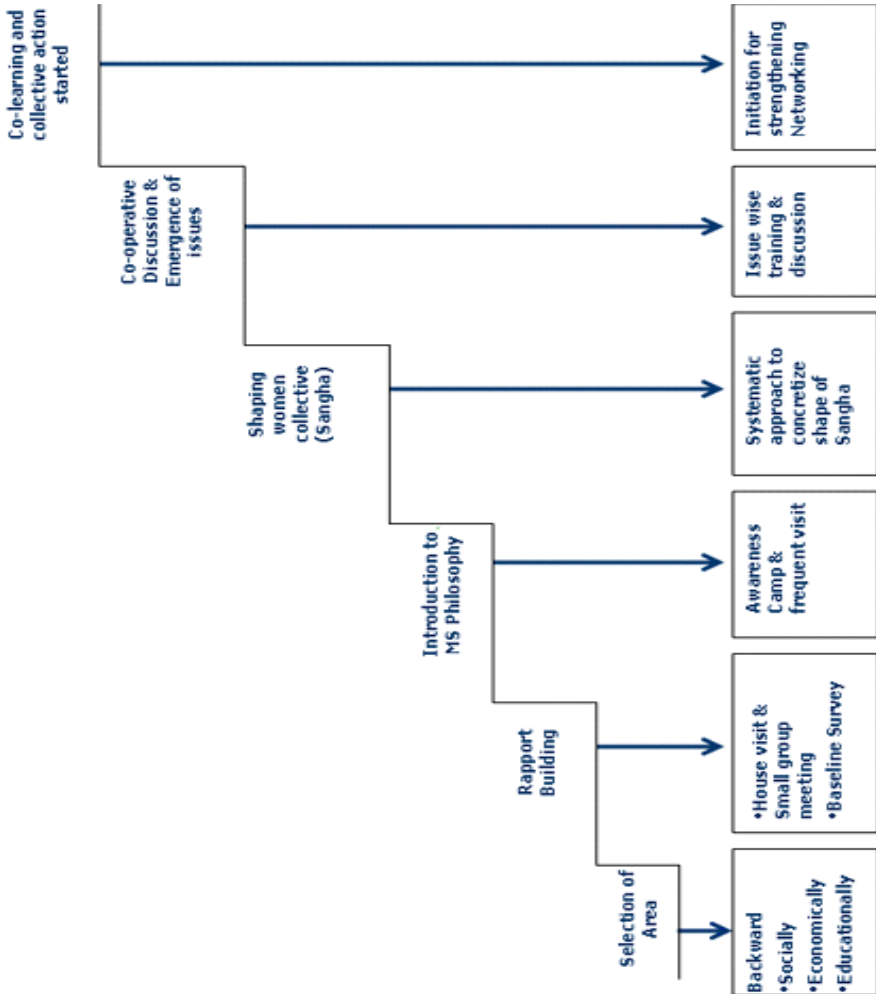
Manomaya Rabha - Case

Manomaya had brought tapioca root used as food item along with another woman of her village. When the other woman fell sick after eating it, she suspected that Manomaya

brought on her illness with witch craft. Instantly the villagers drove her out of the vil-
lage. She sought help of the village who in turn tried to negotiate with the villagers.
However, he too withdrew from the scene when the villagers threatened him of dire
consequences if he intervened. Then Manomaya approached the district Implementation
Unit, Goalpara, AMSS, and the district administration for help. Finally a settlement could
be reached and the villagers gave a written undertaking that such incidents will not be
repeated along with paying compensation to Manomaya.

The AMSS communication and mobilisation strategy

From the discussion and cases studied above it can be summarized that the belief in
witches among the indigenous communities of Assam gets perpetuated through a vi-
cious combination of Government apathy and ignorance of the people. The communities
that are otherwise deprived of resources probably express their frustration through the
acts of witch-hunting.



Communication & Mobilization Model of AMSS (Source: AMSS)

Hence the communication strategy adopted by MSS is responsive to this socio-economic reality of the target communities whereby rather than addressing the problem of witchcraft within the target community as a primitive custom, the compositional issues like literacy, health and economic self-reliance are taken up as the initiation agenda. It follows from the understanding that empowerment of the underprivileged women within the community holds the key to addressing this social evil.

According to Niva Devi, District Resource Person, Goalpara District Implementation Unit, AMSS, the women within these communities become vulnerable owing to a lack of support system within the family or community; for not being economically self-reliant; and for lack of information about better opportunities. Thus, the focus of the activities has to be on empowerment of women through mitigation of the social inequalities. As it is understood that empowerment of women is about changing social institutions and practices, about changing rules, norms and rights, and about changing the balance between women's obligations and responsibilities. (Elson, 1995)

The AMSS follows a systematic multi-step approach to reach out to the community members and mobilize them towards collective action. The first step is to select areas which are backward in multiple aspects – socially, economically and educationally. A situation analysis invariably follows in order to gain extensive understanding of ground realities that determine the prevalent circumstances. The next thing on the agenda is to build rapport with the community. The approach at this point is to gain access into the community and gradually build trust with a small group of people. House visits and discussions in small group meetings not only aid in better understanding of issues but also serve to recognize people's attitude towards the given issues which subsequently lead to identification of potential partners and sympathizers. Once the initial ice is melted, the softer strategy followed in the beginning takes on a little more aggression. The small group meetings are followed up with bigger awareness camps involving more members of the community where the Mahila Samakhya philosophy is gradually introduced. The message delivery mechanism is braced up by further increasing the frequency of house visits to reinforce and emphasize upon the issues brought out during the camps.

As things progress a little, efforts are then concentrated towards the formation of women's collectives or *sanghas*. Women who would have been earlier identified to be prospective associates or moulded during the previous interfacing are motivated to unite towards a common objective. Gradually, the *sanghas* are strengthened and given a more concrete shape by building the capacities of the individual members through sensitization and training camps. Participatory approaches to engage them in discussions lead to the emergence of issues of relevance and better understanding of the various dimensions and contours of such issues. Issue-wise training and further co-operative discussions serve to deepen the *sangha* women's involvement with the problems and intensify their motivation to look for solutions. As these women's collectives grow in strength and their network expands they are mobilized to collective action through process of co-learning and participatory engagement. As they interface with other women, these women too gain a platform for expression of their problems and concerns and gain the strength and courage to fight and resist oppression.

Conclusion

Witchcraft thus emerges as a multifaceted issue which gets entwined with both the concerns for superstition and social disempowerment of women. Hence the promotion of scientific temper becomes as important as ensuring the empowerment of fringe communities. The overall institutional approach by the Government places witchcraft within the general category of crime against women. But the emotional stress and social boycott of the victims rarely gets captured in this dehumanizing framework. The stigma and social apathy faced by the victims puts them at a perpetual state of pain, agony and oppression. Empowerment, in this context can be achieved by a process which enhances the ability of disadvantaged individuals or groups to challenge and change existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions (Agarwal, 1995).

The efforts by AMSS in this context captures the core of the problem and addresses it through a mix of alternative approaches which go beyond mere awareness campaigns. The group building exercise among women within the communities not only creates a network of support system at the grassroot level but also extends opportunities of employment generation through microfinance initiatives. The women's collectives also become the anchor point for initiatives in health awareness and adult literacy initiatives that appeal to the fundamentals of this social evil.

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