



# UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND SUPERSTITION: A STUDY OF WITCH HUNTING AMONG BODOS OF ASSAM

Manaswita Manjuri Deka

Ex. Student

Dept. of Sociology

Royal Global University, Guwahati

**Abstract** - Traditional cultural practices reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community over generations. Every social grouping around the world has its own unique set of traditions, cultural practices, and belief systems—some of which are beneficial to the community as a whole, while others can be detrimental to specific groups, particularly women. Superstition continues to be viewed as a manifestation of so-called feminine weakness. Despite numerous legal interventions and awareness campaigns across various regions of Assam, Bogijuli remains a site where superstition, fear, and patriarchal norms shape community responses to illness and misfortune. A recent case where a woman who had been suffering from a prolonged illness was identified by her family and neighbours as a possible threat. Lacking access to modern healthcare facilities and scientific explanations, they turned to a local tantric (ojha) for guidance. The ojha declared that the woman was under the influence of a witch spirit and posed a danger to the village. This proclamation led to her immediate social exclusion, and she was compelled to live in isolation on the outskirts of the village.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional cultural practices reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community over generations. Every social grouping around the world has its own unique set of traditions, cultural practices, and belief systems—some of which are beneficial to the community as a whole, while others can be detrimental to specific groups, particularly women. Superstition continues to be viewed as a manifestation of so-called feminine weakness. Over time, societal norms and cultural traditions have drawn rigid boundaries, assigning gendered roles that confined women to the domestic sphere. Women were often regarded as subordinate to men and limited to the roles of caregivers and homemakers. As a result, their rights and freedoms were restricted in the name of family honor and societal expectations. This deeply rooted patriarchal ideology placed women in an extremely vulnerable position. (Paudel, 2011)

Witch hunting is one of the most heinous forms of violence rooted in traditional belief systems, especially prevalent in societies across Africa and Asia. (Swargiary, 2017) In Assam, this practice is infamously known as "*Daini Hotiya*". The term 'witch' refers to an evil spirit or an individual believed to practice black magic. Witch hunting, often culminating in the killing of the accused, remains widespread among rural and largely uneducated populations.

This study focuses on the experiences of women from the Bodo community in Bogijuli Village, located in the Sonitpur district. Here, belief in witchcraft remains strong, and 'ojhas' (Tantriks) are still commonly consulted to detect and identify alleged witches.

Historically, numerous cases of witch hunting have resulted in gender-based violence, with widowed or single women being the primary targets. In many instances, women possessing land or property were falsely accused of practicing witchcraft. The use of such accusations served as a tool to dispossess them or eliminate their presence, often resulting in physical harm or even death.

In many tribal regions, superstitions are deeply entrenched and linked to both cultural and health beliefs. Rather than relying on modern medical systems, villagers often seek help from 'Ojhas' or 'Bez', who are believed to possess spiritual powers. These traditional healers often assert that a woman or man is under the control of an evil spirit or witch.

Superstition plays a dominant role in reinforcing witch-hunting practices. Factors such as personal jealousy, unresolved family disputes, fear of sexual dominance, and even the desire to seize property often lead to false accusations. Such accusations are rarely based on evidence and are instead fueled by hearsay, fear, and communal suspicion. In many cases, the accused is either a widow or an elderly woman, making her an easy target. The social status of these women further deteriorates as they are branded witches, isolated, and subjected to violence.

A 'witch' is generally perceived as someone who possesses magical powers and practices sorcery. The act is referred to as 'witchcraft'. Witchcraft involves invoking supernatural forces through rituals, petitions, and prayers. Witches are said to possess the spiritual power of certain animals like black cats, newts, and snakes. They are believed to use items like herbs, hair, nails, pieces of cloth, spit, and ashes in their rituals. These powers are said to serve both healing and harmful purposes. Such individuals are often accused of grave crimes like visiting burial grounds to prepare potions from ashes, and they are branded as threats to society. In many instances, these alleged witches are hunted, excluded from social life, displaced, brutally punished, or even killed—a practice commonly referred to as witch-hunting. (Swargiary, 2017)

#### Objectives of the Study

- To explore and understand the constructed identity of a woman as a 'witch' within the socio-cultural context.
- To analyse the perception and acceptance of this constructed identity by the community members.

## Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of witch-hunting and its socio-cultural implications. Both primary and secondary data have been utilized to collect relevant information regarding the incidents involving women branded as witches.

Primary data has been gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and focused group discussions (FGDs) with villagers, victims, and community members. These interactions provided rich, first-hand insights into how witch identities are constructed and perceived within the community.

Secondary data was collected from existing literature, including scholarly articles, journal publications, newspaper reports, internet sources, and relevant books focusing on witch-hunting and superstition in India, particularly in Assam. The study employs conceptual frameworks such as Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy, theories of social identity, and the sociology of superstition to interpret the data. These frameworks help in critically analyzing witch-hunting as a gendered and superstitious practice. The research follows the purposive sampling method, as it involves selecting individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by the issue and belong to a specific community. The fieldwork will be conducted in Bogijuli Village, located in the Sonitpur district of Assam.

## DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of witch hunting has far-reaching implications, including the shaping of individual identities, the consolidation of state power, the violation of human rights, and even extrajudicial killings carried out in the name of eradicating witchcraft. In the study "Witches, Midwives, and Nurses" by Ehrenreich and English (1973), the authors explore the political motives of the Church in relation to witch trials. Witchcraft is conventionally understood as the use of supernatural powers to influence individuals or events, often through sorcery or magical practices. Its interpretation varies significantly across historical and cultural contexts. In Western societies, "it has been associated with the image of elderly women who gather secretly at night, engage in cannibalism, orgiastic rituals with the Devil or Satan, and practice black magic. However, this portrayal of witchcraft exists more in the imagination of people than in actual reality." (Russel, 2023).

This stereotype is deeply entrenched in historical narratives and has often been used to rationalize evil practices across various cultures. The European witch hunts from the 14th to 18th centuries exemplify the depth and intensity of these beliefs. Despite the passage of time, the concept of witchcraft and its associated imagery continue to shape popular consciousness, frequently represented in mass media including television, cinema, and folklore. "It often finding explicit representation in popular media, such as television shows, films, and fiction, sustained by folk tales." (ibid, 1972).

The historical construction of women as witches was rooted in unscientific methods and irrational beliefs. In earlier times, people held superstitious convictions about witchcraft and often adopted punitive methods that were

unjust, prejudiced, and ultimately harmful, leading to the victimization of innocent individuals. It is critical to acknowledge that witch trials lacked empirical rigor and were highly unreliable in establishing guilt. Moreover, it is vital to recognize that the notion of witchcraft is not uniform; it varies widely across temporal and cultural landscapes. In many modern societies, witchcraft is interpreted as a form of spiritual or mystical practice rather than a criminal offense warranting persecution. The archetype of the witch exists across multiple cultural narratives, often attributed with possessing an “evil eye” or mouth, alleged to bring about harm such as crop failure, livestock deaths, and illness. However, witch hunting cannot be solely attributed to superstition. Socioeconomic and gender-based conflicts often underlie such incidents. Disputes over property, denial of land rights to women, and gendered power struggles at both family and community levels have been identified as underlying factors behind witch-hunting cases. In India, scholars argue that in many instances, land becomes a point of contention, particularly because traditional customs typically transfer lineage and land through male descendants. Tribal women are often denied full ownership rights; they may be allowed to manage land and its produce, or share its yield, but lack complete legal ownership. The second form of land access is a kind of maintenance right given to an unmarried daughter. If she remains single, the land is given to her for management by her father. (Massodi, 2014). Given these complexities, it is imperative to approach the subject with analytical rigor, critical thought, and a firm commitment to human rights. Skepticism, coupled with evidence-based reasoning and adherence to legal frameworks, is essential when addressing conflicts or accusations related to witchcraft.

#### Social Construction of identity: witches

The construction of identity involves “the process of constructing meaning based on a prioritized cultural attribute or set of attributes, which takes precedence over other sources of meaning. Individuals or collective actors may have multiple identities, but this plurality can lead to stress and contradiction in self-representation and social action.” (Castells, 1997) The social construction of the identity of a witch has evolved over time and varies across different cultures and historical periods. The concept of witchcraft and witches has existed in societies for centuries, and its perception and meaning have changed significantly throughout history. In many societies, the identity of a witch has been associated with supernatural powers and the practice of magic. In certain cultures, witches were believed to possess malevolent powers and were considered dangerous and evil. They were often associated with sorcery, curses, and causing harm to others. These negative perceptions led to the persecution and execution of numerous individuals, particularly during the European witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries. There is influence of religious, cultural, and socio-political factors in the definition of who is a witch. For example, during the witch trials, religious beliefs played a significant role in shaping the identity of witches. The Christian perspective fueled the belief that witches were in league with Satan and engaged in acts that were contrary to Christian teachings. (ibid, 1997).

Additionally, social and cultural anxieties—such as fear of the unknown, the marginalization of women, and the desire to maintain social order—contributed to the construction of the witch identity. (ibid, 1997) Women, in particular, were often targeted as witches due to gendered stereotypes and existing power dynamics. The label of

“witch” was used as a tool to control and oppress those who did not conform to societal norms or who challenged the established power structures. (Borthakur, 2022)

However, it is important to note that the identity of a witch is not solely defined by negative stereotypes and historical persecution. In some contemporary contexts, witchcraft has been reclaimed and reinterpreted as a source of empowerment, spirituality, and resistance. Modern witchcraft practices, such as Wicca and other pagan traditions, focus on nature-based spirituality, personal growth, and the celebration of femininity. For individuals who identify as witches today, the concept can be deeply personal and can encompass a wide range of beliefs and practices. (Neogi, 2019) It is generally observed that belief in the existence of supernatural powers is often closely linked to a belief in religion. Individuals turn to magic when religious practices fail to produce desired outcomes. Unpredictable natural events, inadequate health facilities, and calamitous situations contribute to the belief in supernatural forces. The control of these supernatural forces through compulsive formulae is known as magic. Magic is practiced and often intertwined with the worship of gods. (Anand, 2022)

While gods are invoked through prayer and petitioned for wellbeing, magic is typically used to address specific issues. Magic holds great significance in tribal religion, particularly within the Bodo community of Assam, where it is considered an integral aspect of ‘traditional’ religion. Rituals such as chants of the Deuris, oracles of the Doudini, and the religious festival Kherai are crucial components. These performative acts are viewed as essential religious expressions. In the cultural milieu of Assam, traditional beliefs in witchcraft remain prevalent. According to Brahma (1992) as cited by Swargiari (2016), in most tribal communities of Assam, religion and magic are seen as complementary. For example, in the Bodo community, a Dayna or witch is believed to possess the special spirit of animals that perform services for them. They are consequently viewed as harmful to society due to beliefs that they bring illness, harm, and death. Those suspected of witchcraft are often subjected to violence—hunted, tortured, exiled, or even killed. The accused are often women who are socially excluded based on suspicions alone. New forms of inequality, increasing individualism, and social enmity have heightened tensions in communities, all of which can be explained in the context of beliefs in occult powers. (Swargiari, 2016) The primary factors contributing to witchcraft accusations and persecution are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and the socio-dynamic structures of society. One key factor is the tendency to associate illness with supernatural causes. Many communities attribute illness to the actions of witches believed to wield supernatural powers to inflict harm. This belief justifies punishments and reinforces collective fear. Acts of violence based on witchcraft accusations stem from socio-economic disparities, power struggles, and the urge to maintain social control. These accusations are often used to uphold unequal power dynamics and justify the exclusion of marginalized individuals. Such practices do not support the rights and empowerment of marginalized groups. It is often observed that attacks on alleged witches originate from within their own communities, frequently targeting those who were once valued members. However, such individuals become victims due to the deceitful beliefs and suspicions harbored within their social environment. Addressing witch persecution necessitates a critical understanding of the interaction between culture, ideology, and power. (Sharma, 2022) The role of the *ojha* or *kabiraj*—traditional healers—is especially influential. These individuals often play a crucial role in identifying and accusing witches. Their authority is often unquestioned due to their perceived expertise in traditional healing

and spirituality. (Kelkar and Sharma, 2021) Despite lacking scientific evidence, their word carries significant weight within the community. The ojha or kabiraj often rely on rituals and superstitions to extract confessions, which can include torture, public shaming, and coercion. In extreme cases, communities may also participate in punishing the accused, further perpetuating the cycle of violence. It is vital to recognize that these practices are deeply embedded within socio-cultural systems where belief in witchcraft is normalized, and the ojha holds substantial authority. Addressing this issue requires challenging the power of these traditional figures and fostering education, critical thinking, and evidence-based methods. (Kelkar & Sharma, 2020). The term 'Ojha' or 'Tantric' refers to a spiritual expert, typically associated with the ancient Indian tradition of Tantra. Tantra encompasses various spiritual practices such as meditation, rituals, chants (mantras), energy work, and spiritual symbols (yantras and mudras). An Ojha is someone well-versed in these techniques and often sought for healing and guidance. Their influence is deeply rooted in community life, where they function as spiritual leaders and cultural custodians. (Kelkar and Sharma, 2021)

Role of an Ojha among the Bodos:

**Healing and Medicines:** Ojhas are recognized as healers possessing extensive knowledge of traditional medicine and healing techniques. Community members seek their help for both physical and spiritual ailments. The Ojha employs herbs, chants, rituals, and other traditional methods to restore health and balance. (Kelkar and Sharma, 2021)

**Rituals and Ceremonies:** The Ojha has a central role in conducting community rituals and ceremonies, particularly those related to life events such as birth, marriage, and death. They lead the community in invoking blessings and conducting rituals to ensure collective wellbeing. (ibid, 2021)

**Spiritual Guidance:** Seen as a spiritual advisor, the Ojha helps individuals resolve conflicts, gain insight, and make important decisions. Their communication with spirits is often believed to guide people through difficult situations. (ibid, 2021)

**Preserving Cultural Heritage:** The Ojha is vital for the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions, practices, and knowledge. They are the custodians of oral traditions, responsible for passing them on to future generations and ensuring cultural continuity. (ibid, 2021)

**Social Cohesion:** The Ojha fosters social unity within the Bodo community. Through their roles as healers, advisors, and spiritual leaders, they bring people together and strengthen communal ties. Their involvement in collective rituals and problem-solving builds solidarity and support networks. (ibid, 2021)

The Superstitious beliefs and practices attached to witch in Assam:

In recent time, it has been seen an ever-increasing trend of crime against women in Assam, along with rise in witch-hunting cases. Crime against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relation between men and women, and discrimination against women by men. Assam is the ranked second in the country with the highest report on crimes against women. Traditionally, witchcraft was a part of the social life of the tribal

communities in Assam, but now it is increasingly expanding among the other communities as well as across the state. Majority of the tribes in Assam have heterogeneous tradition and culture. All the districts of the state exhibit a mix of divergent ethnic groups who are truly distinct in their own identities. Some of the important tribes include Bodo, Deori, Dimasa, Khamti Karbi, Hmar, Miri, Mishimi, Rabha, Tiwa and many other tribes. These tribal communities always try to protect their self-identities through their customs, traditions and cultural affairs. Witchcraft and witch hunt in Assam are not new events. Assam, known as the land of tantra- mantra (magic), which has a number of folk tales of dead regaining life with the mantra and had been extensively used for the benevolent or malevolent purpose. Mayong, a part of Morigaon district, had been very much famous for black magic and tantra-mantra. In the medieval period Mayong was known as the capital of black magic and witchcraft. Recent revelations about the incidents of witch hunt in Assam, shows that districts like, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang, Tinshukia, Goalpara, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Morigaon, Kamrup suffering seriously by the problem. The problem of witch-hunting in Assam is increasingly becoming complex with the passage of time. It is noticed that not only the poor or under-privileged are targeted, but educated people of the state are also not spared. There are various reasons behind the practice of witch-hunting and the main reason is superstitious beliefs, where a woman is blamed for social unrest. There is also some religious impact and also some economic issues. Underdevelopment, lack of education, health facilities are the few of the reasons behind witch hunting. Witches are usually identified by ojha, bez or deodhani all are known as witches doctor. People visiting the ‘deodhani’, ‘bez’, ‘ojha’ for treatment of disease (Borah.Das.2019). Witch hunting as a form of violence against women associated with the traditional beliefs and practices which is difficult to eradicate from the society. Birubala Rabha was the first Assamese women to be nominated for the novel peace prize in 2005 for her courageous to fight against witch hunting. In 2015 Guwahati university awarded doctorate degree for her works for the society. She was born at Thakurbilla village in Goalpara. In her early life she also believed in traditional practice of witchcraft. But in 1985 one incident changed her life. In 1985 her son suffered malaria and become mentally disturbed. Deodhani predicted that her son would die within 3 days but this did not prove to be true. After that she would stopped believing to the words of Deodhani. Unfortunately, her husband fell ill after her sons illness. Because of these incident villagers suspected her of being a witch and kept her alone. 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. In 2011 she launched Mission Birubala which tours different parts of Assam to spread awareness against witch hunting and superstitious believe. Birubala Rabha was honored with the women world summit foundation prize in 2018. She rescued over 50 women from being branded as witches. The main aim of this mission is to serve human being and to protect the rights of women. Birubala Rabha was honored with the Padma shri award on January 25, 2021. Birubala Rabha is instrumental in getting Assam witch hunting (prohibition, prevention and protection) act 2015. Former CM of Assam Sarbananda Sanowal initiated an awareness program named as “Sanskar- Manuhemanuhor Babe” to eradicate misbeliefs and superstitions and to cultivate empathy among people. Through this awareness programs, society can eradicate such evil practice. Education also plays a vital role in the life of any individual. Education is the light of life. Without it people become illiterate. It helps

individual to become a good person and also shapes the personality of people. Education is necessary to live with a dignified life. It has importance in the life of an individual to become aware of their rights, duties towards society, families and the nation. Education helps people to become self-reliant and also give employment and identity to the people. Education plays a key role for the growth of rational and logical thinking of people. Therefore, education is necessary for all round development of an individual. Most of the witch hunting cases are prevalent in rural areas of Assam where people are illiterate and education is not properly developed. Therefore, to eradicate illiteracy from Assam is an undeniable necessity in order to fight against witch hunting. Various civil society organizations play an important role to fight against witch hunting. For example, some of the organizations are Assam State Commission for Women, All Bodo Student Union; Ellora Vigyan Mancha started campaign against preventing and prohibiting the social evil. They also gave employment opportunity to the victim of witch hunting (Borthakur 2022). “The domestic life of the Bodos follows the patriarchal family pattern. However, Bodo women do have the liberty to work. The household works like cooking, maintaining cleanliness in the house, providing food for each and every member of the family and so on are done by the women. Moreover, extra work for additional income such as rearing of pigs, hens, goat and ducks is done by women, and the kitchen garden owned by her in the house is often used as she wishes. So, the division of works between husband and housewife in a Bodo family is based on the necessity and physical capability to support family life (Swargiari 2017). It is generally seen that belief in the existence of supernatural powers is very often corollary to a belief in religion. One takes recourse to magic when religion fails to produce desired results. Unpredictable natural events, inadequate health facilities and calamitous situations lead to the belief in supernatural forces. The control of supernatural forces by means of compulsive formulae is known as magic. Magic is practiced and it cannot be separated fully from the worship of Gods. While the gods are moved by prayer, and the gods are petitioned for general wellbeing, magic is always used with reference to specific problems. Magic is an integral part of the tribal religion and its importance is equally noteworthy in the case of Bodo traditional religion. The chants of the Deuris, the oracles of the Doudini, and the different performative feats during the religious Festivals particularly Kherai as mentioned above are important aspects of the ritual. It is important to note that in the cultural milieu of Assam, the traditional belief in witchcraft is prevalent in many communities. According to Brahma, in most tribal communities of Assam, religion and magic are often treated together and regarded as complementary to each other (Brahma, 1992:145). For instance, in the Bodo community of Assam, dayna or a ‘witch’ is believed to possess special spirit of animals that perform services for them. They are thereby considered harmful to the society as it is believed that they can bring harm, illness and diseases to people. The suspected person is hunted down, physically tortured, driven out of villages, socially excluded and in some cases even killed on the alleged charge of being ‘witches’ and practicing ‘witchcraft’. New forms of wealth and inequality, rapid growth of individualism and enmity increased social tensions among the Community. These are explicable in terms of occult power of witchcraft. Montague Summers argues that “Witchcraft was inextricably mixed with politics”. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, published in 1484 by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, two of the inquisition’s foremost prosecutors and both Dominican monks, pieces together a patchwork of the many political, religious, and personal anxieties associated with the construction of the witch in the late fifteenth century. More

than the occult practices, witchcraft and more than the sorcery and magic, the witch-hunts are practiced increasingly in Bodo Community. (Swargiari 2017)

The 'bodo' living in and around the Arunachal Pradesh border areas under Chariduar circle is very distinct and unique. They are believed to have settled here in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The bodos of Chariduar, Chengelimara, and Bogijuli areas are believed to be the earliest settlers here. They came and settled here from different places. Bogijuli village is located in Chariduar subdivision of Sonitpur district in Assam, India.

The Bodo people of Bogijuli village predominantly follow 'Bathou' religion. Some also adhere to "Sanatan Dharma" as preached by Srimanta Shankar Dev, and a small segment practices Christianity. The lifestyle of the villagers is simple, with agriculture forming the backbone of their economy. Most households depend on farming for subsistence and livelihood. The economic condition of the people residing near the Arunachal border is poor, with the majority being daily wage labourers. Several structural factors contribute to their economic backwardness. For a considerable period, this population remained cut off from basic amenities like electricity. Electrification reached them only around 2022. The persistent low literacy rate has been a major impediment to their socio-economic progress and is closely linked to the prevalence of superstitions like witchcraft. Several witch-hunting incidents have occurred in this region over the years. The lack of education has not only limited their access to government welfare schemes but also entrenched regressive social practices and beliefs. The absence of proper healthcare facilities further contributes to the persistence of such superstitions.

The governance of the village is largely traditional, managed by the 'gaon burhas' (village elders) and local heads who play a central role in maintaining harmony and resolving conflicts within the community. Though this structure fosters local cohesion, the need for awareness, literacy, and development initiatives is pressing to bring the community in line with modern social progress. (Bramha, 2017)

Bogijuli village, located within the Bodo community in India's northeastern region, is a small and close-knit community with its unique characteristics and perspectives. While it is important to note that individual experiences and viewpoints may vary within the village, here is a general overview of the view commonly associated with Bogijuli village in the Bodo community:

**Community Bond:** Bogijuli village is known for its strong sense of community and close bonds among its residents. The people of Bogijuli value unity, cooperation, and collective well-being. They often come together for social events, festivals, and cultural activities that promote a shared identity and a sense of belonging.

**Cultural Richness:** The Bodo community, including Bogijuli village, is culturally rich, with a distinct heritage and traditions. The villagers take pride in preserving and promoting their unique customs, music, dance, art, and language. Cultural festivals and celebrations play a vital role in showcasing and reinforcing their identity.

**Agricultural Lifestyle:** Bogijuli village, like many rural areas, is predominantly agrarian. The residents rely on farming and agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. The village is surrounded by lush green fields where

crops such as rice, vegetables, and fruits are cultivated. Farming practices and agricultural traditions are integral to the daily lives of the villagers.

**Respect for Nature:** The Bodo community, including Bogijuli village, typically holds a deep respect and reverence for nature. The villagers understand the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment. They often practice sustainable agricultural techniques, participate in ecological conservation efforts, and have a profound knowledge of local flora and fauna.

**Traditional Governance:** Bogijuli village may adhere to traditional systems of governance and decision-making. Community leaders, often respected elders, play a significant role in resolving disputes, maintaining social order, and guiding the village's development. Traditional practices and customary laws may influence the administration of the village.

**Challenges and Aspirations:** Like any community, Bogijuli village faces its share of challenges. These may include limited access to modern amenities, infrastructure development, educational opportunities, and healthcare facilities. However, the people of Bogijuli are resilient and aspire to overcome these challenges, striving for progress, improved living conditions, and a better future for themselves and future generations. It is important to remember that this overview provides a general perspective and may not capture the complete diversity and complexity within Bogijuli village. Individual experiences, beliefs, and aspirations can vary among the residents, adding depth to the cultural fabric of the Bodo community in Bogijuli.

#### Field Observations and Witch-Hunting Practices in Bogijuli Village;

fieldwork in Bogijuli village reveals that it became evident that witch-hunting continues to be a deeply entrenched practice within the local social structure. Despite numerous legal interventions and awareness campaigns across various regions of Assam, Bogijuli remains a site where superstition, fear, and patriarchal norms shape community responses to illness and misfortune. A recent case where a woman who had been suffering from a prolonged illness was identified by her family and neighbours as a possible threat. Lacking access to modern healthcare facilities and scientific explanations, they turned to a local tantric (ojha) for guidance. The ojha declared that the woman was under the influence of a witch spirit and posed a danger to the village. This proclamation led to her immediate social exclusion, and she was compelled to live in isolation on the outskirts of the village.

Attempts to interact with the woman during my field visit were obstructed, as the villagers refused to allow any direct engagement. This act of concealment and denial further underscores the strong social stigma and fear associated with witchcraft allegations. However, conversations with some of the younger generation—particularly school-going students from neighbouring areas—revealed a level of awareness and skepticism regarding these practices. While most of the youth in Bogijuli itself are not exposed to formal education and therefore remain unaware of the harmful consequences of such beliefs, there is an emerging consciousness among students from nearby villages. They expressed critical views about the irrationality of witch-hunting and acknowledged the importance of education in challenging such social evils. The situation in Bogijuli illustrates

how witch-hunting continues to function as a mechanism of control, particularly over women, in communities marked by low literacy, poor healthcare infrastructure, and the influence of traditional authorities. It highlights the urgent need for sustained educational initiatives, legal enforcement, and community-based awareness programs to dismantle the socio-cultural foundations that legitimize such practices.

### **Conclusion:**

The Ojha or also we can say the witch hunter may punish the victim for a perceived reasons such as property disputes that happens in family or when woman raise their voices against authoritative figures or when there is some personal jealousy among people and family members. The Ojhas basically takes the advantages of the traditional and strong beliefs of ancestors on witch, black magic and witch hunting practices and they brand someone as witch and the rest are handed over to the villagers and the villagers spread constructive evidence and narratives and as a result it becomes a bigger issue and which results in the mass killing of that particular woman (Swargiari, Volume 2,2017). Also, from my study I got to know how woman in the particular locality have been subjective to the problem of witch hunting, and this is mainly because women and also people of that particular area were not that educated and more over that area is not that developed for which the woman don't have much idea about the outside world and get trapped in such practices which are followed by the village people. Borjuli village is a male dominated society where women always have a fear of raising their voices and these things are followed since ages from time to time. Ojhas are traditional healers in India who are believed to have the power to identify and exorcise witches. There is no scientific evidence to support the existence of witches, but the belief in witchcraft is still widespread in many parts of India. There is already so many articles and studies done in this topic but I have specially chosen this topic because that is a place which is far from my locality and since last two years much news of such practices has come out and specially during the lockdown time we have received many news of such practices. The personal bonding between family members and political and economic differences between families, personal jealousy turns out to be few of the reasons stated by respondents to brand a women as witch and kill or separate the family from the village social life. Also by doing the study it is found that all the victims were women only and no men it is because the society of my study place is a male dominated society since so many years, and all the generation are following this patriarchy system due to which the women are very much vulnerable and can't raise their voice for the injustice that is happening against them and as result they become victims of such cases. Witchcraft thus emerges as a multifaceted issue which gets entwined with both the concerns for superstition and social disempowerment of women. Superstition, jealousy, property issues,

Feminist scholars have argued that witch hunting is a form of gender-based violence that is rooted in patriarchal norms and values. According to this theory, accusations of witchcraft are often used as a means of controlling women who challenge gender norms or who are perceived as threatening to male dominance.

Overall, these theories and conceptual frameworks offer different perspectives on the practice of witch hunting, and highlight the complex social and cultural factors that shape beliefs and practices related to witchcraft. They emphasize the need for interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and addressing the issues related to witch hunting.

## **Bibliography:**

Dundes, A. (1961). Brown County superstition: The structure of superstition. Midwest Folklore.

Masoodi, A. (2014). Witch hunting Victims of superstition.

Russell, J.B. (1972). Witchcraft in the Middle Ages. Cornell University press.

Bidney, D. (1950). The Concept of Myth and the Problem of Psychocultural Evolution

. American Anthropologist. Kelkar, G. Sharma, A. (2021). Culture, Capital and witch Hunts in Assam. Council for social Development.

Hussan, I. & Mahavidyalaya, L. (2022). WITCH HUNTING IN ASSAM : AN UNABATED CRIME AGAINST WOMEN.

Buder, J. (2011). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.

Borah, L. & Das, M. (2019). Witch -hunting in Assam: Myth or reality. Space and Culture, India.

Hester, M. (2003). Lewd women and wicked witches: A study of the dynamics of male domination. Routledge.

Castells, M. (2011). The power of identity. John Wiley & Sons.

BORTHAKUR, P. (2022, November) WITCH HUNTING: VIOLATING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ASSAM.

Walby, S. (1989). Theorising patriarchy. Sociology.

Anand, A. (2022). Unheard and Unnoticed: Violence Against Women in India – A Study of practice of Witch – Hunting, Honour Killing and Devadasi System. Lancaster University ( United Kingdom).

Neogi, D. (2020, December). A study on the practice of Witch – Hunting in Assam, an Ontology. In Proceeding of the World Conference on Women's Studies.

Swargiari, D. (2027). Witch – hunting among the Bodos of Assam ( Doctoral dissertation, Tezpur University).

Brahma, D (2022). Superstition belief and witch hunting among the Bodo people: A case study north Rangapara area under Sonitpur district.

Sharma, P. (2020). Witch – hunting as a form of Violence against Women in the Tea Estate of West Bengal ( Doctoral dissertation)