Abstract

Witch-craft practices, witch-trials and witch-hunts have been in existence ever since early times in several countries. Although studies pertaining to the spatial and temporal variability of these aspects has been done at the international, national as well as the state level, works detailing upon certain socio-economic factors, which might have some bearing upon the phenomena at large are scarce. On one hand, as the number of incidents seems to be on the rise, measures for curbing the menace has been considered to be inadequate. Out of thirty-three districts in Assam, this phenomenon has been found to be reported from twenty-two districts. In such a setting, it seemed pertinent to take up the present study which seeks to investigate into the various facets of these aspects, identify the various causal factors and to suggest appropriate measures for curbing this social menace. A special emphasis on the qualitative and quantitative aspects pertaining to the Rabha community of Assam has been given during the course of the study.

The present work was undertaken with five-fold objectives in mind, viz. to examine the witch-craft practice, witch-craft accusations, witch-trials and witch-hunting phenomena in an international as well as national perspective, to identify the spatial and temporal variability of the various cases within India, to understand the nature and extent of the problem within the Rabha community to interpret and analyze the causes leading to the problem within the Rabha community, to examine the various governmental and non-governmental initiatives in tackling the phenomena, and to suggest appropriate measures to curb down the menace. In this research work, fifty-one different witch-hunting case studies were carried out, that are spatially distributed over forty-four villages from four
districts (Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar and Udalguri), falling under the jurisdiction of twelve police stations, encompassing sixty-one victims (including sixteen death victims – nineteen male and forty two female) for the period 1990 – 2016. The study required a ‘collective case study’ approach, utilizing both qualitative as well as quantitative parameters. In order to serve the purpose, utmost care has been taken to devise parameters for the study and analysis of various aspects related to the cases. Data collection has been carried out from a number of sources, including police records, NGO records, interaction with the victims and their relatives, opinion survey, informal discussions with various NGO members/ individuals, organization of seminars, awareness cum interaction camps in the witch-hunt prone areas, internet and different forms of published materials. The findings of the work have been chapterized into six sections as detailed below:

Chapter 1 details on the overview of the witch-hunt problem, objectives and scope of the present work and the methodology that was employed for fulfilling the objectives of the present study.

Chapter 2 focuses upon all the inter-related aspects of the phenomena viz. witchcraft, witch-craft accusations/branding, witch-trials and witch-hunts, which have all been dealt with in a historical cum international perspective. It has been concluded that witch-hunt targets in a world-wide context, shows that women are being targeted in majority than men, which makes witch-hunt a gender-based crime. Children are also being made victims, mainly in the African nations, for a variety of socio-economic reasons. The
perpetrators in most of the cases are the traditional witch doctors and in many cases they are the close relatives or neighbours of the victims.

Chapter 3 touches upon the different aspects of the witch-hunt phenomenon in a three-tier perspective, viz. international, national and state level. In the international level, the magnitude and other aspects of the phenomenon has been detailed under five broad regions viz. European, African, American, Middle-East and Asian-Pacific. In the national level, reported details of the phenomenon from twenty-four states and three union territories are provided. It has been seen that although witch-craft and the allied practices has been a world-wide phenomenon for many centuries amongst several principal religious sects, these practices has stopped in many developed nations across the globe. In the present day context, such practices are mostly confined to some African, Asian-Pacific and Middle-East nations. In Europe, although such practices have apparently stopped long back, recent incidents have been reported primarily amongst the immigrant communities. In India, these practices are still continuing primarily amongst the tribal communities. In Assam, the practice is mostly prevalent amongst five different tribal communities, viz. Bodos, Deoris, Karbis, Misings and Rabhas, and a few other non-tribal communities including the Ahoms, Biharis, Islamic, Rajbongshis, Tea garden, etc. However, it has been concluded that whatever official knowledge and statistics exists or is available to us, is merely the proverbial tip of a deep iceberg, as many cases have been unreported and unrecorded.

Chapter 4 concentrates upon the demographic profile, as well as the folk beliefs and customs of the Rabha community of Assam, including witch-craft practices. The
primary data collected through structured questionnaires in the fifty-one case studies has been analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The analytical parameters are primarily focused upon two main areas viz. attributes of the incidents and attributes of the victims. The former includes parameters like date and time of occurrences of the incidents, the causes/motives/intentions that led to the incidents, the settlement pattern of the incidents, status of the crimes, etc. The latter includes gender, age, marital status, literacy level, primary profession, family size, property details, etc. Descriptive or inferential statistics have been generated and reported through standard tables and graphs and diagrams, for scientific visualization and interpretation. Certain significant findings that emerged from personal interviews conducted with a few traditional healers have also been reported at the end of the chapter. From the in-depth analysis, it has been concluded that illness in the neighbourhoods of the victims has led to a majority of the witch-craft accusations and hunts. The rampant use of the traditional rice beer, has served as triggers in many instances, as the villagers have committed the crimes primarily under the influence of alcohol. In majority of the cases personal disliking or envy by the neighbours of the victims was cited to be the principal reason behind the accusations and hunts. Most of the cases have occurred at locations quite far from the police stations/ out-post. It was also seen that the village headmen has practically failed to deter the recurrence of witch-hunt incidents. The very finding that the illiterate class of people is more prone towards victimization, itself speaks of the need for putting emphasis upon educating the rural uneducated. Considering the frequency and intensity of the incidents, the witch-hunting scenario cannot be said to be alarming as far
as the Rabha community is concerned. However, the situation naturally demands attention, as it speaks volumes of the lack of several basic amenities and the existence of socio-economic elevators in the regions afflicted with witch-hunting.

Chapter 5 examines the governmental as well as non-governmental efforts in tackling the witch-hunt phenomenon in general. The different clauses that are outlined in the various human rights legislations, anti-superstition legislations, including anti-witch-hunt legislations, which have been drafted by global agencies and the governments of some countries from time to time, are examined. Mention is being made of the different clauses that are enlisted within these legal instruments and which serve to protect the rights of the witch-hunt victims. International level legal instruments have been detailed upon, along with descriptive accounts pertaining to the prevailing legal scenario of several countries belonging to the African, Middle East and Asian-Pacific regions. The chapter also examines some of the national level legislative provisions promulgated by the Union Government in India. The legal instruments devised by the government in seven States viz. Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Assam, have also been examined. The efforts of non-governmental agencies have been also examined in the international, national as well as state-level contexts. However, it has been concluded with reasonable justifications that only laws are not suffice to wipe out this social malaise; there needs to be synergetic coordinated efforts between wide spectrums of stakeholders, both governmental as well as non-governmental. A silver lining in this looming dark cloud in our society is that a growing number of non-governmental organizations have made a number of coordinated attempts for tackling this
phenomenon. In Assam, we see such NGO activism from the year 1991 onwards. Apart from these NGOs, various other civil society organizations, associations, societies as well as educational and research institutions have been rendering yeoman services, which itself reflects the intolerance of the civil societies towards such medieval macabreness.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of the entire work. The foundations for a road-map aimed at eradicating the witch-hunt phenomenon are detailed upon and final recommendations being made, by incorporating the opinions collected from prominent personalities who are considered to be well-versed with the witch-hunt phenomenon. The future scope related to the present study is also being outlined in this section.