Witch-craft has been in practice ever since early times in several countries and many famous witch-trials have been described by historians. This practice rose to its peak in many European countries especially during the period fifteenth to eighteenth century (Karmakar 689). Even children were also harmed, abused or killed due to accusations of being witches throughout the world (Bussien et. al. 1). In India, witch-hunting has been reported from a large number of states and Union Territories, including the states belonging to the north-eastern part of India. In Assam, this phenomenon is reported from a majority of the districts. In this research work, the researcher focuses on the different aspects of witch-hunting in a three-tier perspective, viz. international, national and state level. All the three aspects of the phenomena viz. witch-craft, witch-trials and witch-hunts have been dealt with in the study in a historical perspective. The present study although provides an outline of the spatial and temporal variability of the witch-hunting phenomenon in general, is primarily focused on the witch-hunting aspects amongst the Rabha community of Assam in particular (Chapter 4). The Rabha community in Assam although is spatially distributed primarily in twenty one districts of Assam (Borah 43-44), witch-hunting incidents amongst this community have so far been reported from only four districts viz. Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar and Udalguri. In the present work, an attempt has been made to study the reported incidents that took place amongst the Rabhas residing in all these four districts. A detailed study of the different reported incidents as well as details of the witch-hunting victims has been worked out, so as to analyze the
plausible and possible causes that might lead to the incidents. An attempt has also been made to compile and synthesize different views regarding prevention of these unfortunate incidents as well as the role of different governmental as well as non-governmental organizations in handling/tackling this phenomenon.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Is witch-hunting a new phenomenon or a curse which is continuing in our society since pre-historic times? Is it just a fall-out of mere superstition only? Why otherwise the calm, quiet, friendly and hospitable villagers become so cruel and aggressive against a person whom they know closely for a long time? What may be the factors which motivate these people to take drastic action like killing their fellow-men? What can be done to prevent the mindless mobs in taking the law in their own hands? A natural question which comes to mind is that as to why and how things like witch-craft practice, witch-craft accusations, witch-trials and witch-hunts could happen in this golden age of science and technology, when people have become advanced in their thoughts and life style? It is indeed a matter to be pondered over as to why people still cling to the age-old myths, superstitions and why some tend to take advantage of these blind beliefs? It would be difficult to single out a particular reason for witch-hunting as several socio-economic paradigms may be responsible. Many of these pertinent questions cannot be answered without diving deep into the problem.

Many societies round the globe, face so many social and economic problems that create a fertile ground for the belief in the influence of evil spirits to flourish. These include poverty and deprivation, unemployment, lack of success, immigration problems, housing problems, family breakdown, ill health, barrenness and many others. In many
instances, the sources of these problems are attributed to certain members of the community, who are branded as witches. In many societies, this figure symbolized evil as much as good, who was both feared and respected because he was part of the invisible world and was consequently in contact with genies and spirits. The witch was both someone who could cause harm as well as being someone who possessed special gifts of healing. Such people are subjected to many forms of abuse and harm to punish them for their evil deeds, but also in efforts to exorcise them from the evil spirits possessing them. Due to the seriousness of the abuse and harm, people branded as witches experience, and the long term damage this causes to their overall well-being, the phenomenon has been termed as witchcraft abuse, which can be of two variants viz. witch-trials and witch-hunts, the former preceding the latter.

The social landscape of Assam has been termed to be locked in an uneasy coexistence between the modern and the barbaric (Deka N.p.). The fact that killing of witches has been making headlines of all local newspapers of Assam for quite some time, every now and then, is not only disturbing but also alarming. In the past only women were vulnerable to be attacked as witches, but of late the attacks are focused on entire families, even if only one member is accused. Moreover, in many instances there are mob attacks of the suspected witches, and no one from the community comes forward to testify against anyone. The police therefore find it difficult to press charges against any specific accused.

Witch-hunting is a gross violation of human rights, which affects the livelihood, properties, personal security, social dignity and the right to life of the victims and their families. The lack of specific laws to deal with the problem poses another dimension to
the whole issue. As of date, the law enforcement agencies in the state are left with no other alternative but to consider witch-hunting as a routine crime case and book the perpetrators under the provisions of the IPC and CrPC. Many of the IPC sections are bailable sections which make the situation more unfavourable for the victims (Choudhury N.p.). On one hand, as the number of incidents seems to be on the rise, the State action is inadequate to handle the situation that seems to be inadequate as a plethora of socio-economic factors seem to be the driving force of the phenomena.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The present study focuses attention on the following broad objectives –

i. to examine the witchcraft practice, witchcraft accusations, witch-trials and witch-hunting phenomena in an international as well as national perspective

ii. to identify the spatial and temporal variability of the various cases within India

iii. to understand the nature and extent of the problem within the Rabha community and to interpret and analyze the causes leading to the problem within the Rabha community

iv. to examine the various governmental and non-governmental initiatives in tackling the phenomena, and

v. to suggest appropriate measures to curb down the menace

1.3 Extent of the study area

The study area encompassed in the present work extends through four districts of Assam, viz. Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar and Udalguri. The total geographical extent of the study area is 9672 square kilometers [Goalpara: 1911 sq. kms.; Kamrup: 2740 sq. kms.;
Kokrajhar: 3169 sq. kms.; Udalguri: 1852 sq. kms. The study area being bounded by 89°46'E and 95°15'E longitudes, 25°46’N and 26°77’N latitudes [Goalpara: 90°7'E and 91°5'E longitudes, 25°53’N and 26°30’N latitudes; Kamrup: 90°48'E and 91°50'E longitudes, 25°46'N and 26°49'N latitudes; Kokrajhar: 89°46'E and 90°38'E longitudes, 26°19’N and 26°54’N latitudes; Udalguri: 92°08'E and 95°15'E longitudes, 26°46’N and 26°77’N latitudes] (http://goalpara.gov.in/; http://kamrup.nic.in/; http://kokrajhar.gov.in/; http://udalguri.gov.in/; Fig. 1.1). Altogether fifty-one different witch-hunting case studies were carried out, that are spatially distributed over forty-four villages from four districts, falling under the jurisdiction of twelve police stations, encompassing sixty-one victims (including sixteen death victims – nineteen males and forty two females) for the period 1990 – 2016 [Appendix – D].

1.4 Scope of the study

Rural Assam is a hotbed of several epidemics and due to the underdevelopment of the transport and communication sector, anyone seriously ill has to be taken by handcart or bicycle through paddy fields, dirt roads and forests to the nearest hospital, often located at a great distance. Under such circumstances, the villagers often find it convenient to approach the nearby traditional healers (bez or ojha), which are found in large numbers in the rural areas of Assam. The traditional healers are unable to cure many of these patients in spite of their tall claims and predictions. As a result, emotions run high and the villagers often accuse these healers to be responsible for the death of the patient, which in turn leads to severe punishments including death (Das N.p.). In another variant, these traditional healers are engaged by the relatives of some patients to ascertain whether the cause of the illness in their patients is due to the spell of witchcraft practiced by some
fellow villagers. Once the *bez* or *ojha* pinpoints to some person, the villagers pounce upon those in a manner not befitting the norms of a civilized society. The irrational mob mentality can be attributed to their cultural beliefs which have been passed to them over generations. The ignorance about the various symptoms and signs of different diseases/illnesses and some ingrained concrete/vague ideas about evil spirits in their minds is responsible for some of these incidents.

However, of late, the phenomenon has taken the form of organized crime. There are some cases reported recently where it is claimed by a section of people that the witch killings are acts by the land mafia. In such cases, some miscreants uses social superstitions to destroy and uproot families completely from the land they have their eye on, so that this piece of property can later be acquired either at dirt cheap prices or forcefully. But the question that naturally comes to mind is that would a common man, want to own a property where witches lived and practiced black magic at one point of time? Personal feud and envy/jealousy are some of the other apparent reasons for the phenomenon. In some other cases women are branded witches and punished along with their family members after they resist sexual exploitation attempts by some miscreants within the community. Alcoholism acts as catalysts in these situations.

There has to be a different approach to deal with this social stigma. Traditional policing does not help much. A section of the educated still believes that witches do exist and in some instances, participation of educated people had been observed in witch-hunting cases. In most of the cases, the police find it difficult to arrest the real culprits either because of the involvement of the entire community in such murders, or because the information about the murder reaches the police too late. As a result, proper
investigation into a majority of the cases remains elusive, and courts often have to acquit those arrested. The role of media too is insufficient in the battle against this form of social injustice. It has also been rightfully pointed out that it is very difficult to arrive at a clear estimate on the witch-hunt phenomena since the cases are not usually reported officially (Agarwal 145).

Thus, in view of the above circumstances, it seemed pertinent to take up the present study which seeks to investigate into the primary and secondary causes responsible for this social stigma, and suggest appropriate measures to curb this social menace as a matter of public concern. The tenability and applicability of the different international as well as national level legal instruments in checking the witch-hunt phenomena has also been thoroughly examined. Detailed information of various witch-hunt incidents that took place all over the state has been collected under the provisions of the Right To Information (RTI) Act, 2005, promulgated by the Government of India, which gives a clear picture of the status of various cases, the various penal provisions slapped upon the offenders by the police under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 as well as the names of the victims as well as the accused [Appendix – G]. This has facilitated in deriving the range of IPC sections imposed upon the offenders [Appendix – K] as well as the community classification of the incidents [Appendix – L] whose members have fallen victims to this barbaric practice. Over and above, detailed description of the background facts that led to the different incidents have been collected through personal interviews of the victims as well as their family members and neighbours, which gives us a clear idea of the actual ground circumstances that led to these incidents. In the present works, descriptive and inferential statistics has been
calculated pertaining to the witch-hunting episodes amongst the Rabha community, which is another significant aspect of the present research work.

1.5 Review of literature

Documented literature in the context of the witch-hunting phenomena although available and widespread with reference to various global communities and regions, is scarce with respect to the state of Assam. However, a fairly good number of references were collected during the period of research. From the survey of literature, it has transpired that a good number of workers have studied about the spatial and temporal variability of the witch-hunting phenomena both at the international, national as well as the state level, but none seemed to detail upon the socio-economic factors of the victimized classes, which might have some bearing upon the phenomena at large, barring a few. Smelser and Baltes have observed three lines of approaches can be observed in witchcraft studies viz. the historian approach, the anthropologist approach and the sociologist approach (qtd. in I Dutta 7).

It has been emphasized that witch-hunts have not been confined to a specific time or place. Besides European, there were major persecutions in different African and American nations, and other countries like Russia, China, etc. amongst different communities like Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu. There are several vivid descriptions and accounts on the scale and horrors associated witch-hunts that took place across the globe (Schnoebelen 2009; Mohapatra 2014; Ortoleva 2014). The beliefs in the existence of witches prior to the ninth century and their evil roles of harming and killing people through black magic and evil sorcery have been highlighted (Robinson 2012). It has been reiterated that witch-hunting is a world-wide phenomena, and around one
million people were executed in Europe mostly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for practicing witchcraft (Oster 2004). The horrors associated with witch-trials and witch-hunts by the use of different means of suffering used to evoke confessions as well as the role of physicians have been elaborated (Nemec 1974). The witchcraft allegations leveled against children from numerous countries across the globe and the consequent human rights violations have been reported (Foxcroft 2009; Cimpric 2010; Bussien et. al. 2011; Secker 2012). Detailed references on the international perspective (region-wise) are given in Section 3.1.

A number of national level studies on witch-hunting have been carried out in India in states like West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, etc. (M Barman 2009; Rajalakshmi 2000; Singh 2011; Agrawal and Mehra 2014; Rawat 2014; Malik N.d.; S L Barua 2016). Apart from the traditional beliefs that had led to the witch-hunting practice, the involvement of other socio-political motives as well as other vested interests of a section of cunning people has been highlighted through some works (Vokendor 2013; Iqbal 2015). Detailed references on the national perspective (state-wise) are given in Section 3.2.

Reports and studies on the witch-hunting phenomena at the state level, is relatively few, as compared to the international and national levels. There are very limited works that detail upon the witch-craft practice and witch-hunting phenomena amongst the Rabha community (Majumdar 2002; Hakacham 2006; Daimary 2008; Karmakar 2013; Baishya 2014; R Sarma 2014; Dash and Nayak 2015; J Nath N.d.). The traditional belief of the existence of daini amongst the Rabhas is also found elsewhere (Datta 1995; Narzary 2014). The magico-religious customs prevalent amongst the Rabha
community are detailed in a limited works (B Rabha 1996; M D Rabha 2003; Hakacham 2006; L C Rabha 2009). A few works have emphasized upon the efforts made by different voluntary organizations in Assam, viz. Mission Birubala, Assam Mahila Samata Society, Project Prahari, SIFMSWA, Brothers and Buruj, in fighting against the menace of witch-hunting (S Barman 2014; Das et.al. 2014; Dutta 2015).

Detailed accounts of different legislations that have been drafted to fight against the witch-craft practice and witch-hunts exist in different countries, including India as well as the state of Assam. Detailed references on the legal perspectives are given in Sections 5.1.2.-5.1.4.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The present study is based upon all the reported cases of witch-hunts that are available with the Assam Police Department as well as with the different NGOs working in the field of witch-hunt prevention, for the period January 1989 and June 2016. The list of cases that were considered for the research study cannot be considered to be a comprehensive picture of witch-hunting in the studied area because many of the cases might have gone unreported, considering the remote location of certain incidents and also due to the fear of the victims for being retaliated upon by the community that committed the crime. During the course of field work, it has been observed that some of the members of the victimized class, fearing retaliation from their neighbouring community, hesitated from providing certain details of the ordeal they had to undergo in the post-hunting stage.

At many instances, when the researcher went for data collection to the victims’ residences in the villages, there were apprehensions amongst the respondents when they
witnessed other men in uniform. However, subsequently the strategy had to be changed with the escort team being made to comprise plainclothes policemen and positioned at a distance from the victims’ residences. It proved to be a tough job for the researcher to extract information out of the victims, because it is quite natural for the victims to have apprehensions in their minds, as the researcher was from the police department. Hence, a considerable effort had to be given for taking the victims into confidence, and the AMSS office bearers played a major role in this regard.

Although there are reportedly eight witch-hunting cases from Kamrup District for the period 2000 – 2012 [2006: 2 cases, 2008: 2 cases, 2009: 3 cases and 2010: 1 case] (Das 54 – 55), only four victim cases has been surveyed during the course of research [2009: 2 cases, 2013: 2 cases] [Appendix – B]. Eight cases from Goalpara District (3 cases under Agia P.S., 1 case under Krishnai P.S., 3 cases under Lakhipur P.S. and 2 cases under Rangjuli P.S.) could not be included within the ambit of the present study due to various constraints [Appendices – C & D]. For example, in one case (relating to Late Tantibala Rabha of Village Bardamal), the family members of the victims were reluctant to narrate the sequence of events that led to the incident.

Ascertaining the actual facts related to different cases of witch-hunting pertaining to the dates of occurrence, dates of settlement through NGO intervention, names of victims, names of accused etc posed to be a major challenge during the course of the study. Many instances were found where the information gathered from different sources did not tally with each other and checking and cross-checking had to be done in a number of instances in order to arrive at a clear picture and present the data in an error-free manner. The information pertaining to the dates of occurrence, dates of settlement, etc
provided by the victims or their family members in some cases has not been given due
credit due to many factors and the information as per official record of the NGOs has
been considered in such cases [Appendix – B]. Obtaining a near-about accurate age of the
victims proved to be another hurdle, since a majority of the victims were either semi-
literate or illiterate, and did not possess any valid documents towards testimony of their
dates of birth. Many of the victims could not speak proper Assamese for which the help
of NGO members acquainted with the Rabha dialect had to be sought for a proper
understanding of the verbal statements provided by the victims. Collection of stakeholder
opinions and NGO profiles through structured questionnaires proved another challenging
task as many such interviewees were busy in their own schedule of works and hence
could not provide the required information as per expectations of the researcher.

Anomalies were observed even in the information collected through RTI mode,
which posed a major hurdle during the course of the study. The anomalies ranged from
not providing or wrongly providing or partially providing the names of either the victims
or the accused persons, Final Report (F.R.)/ Charge Sheet (C.S.) numbers as well as
dates, erroneous mention about the Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections invoked in different
cases, typographical errors pertaining to correct spelling of titles of victims/accused
persons, non-provision of RTI replies within stipulated time, etc. Moreover, it has been
observed that the total number of case details that were obtained from all the districts of
Assam (excluding the case details for the period 1989 – 2012 in respect of three districts
viz. Cachar, Kamrup and Lakhimpur) is only 186, which is thought to be an
underrepresented figure [Appendices – F & G].

1.7 Methodology
Keeping in view of the objectives as stated above, 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 various witch-craft accusations and witch-hunting 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.

- **Primary data collection:** A comprehensive questionnaire has been devised and data collected from amongst the affected individuals belonging to the Rabha community residing in the Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts. Questionnaires have been devised both for recording the different witch-craft accusations and witch-hunt cases in general and also for obtaining a profile of the witch-hunt victims. The questions that were devised for data collection from the victims are clear-cut, being laid out in a common template, so that the respondents could answer without difficulty. The samples for the study has been stratified to represent the education, socio-economic background, family background, age and gender attributes, etc. of those Rabha people who were accused of being witches or of practicing witch-craft. The victim data sheet was devised for collecting the socio-demographic details of the affected individuals. Data was generated through open, informal and in-depth interviews and discussions with affected individuals, family members of affected individuals, villagers of the affected localities,
eyewitnesses, members of NGOs, members of law enforcement agencies, etc. Field work was carried out and field data were generated in a number of phases during the period 22.05.2012 and 27.11.2016, either through spot visits to the residences of different witch-hunt victims, summoning the victims to certain preferred locations of their own choice or through the engagement of police personnel and members of non-governmental organizations to collect the information as per a standard format devised for the purpose. Access to the victims or their family members were facilitated mainly by the office bearers of the Goalpara District Implementation Unit of Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and Mission Birubala (MB), since they have been active in the areas/villages where witch-huntings took place. The interviews were conducted in the Assamese language and the AMSS and MB members acted as interpreters in some of the cases, as some of the victims were capable of conversing with their local Rabha dialect only. The informants, especially the victims were spoken to at their own residences or in locations of their preference. In certain sensitive cases from Goalpara District, where the victims desired to avoid suspicion amongst their neighbours, they were summoned to certain other conducive locations outside their native villages viz. the AMSS (Assam Mahila Samata Society) office located at Goalpara town, Bolbola market place near Agia, the Inspection Bungalow (IB) and roadside eateries located at Dudhnoi town and also to the Police Guest House located at Goalpara town, where they were interviewed as per the questionnaire proforma. For the cases pertaining to Kamrup District, the victims and the next to kin of the victims were called to the Mirza town from their
native villages for interviewing. The information pertaining to the witch-hunting cases of the Kokrajhar District were obtained from the case diaries available with the police department and the victims were also interviewed by calling them to places nearby their resident villages. For the lone case from Udalguri District, the victim, accompanied by one of his son, was summoned to and interviewed at the Bhergaon Police Out-Post premises. The interviews were held in a cordial environment, through informal conversations with the intention of not making the informants self-conscious or anxious or any such suspicion or apprehensions that might arise regarding inquiries related to the subject, since the researcher himself was in the position of the Superintendent of Police both in the Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts.

- **Secondary data collection:** The relevant secondary data has been collected from Action Taken Reports and Case Diaries available with the police department, by visits to police stations located both in the Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts. Detailed reports on the status of various witch-hunting instances that were reported to the police within the State of Assam were obtained through RTI applications, submitted to the Additional Director General of Police, CID, Assam Police, Guwahati. RTI applications had also been submitted to the National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi for obtaining witch-hunt statistics for different states of India. Different newspaper and other media reports, as well as publications have been obtained through personal contacts and requests from various sources. Optimum use of the internet has been done to download a number of citations, published works and reports pertaining to the topic of research. Investigative
journalism by journalists attached with some of the leading international and national dailies and magazines provide insights into different cases as well as their matured observations and judgments. All such reports and consultation reports that are easily accessible in the internet have been examined. Personal visits to libraries and the offices of different NGOs have also been done to collect relevant reference materials. Personal request letters with pre-determined clauses have been given to various NGOs working in the field of prevention of witch-hunting, for obtaining a detailed report on the functioning modes and achievements of these organizations in the relevant field [Appendix – M]) Opinion collection sheets have been distributed amongst prominent personalities and professionals working in the field of prevention of witch-hunting for gathering public opinions and views for curbing the menace of witch-hunting [Appendix – N].

- **Data analyses:** The data collected both from primary as well as secondary sources has been grouped, analyzed and interpreted as per requirements of the present study by using appropriate statistical tabulation methods and techniques, with a classificatory approach. Accordingly, the collected data has been shown in maps and diagrams, for scientific visualization and interpretation. Descriptive profile of the different witch-hunt cases amongst the Rabha community has been provided. Primary data has been used to draw insights on the practice of witchcraft and witch-hunts among the Rabha community of Assam. The primary data collected through structured questionnaires has been analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and descriptive or inferential statistics generated and reported through standard tables and graphs.
Notes

Alcoholism\(^1\): Most of the locally or home brewed alcohol (rice beer) consumed in such areas contains a high alcohol content. Due to regular consumption of such highly intoxicating and unfiltered alcohol, the thought process of the individuals essentially go wary, overwhelmed with emotion and it does not take anyone much effort to convince such people that the accused persons in their neighborhood are evil and that he/she needs to be eliminated for the overall well-being of the community.