2

Witch-craft and allied perspectives

2.1 Witch-craft perspectives

2.1.1 Concept of witch

Assigning a proper definition of *witch* or *witchcraft* is not an easy task since these terms have denoted different practices and beliefs at different times and in diverse cultures. In some cultures, these are age-old traditions, that percolated through several generations and hence consideration of such beliefs and practices vis-à-vis human rights is a complex matter. These beliefs are finely ingrained amongst the educated and the uneducated, the rich and the poor, the old and the young alike in many societies round the globe (Schnoebelen 2).

The belief in the existence of witches can be traced back to the times of the Old Testament of the Bible, where the practice of witchcraft is forbidden. The history of organized witch-hunting is primarily associated with the Christian church (Oster 216; Linder N.p.). Primary mention of the term *witch* is found in the two Old Testament books Exodus and Leviticus, written in the sixth century B.C. by an unknown Jewish writer. The term *witch* as mentioned in the Exodus (*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*: Exodus 22:18) has come from the Hebrew word *kashaph*, meaning to whisper, which may be used for meaning *one who whispers a spell*. However, in Leviticus, mention about witchcraft persecution is to be found (*...woman...that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones...*: Leviticus 20:27) (Linder N.p.).
The very word *witch* immediately brings to one's mind a vivid image of a wicked woman, with a visibly protruding nose, scary claw-like fingernails, and adorning a long pointed hat, which barely hides their wrinkled skin and bulging pimples, and flying in the air on a magical broom (Sharma N.p.). The idea of the witch covers a wide range of meanings. According to a popular definition, the term witch refers to *‘that disconcerting character, who operates more or less undercover, and who employs occult knowledge and controls certain objects and magic techniques, the female witch on her broom and even to the seers consulted by the local population’* (Cimpric 11). Although commonly, the term *witch* applies to both the sexes’ male and female, in strict literal sense of the term, the term refers only to the female; the term *wizard* applies for the male counterpart (Nath 236). However, the male equivalent does not carry the diabolic connotation and it may simply refer to the possession of certain magical powers, not necessarily malevolent (Nityanandam N.p.). The origins of these concepts may be ascribed to the universal human tendency to ascribe anything unusual and disturbing to the effect of hostile powers, i.e. Satan’s evil powers of magic and at one point of time, even the intellectuals of the now prosperous Western nations did believe that ‘heroic’ measures must be taken to save the mankind from the evil wrath of witches. This attitude of the people resulted in the large-scale witch-hunts on the targeted individuals in various countries across the globe.

Like all other things and concepts, the concept of witch too has changed over time. Earlier it was believed that women, who are witches, are born as witches. But, this idea has undergone change over time. Later, it was accepted that, in order to become a witch, an individual needs to acquire certain skills and hence it can be referred to as a
craft. The idea of a witch bears certain similarities across all regions, religions and castes. Witches are believed to possess an evil eye or mouth; they eat humans, kill cattle, and destroy crops, cause illness and such misfortunes on any persons or places over which they cast their evil eyes (Masoodi N.p.). In Malawi, witches are believed to dig up the dead, eat human flesh (necrophagous) and play games with human body parts (e.g. a person’s head) so that when the person concerned wakes up in the morning he finds himself very tired. The witches are believed to possess special powers that enable them to fly long distances, walk around naked at night and hence possess red eyes during daytime for lack of sleep during night time. Such witches can also transform themselves into different animal forms like lions, hyenas and owl (Dicks 108).

In Assam, witch is referred to as daini (female) or daina (male), which has its roots in the Indo-Aryan terminology dakini. The original word dakini can be traced in Tantra, since in Tantrik Buddhism, dakini means the female personification of a stage of wisdom (A K Das 73). Dakini and yogini were two associates of Goddess Parbati (Nath 232). In other places, witches are known by different names viz. daain, dayan, dakain, tonahi, tohna, tohni, chudail etc (Parthasarathy N.p.). For the male counterparts the terms tohna (Agrawal and Mehra 1) or baigha (PLD Report 13) are used. Other witch-equivalent terms include fuskin (Rajalakshmi N.p.), dakan (Rakesh N.p.), menshohnohs (The Assam Tribune 20 Mar. 2006), etc. The fact that the preponderance of the terms that are commonly used are all feminine counterparts, is indicative of the fact that witch-hunting itself is a gender-based crime (Agrawal and Mehra 3).

2.1.2 Concept of witch-craft
According to the Encyclopedia Brittanica, the term *witchcraft* has been derived from the Old English term *wiccecraft* where *craft* means ‘craft’ or ‘skill’. Witchcraft, here, is defined as *the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, practices typically involving sorcery or magic* (AFRUCA Report 7; Bussein et. al. 4). Although defined differently in historical and cultural contexts, witchcraft has often been seen, especially in the West, as the work of crones who meet secretly at night, perform **Sabbaths**¹, indulge in cannibalism and orgiastic rites with the Devil, and perform black magic. In generalized form, witchcraft has been denoted to mean *‘harmful actions carried out by persons presumed to have access to supernatural powers’* (Schnoebelen 2). The subjective translation of this term literally means the skill or craft of sorcery. However, there is complexity involved in generalizing this concept, owing to different natural factors like time and place, and other sociological factors like culture and religion. Following the approval of the Church during the early Modern Period (14th-18th Century A.D.), witch-craft gained mass acceptance (Sharma N.p.). At one time, it was applied to virtually every type of magical activity or ritual operation that was worked through the occult method. Even the actions of contemporary scientists in treating the ill baffled the ignorant and were attributed to be none other than witchcraft practice (Nath 236).

A distinction is made between *witchcraft* and *sorcery*. According to the British anthropologists Evans-Pritchard, the former term referred to a substance that was inherited and innate in witches. However, the latter is carried out by persons called sorcerers who can harm others by using plant substances and rituals. The sorcerer’s knowledge is not innate and has to be practiced. Witches operate during nights only, in
invisible or metamorphosed forms and harm victims by devouring the life essence (Cimpric 8). However, Alan Macfarlane finds it difficult to distinguish between ‘witch craft’, ‘sorcery’ and ‘magic’ since there is no consensus of opinion on their meaning, be it historians or anthropologists (qtd. in I Dutta 3).

Hutton outlines five different aspects are common to witchcraft believers, viz. (a) misfortune or injuries are caused by witches through the use of non-physical means (b) witches usually harm neighbours or relatives rather than unknown people (c) since the motives involved include malice and spite and also because there is an element of secrecy involved, witchcraft receives strong social disapproval (d) rather than working in one-time contexts, witches work in long-time traditions (e) Different methods like persuasion, non-physical means, exile, corporal punishment etc can be employed by other humans to resist witches (qtd. in Bussien et. al. 4).

Occult powers have been used for transforming agencies in countries like South Africa through the preparation of magic potions\(^2\) (Ashforth 2001, 7). In Assam, the undivided Kamrup District was considered by outsiders to be the land of magic and sorcery for a long period of time. Goyalpara was considered to be the chief place where these were widely practiced, amongst all sections of people, belonging both to Hindu and Islamic communities, and both tribal and non-tribal. These practices are mainly connected with various supernatural agencies like gods as well as other spirits. The practitioners were commonly called ojhas, who expertise in both the white and black magic. In the former variety, the ojha is entrusted with the task of ‘diagnosing’ the cause of any illness or misfortune and removal of the evil spells responsible for it. The range of activities include various fevers, miscarriages during child birth, night blindness, stomach
troubles, fractures, aches, pains, sprains, debility, dispelling serpent venom, removal of fish bones stuck inside a patient’s food tract or throat, etc. Some ojhas are even said to possess powers for controlling nature e.g. ensuring good weather on a marriage occasion, etc. On the other hand, those ojhas who practice black magic harm an intended victim on their own or are employed by others to harm their targeted enemies. It is believed that such ojhas employ certain spells with mixed with the targeted victims’ nail clippings, strands of hairs, garment pieces, etc. and burying those objects in the household compound of the victims. The ojhas also resort to the use of bans (described in Section 4.3.2.) for bringing about harm to any individual. The services of these black magic practitioners are also employed by thieves and dacoits at times for fulfillment of their evil designs (Datta 58 – 61). Dainibidyā is the term used to denote witch-craft in Assam, while dainidhara means witch-hunting (I Dutta 2). Apart from the people belonging to the Rabha community, beliefs also exist amongst the Bodo-Kacharies, Misings and the Adivasis. Whenever an individual from the Bodo-Kachari community becomes sick, the individual is considered to be possessed by one of the deities, resulting in the pains, caused due to punishment for impiety or neglect of the God in question. The Misings also believe in supernaturalism and animism. They believe in the existence of ui or uyu, the two varieties of benevolent and malevolent spirits respectively. Both these spirits can be pacified through offerings and the mibu is capable of detecting the spirits and appeasing them as such. Priests known as miru worships spirits during night-time and thereby attempts to cure diseases (I Dutta 16 – 21).

In Manipur, there are no specific cases where women are labeled and tortured in the name of being witches. However, women do suffer from discrimination whenever the
community members believe that they are possessed by evil spirits. This practice is prevalent amongst the Meitei tribe. The traditional healers are employed for exorcising the evil spirits from body of the possessed women. These healers are considered not to work against the interests of the possessed women. Women undergoing such trauma are not ostracized, but the stigma continues to manifest even during the time of marriage (PLD Report 42). Postam Jadoo is one of the common and ancient black magic practices widely prevalent in Manipur. It is performed by Maiba (males) or Maibi (females), which they would perform when some individual seeks for something for their own benefit.

Another practice is Mingsel Kanglon Yengba, where a Maibi with the aid of a mirror and chants mantras for tracing a thief or locating the place where the stolen goods are kept. Yet another practice is Thaoda Yenga, where the Maibis uses oil, chant mantras and tries to describe the physical features of a thief and the tentative place where the stolen goods might be kept by the thief (Baglari 1). Evil Eye is another black art that is in practice in Manipur. Certain people who know this art are capable of causing severe stomachache, falling of teeth and even destruction of properties. Voodoo practices are also carried out in Manipur by use of dolls, needles and spells. It is believed that when a needle is pinned to a doll, it affects a person in the same spot where the needle is being pinned (Baglari 4).

A form of black magic called Seki-buh-chhuak, practiced in Mizoram, has the capability to produce anything one wants. Some practitioners, by taking someone’s property or belongingness, can cause misfortunes. For example, a strand of hair when burnt with a magic potion, accompanied by chanting mantras, can make a victim sick or can also bring about fatal consequences. Zawlaidi is a form of popular Mizo folktale, which is used to make people fall in love (Baglari 4).
Divination is a common technique widely prevalent in Nagaland. This technique is used to find out the inside of a problem. For this purpose, people approach the practitioners referred to as ‘diviners’ (Baglari 4).

2.2 Witch-branding perspectives

For all incidents of branding a person as a witch, it requires three necessary ingredients viz. a triggering circumstance, a target and a perpetrator. A suitable and favourable mix of these three ingredients can only lead to the different witch-trial and witch-hunt incidences. The various perspectives of these factors are detailed in the following sections.

2.2.1 Branding targets

Witch-hunting is broadly considered to be a gender-based violence. Although a small percentage of male subjects are witch-hunted in some States like Assam, it does not make witch-hunting a gender-neutral crime. It has been observed that in majority of the cases, the male victims are related to the primary female target by way of being husband, son or a close relative and thus becomes a victim of the hunt. In Odisha, such male victims are termed as guniya (PLD Report 19). Poor, lower caste women are easily branded as witches. Mentally ill, widowed and infertile women, spinsters, old/elderly or with ‘ugly’ features, physically challenged, unprotected or socially ostracized are quite commonly branded as witches (Akula N.p.; I. Das 255; N.K. Singh N.p.; Rakesh N.p.; McCoy N.p.; Vaishnavi N.p.; Nityanandam N.p.). Single women are also vulnerable, but instances exist when the perpetrators of the crimes let loose their wrath upon entire families. It has been seen that the people who are the prime accusers of the victims, are often related to the victims in one way or the other (Shalz N.p.). Single sisters with large properties in
their name and women with leadership qualities are also at risk for being dubbed as witches (PLD Report 13). Women who are exceptional looking, strong minded, educated or those who desire to be educated stand a higher risk of being labeled as witches in Jharkhand (PLD Report 15 – 16). The middle aged and older women are primarily being made targets (Agrawal and Mehra 10; Schnoebelen 11). Women who are without husbands in their marital homes are most vulnerable (Agrawal and Mehra 14). Most of them belong to the economically weaker sections of the society and levels of formal education are extremely low among the victims. Moreover, in a number of cases, one or more family members of the primary victim also become victims of witch-hunting (Agrawal and Mehra 23).

Children being harmed on grounds of witchcraft accusations (child witches\(^3\)) have been documented from many countries, the vast majority being from African countries (Bussien et. al. 1; Cimpric 1). In Nigeria, children having some form of disabilities or unique character traits like erratic behaviour are especially vulnerable for being labeled as witches. Most of these children are either orphans or having one of their original parent getting remarried, and the new spouse not having wishes for supporting the children who belonged to the former spouses (Foxcroft N.p.; Cimpric 17). In Tanzania, elderly women, who are bad-tempered in nature, irritable, greedy, eccentric and quarrelsome and those who possess red eyes (caused due to years of cooking over dung stoves), are generally considered to be witches (Foxcroft N.p.). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, child-related accusations start whenever a father becomes unable to care for their children and hence seeks a justification to expel them from the family. Similar circumstances also prevail in Angola, where traditional practices are distorted in
the context of poverty brought about by the 27 years of war in the country (Schnoebelen 16). Molina listed the different signs of a child that lead to suspicion of being possessed by a witch, as per accounts of family members and pastors, which are summarized in Table 2.1 (qtd. in Liepe 9). However, it needs to be remembered that many of these signs are common signs and behavioural traits present in every normal individual (Liepe 9).

Research studies in Zambia have shown that people who have exceptional skill or exceptional wealth are primarily targeted because it is believed that such success comes to those people who take recourse to witchcraft (Schnoebelen 14).

Another form of witchcraft accusation is of comparatively recent nature in countries like Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Tanzania. In these countries, witch doctors are making attempts to make people believe that albinos are dangerously cursed and that their body parts being possessed of mystical powers can be used to make people prosperous and rich. Such a false propaganda has led to killings of albinos in these countries in the name of witch-hunts (Foxcroft N.p.; Schnoebelen 17 – 19).

2.2.2 Branding perpetrators

Ambedkar once rightly said that the villages in our country are full of illiteracy, foolishness and factions (Navayan N.p.). It is therefore, not uncommon, why the people immediately rush to the witch doctors, traditional doctors, traditional healers or sorcerers whenever any misfortune befalls them. This class of people is known by different names in different parts of India viz. ajhal ojah or bez (Assam), guniya (Odisha), bhuni (Bihar), bhagat (Jharkhand), baighat (Madhya Pradesh) etc. (PLD Report 21; Parthasarathy N.p.). Traditional healers known as nganga in Central Africa and inyangal sangoma in South
Africa, claims to be capable of tackling occult forces. Apart from healing natural illnesses, these categories of healers also claim to specialize in healing witchcraft-related illnesses as well as can detect witch (Cimpric 37).

There are certain distinct traits amongst the witch-hunt perpetrators. It has been found that witch-hunts are perpetrated by people who are very close to the victims by way of kinship relationship or by someone who resides in the physical proximity of the victim (Agrawal and Mehra 25).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Signs</th>
<th>Invisible Signs</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearing to be too small for their age; Dirty; Epileptic; Ill-health; Malnourished look; Pot-bellied stomach; Red lips/eyes; Scabies on head; Strange appearance; Ugly; Young body but old face;</td>
<td>Become dangerous murderers and assassins at night; Casts spells over their families; Cause road traffic accidents; Eat human flesh; Go out of their homes at night to bewitch people; Have the power to go out even if they are shut indoors; Have spiritual sex, thereby causing sterility; Main cause of natural disasters like destruction of roads, epidemics;</td>
<td>Aggressive; Courageous; Curious; Disobedient; Disrespectful; Fearless; Full of hatred; Hypocrite; Impolite; Inattentive; Incomprehensible; Incredulous; Insensitive; Jealous; Lazy; Liar; Mad; Mentally challenged; Mysterious; Naught; Provocative;</td>
<td>Collect rubbish; Defecate in their clothes; Do not hear or do not listen to what is being said to them; Do not sleep at night; Sleep badly; Do not study; Eat a lot; Go out even when they are ill; Have epileptic fits; Never look people in the eyes; Practice sexual abandon; Sleepwalk; Steal; Talk to themselves;</td>
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In majority of the cases, men took more initiative during the ‘hunt’ process, thus giving a gendered dimension to this form of violence; however, in some cases, women also play a significant role in perpetration (Agrawal and Mehra 26). Another important finding was the lack of inter-caste or class dynamics in the witch-hunt. Moreover, in most cases, a vast social or economic gap between the victims and the perpetrators did not exist (Agrawal and Mehra 28). A significant trend in Jharkhand is that the entire village unites together in making the accusations (PLD Report 16).

In Nigeria, suspected witch-afflicted children after being kept in confinement are subjected to deliverance ceremonies⁶, conducted by pastors and prophets, whose charges may be paid in cash or kind (Liepe 13).

The media also constitute one of the perpetrators in some countries. In Ghana, programs depicting how witches operate are broadcast everyday. In Nigeria, films that show the evil doings of witches are openly sold in the markets (Federeci 2010, 21).
Witchcraft accusations can also be a pointer to intra-gender struggles. Insubordinate wives and obstinate daughter-in-laws can also fuel up witchcraft accusations, which led to one diviner from South Africa to opine that polygamy needs to be outlawed (Schnoebelen 11).

In some African countries, ‘cleansing’ campaigns are launched by self-appointed witch-finders, who travel from one village to the other, submitting the native people to humiliating and frightening interrogations and exorcisms. Those accused would be tortured, killed or driven out of their villages and their possessions forfeited. These witch-hunters operate with impunity and the local police do not find people to testify against them (Federici 2008, 3). The young men who take on such responsibilities of sadistic vigilantism consider it to be a way of earning prestige amongst the community. The self-styled pastors and prophets form another class of witch-hunt perpetrator (Horowitz N.p.). Hunter mobs targeting suspected witches are also present in Papua New Guinea (Minggu N.p.). Such young men termed as comrades operate in South Africa (Schnoebelen 33).

Different rebel groups have also utilized witchcraft beliefs in certain African nations (Schnoebelen 3). The Holy Spirit Movement in Uganda aimed to fight against evil spirits and witchcraft. Mai-Mai soldiers in Northeast Congo are said to have liberated people from Mobuto Seko’s forces, using supernatural powers, through the use of amulets and charms. The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) carried out trials and executions of witches (Schnoebelen 34).
In Nigeria, even police officers in the rank of Assistant Inspector General and people holding the post of Governor have been implicated in witch-hunt killings (Schnoebelen 36).

2.2.3 Branding triggers

The occurrence of the witch-hunting phenomenon has been hypothesized to be due to uneven development and distribution of services (Karmakar 692). The triggers constitute the range of ‘crimes’ purportedly committed by the suspected witches. The list includes inflicting illness and death on their enemies and damage to their properties, murdering children, pacts and sexual intercourse with the Devil, metamorphosis into animals, preparing diabolical potions, etc. Hundreds of other forced confessions have been obtained through inhuman tortures upon the victims in different parts of the world over historical times (Nemec 2).

The prime motivation for such actions on the part of people arises from basic factors like deeply ingrained superstitions and illiteracy (Sharma N.p.). The idea of witches is common across all places, irrespective of the caste or community. Witches are thought to possess an evil eye or mouth and it is believed that they eat humans, kill both cattle and humans alike, destroy crops and cause a wide variety of illness and such other misfortunes amongst people (Masoodi N.p.).

The accused victims are branded as witches for many sorts of misfortunes that might befall the areas in which they reside. Natural disasters (such as droughts, drying up of a well, floods, crop loss, death of domestic animals), illness in the neighborhood, accident or sudden death of any people (Nityanandam N.p.; Vaishnavi N.p.; Akula N.p.; Rakesh N.p.; Nagvanshi & Khan N.p.; Rose N.p.). Witches were also considered to have
the ability of making men sexually impotent. Destruction of crops by hailstorms and burning incidents in different town and cities were also attributed to the powers of witchcraft (Rose N.p.). Illness even in the victim’s house can also lead to witch-hunts. In one such instance from Uttar Pradesh, the village Sarpanch harassed the wife of a man for discarding the ‘evil spirit’ that had entered into his body. But in reality, the man was suffering from cancer. The Sarpanch asked for rupees twenty-four thousand from the wife, and when she could not pay, she was beaten up by the villagers (PLD Report 18).

Any family amongst the Munda tribe in Jharkhand who accumulates wealth was subjected to the envy of the entire village folk. The wealth of the owner is supposed to have accumulated through the worship of the domesticated paltu/bonga and it is not supposed to be due to individual or household effort. These families, at times, are therefore required to give feast to the entire village, which is considered to be a manner of redistribution or economic leveling. Hisinga is a well-established concept in tribal socio-economic thinking (Nathan et. al. 6 – 7). Thus people have come to believe that if spirits can be used for one’s economic well-being, these can also be used for damaging other people’s economic well-being. Thus, the witch-hunt phenomena have two-fold connotation – those who suffered economic loss tries to find out the witches and those who did well, would be targeted as witches (Nathan et. al. 8).

Of late, the pretext of branding a woman as become more diversified. Certain miscreants have started to capitalize on this prevailing social superstition to kill or displace victims with ulterior motives (Dwaipayan 6). These people have started conspiring to brand women as witches for fulfillment of various self interests like grabbing of various movable and other immovable properties, settling scores, family
rivalry or even as a measure to punish for turning down sexual advances of someone influential in the village. Widows who are reluctant to relinquish claim over their husband’s properties, may be threatened and charged with being a witch (PLD Report 19; Akula N.p.; Nityanandam N.p.; Khan N.p.; M.P. Singh N.p.; McCoy N.p.; U Barman 6; Sultana 6: Devi 6). If a woman happens to be too assertive, and questions social norms, then also she is at risk of being branded as a witch (Rakesh N.p.; McCoy N.p.). The modus operandi is to disgrace and ostracize the victim (Nagvanshi & Khan N.p.). The link between ownership of land and persecution of women in witch-hunting cases is well established (Das Gupta, 1993).

Family disputes might also lead to witch-hunts. An instance can be cited from the Ranchi district in Jharkhand, where the husband of the victim conspired to get his wife raped with hired goons on the pretext of being a witch as she had apparently tried to dissuade her husband from selling a plot of land (Rajalakshmi N.p.). In another instance from Rajasthan, the husband of a woman conspired to declare his wife to be a witch, in order to marry another woman (Shalz N.p.).

Witch-hunting in the present times has come to be linked with politics also. In one such incident, a Dalit woman contested against a backward-caste woman in the panchayat elections in Madhya Pradesh. Thereafter, the land-owning castes (Yadavs and Patels) conspired to brand the Dalit woman as a *tonahi*. Yet in another instance, a tea garden worker who actively campaigned for Left Front candidates in the Panchayat elections was declared a witch after a conspiracy hatched by the members of the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura, and later murdered (Rajalakshmi N.p.).
In one citation, it has been argued that in a male-dominated society, the distrust in women has been catalyzed by the belief that women are more superior to men in matters of chanting *mantras*. Hence, it might be a belief amongst the male counterparts in the society that if the females are allowed to worship the deities, they might win their favour quickly and since the worshipped deities are destructive, the females might bring about havoc in the society through the powers of black magic.

Livestock disputes can also be reasons for witch-hunts. In one such instance from Uttar Pradesh, a woman who into a dispute over livestock with another family, was burnt by the men and subsequently labeled as a witch to cover up the case (PLD Report 18).

If a Dalit woman rejects stale food and is offered worn out clothes in return of payment for cleaning jobs, and if she places demands before her employer for better wages, she is immediately at risk of being targeted (PLD Report 30).

In countries like Indonesia, many of the witchcraft accusations are found to be politically and economically motivated or motivated by dislike and envy by fellow villagers. On the other hand, in countries like Nepal, extreme poverty, lack of access to basic resources, breakdown of social networks, all being contributed by civil was during the period 1996 – 2006 had fuelled the growth of rising witchcraft related incidents in the country (Minggu N.p.). Civil wars, political repressions and refugee-producing circumstances have also created breeding grounds for witchcraft related cases (Schnoebelen 3).

The absence of adequate and quality public healthcare infrastructure and services is also indirectly related to the witch-hunting phenomenon. This makes people to rely upon the witch-doctors to cure their illnesses. The traditional cultural mindset of the tribal
people and their belief in paranormal forces acts as catalysts in such circumstances. Alcoholism is another trigger which makes the people emotionally overwhelmed and makes them ruthless in dealing with any suspected perpetrators who they believe to be responsible for all their misfortunes (L. Deka 93).

Cold weather, droughts and floods which tend to affect upon agricultural production and bring hardships to people are inherently related to witchcraft accusation (Minggu N.p.). Witches were squarely blamed during the medieval times for all manners of evils that afflict the community. Spells that were caste by witches were considered to be responsible for frost and were thought to be responsible for bringing forth plagues of snails and caterpillars that tend to destroy the seeds and fruits of the earth. A hail striking a crop and a cow failing to give milk were all thought to be the handiwork of witches (www.jw.org).

The modern day witchcraft-related incidents in several advanced nations of the world are mainly concentrated amongst the urbanized immigrant population (Minggu N.p.). The people of this category have to face a wide-range of problems like employment, depression, immigration issues, past traumatic experiences, etc, and these people have to take mental and emotional support from the Church or the Mosque. Under such stressed conditions, these people do believe if they are told by the pastors, imams or priests that their children are possessed and exorcism needs to be carried out to bring about good days to them (AFRUCA Report 12).

Cases of premature deaths and untimely illness are almost always attributed to the action of invisible forces in Africa (Ashforth 2001, 5). Sufferings and misfortunes are always considered to be signs of action of the invisible powers (Ashforth 2001, 6). Health
crises, quite naturally have led to witch-hunts at different times. For example, a tetanus epidemic in Benin, dysentery and malaria deaths in Papua New Guinea, meningitis outbreak in Ghana, etc. have all triggered witch-hunts in those countries. In countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Papua New Guinea, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, incidences of HIV/AIDS\(^9\) are linked with witchcraft practices (Schnoebelen 19). During 1970s, older women were been chased out from certain areas in Benin, when infant mortality rates dramatically increased (Schnoebelen 32).

Another interesting observation that was made was related to weather conditions and witch-hunts. The period falling between the end of the fifteenth and the middle of the sixteenth centuries, was a period when witch-hunt incidents scaled down considerably. However, soon after that, up to the end of the eighteenth century, witch-trials re-emerged and that too with tremendous blow. There are evidences which suggest that during that period there were noticeable climate changes in Europe which would have severely affected food production. A ‘little ice age’ conditions were experienced between 1680 A.D. and 1730 A.D. and situations were such that the Thames River in England and the canals in Holland were frozen and people did believed that witches controlled the weather (Oster 217 – 218). Moreover, such conditions have led to drop in food production and an overall slump in the economic conditions. Under these circumstances, it is probable that the medieval communities might have undergone impulses to wipe out the least productive members of the community i.e. the poor and the old in the backdrop of such difficult times (Oster 225 – 226).

The fact that majority of women tend to become vulnerable targets all over the world in different witchcraft related incidents, the gendered phenomenon involved in
such incidents cannot be ignored. However, children have become vulnerable targets in some countries due to prevalent cultural myths (Minggu N.p.). Exceptions of men being targeted more than women are exemplified from the Lugbara tribe in Kenya (Schnoebelen 9).

2.3 Witch-trial perspectives

After successful branding of a person as a witch is accomplished, a series of events follow, involving different forms of rituals, methods and appliances, which all form important ingredients of the witch-hunting episodes. All individuals who have been implicated and sentenced through the witch-trials, undergoes a horrific sequence of events that leads to a wide-range of consequences, as outlined in the following sections.

2.3.1 Trial rituals

The rituals that follow prior to the witch-hunts vary from place to place. A witch gets identified through different techniques. The role of the witch doctor is to counteract the powers of the witches the latter being practitioners of black magic, and the former of white magic. In tribal folklore, the purrнима is related to spells and incantations of witches. In some tribal customs, when people sense any perceptible witch spell in their area due to any sort of misfortune, they would start offering prayers to undo what they think as a spell. In some instances, they would offer boiled rice along with the ashes of a burnt rooster, taken on a banana leaf and keep it in the middle of the road as offering to the witch (Masoodi N.p.). If nothing positive comes out, an ajha is invited, who charges a visiting fee for his service.

In one custom, the sorcerer would write the names of all those suspects onto the tree branches and the name of the suspect that is written on the branch that withers, is
condemned as the witch. In another, rice bags with names of suspects written on those, are placed inside a nest of white ants. Whichever bag the ants eat, identifies the witch (McCoy N.p.). In certain instances, the victims are dictated to hold live electric wires and the belief is that if the accused were not witches, nothing would happen to them (Akula N.p.). In another variance, the local sorcerer asks the victim to prove his/her innocence by holding a naked sword. If the sword wavers, the victim is proved to be a witch. If there are accusations against the victim of killing someone, the accused is asked to revive the dead. Failure on their part warrants torture or even the death sentence (M.P. Singh N.p.).

In Jharkhand, there are elaborate rituals for identifying a witch. One such example is called *daliya dikhana*, in which rice grains are brought and a woman is declared a witch depending upon the colour of the grains after the ritual (PLD Report 16). In Bihar, the rituals are slightly different. The traditional witch doctor known as *bhuni* participates in every such ritual. The *bhuni* instead of naming any particular person provides tentative description of the suspected witches (PLD Report 16 – 17). In Madhya Pradesh, ceremonial community events called *chabuatras* are used to label women as witches. An instance which has not been reported elsewhere is the presence of women witch-doctors in the State and incidents have been reported where such woman *baighats* had been imprisoned (PLD Report 20). In one instance from Rajasthan, a woman was labeled as a witch as a consequence of jealousy and family rivalry. After suffering from this slur for eight long years, she decided to assemble her community to come out with evidence of her being a witch. It was then decided that if women from her community consumed food offered by the victim and then survived, her witch label would be removed. The victim
then offered *prasad* (sanctified food offered to God) to five women from the community. However, these women who consumed the *prasad* came to no harm (PLD Report 28).

The western world followed different techniques. Suspects were firmly tied up and put into a ‘blessed’ body of cold water. If the suspects sank, they were deemed to be innocent and pulled out. However, if the suspects happen to float, they were considered to be witches. The suspects were weighed because it was a popular notion that witches had little or no weight. Another test involved the presence of ‘Devil’s mark’ on the body of the suspect. All hairs are shaved off from the suspect’s body and every nook and corner of the body is inspected in full public glare. If any spots like birthmarks, scars and warts are discovered, needles are stuck into those. If the needle pricks did not cause any hurt or bleed in the spots, those were considered to be caused by the suspect’s intimacy with the Devil (www.jw.org).

The trial rituals followed by the Rabha community is given in Section 4.3.

### 2.3.2 Trial appliances and methods

Different methods have been applied world-wide in different times for extracting confessions from the victims undergoing witch-trials. Those individuals, who didn’t admit of being a witch and were under heavy suspicion, were usually induced to confess by different means of torture. The rack, mutilation, fire, etc were only a few of the means of suffering used to evoke confessions. If the accused later revokes the confessions made earlier, he/she was tortured again until final confessions were made (Nemec 3).

In the earlier days in Scotland, instead of using direct torture methods, the method of sleep deprivation was used for extracting confessions. But later during the 1590s, James VI was of the opinion that Devils have very tight grip on their ‘servants’ and only
pain is capable of making this grip to slip. Thereafter different direct torture methods came into being, like the ‘boots’ which are used to crush the legs, use of the thumbscrews, burning with hot irons, use of ‘turcas’ for tearing out nails, etc (Zahradnicek 23).

In medieval Europe, witch-trials were held in a different perspective. Whenever a suspected case is brought into the notice of the court, four different categories of witnesses provides evidences viz. accusers, interrogators, watchers and searchers. The accusers were normally neighbours of the accused witch, who testified that they were affected by the witchcraft practices carried out by the accused witch. The watchers were those categories of people who were given the responsibilities of watching the accused witch at her home or in the prison to see whether her imps comes to visit her. The duty of the searchers was to conduct physical search of the witch’s body for the presence of witch’s marks or teats, from which the imps suckled (Jackson 68).

The following account dwells upon some of the tests that were employed during the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692 for evoking confessions and subsequent convictions (http://listverse.com/2012/07/27/10-tests-for-guilt-used-at-the-salem-witch-trials/):

- **Bound Submersion:** In this test, the alleged witches were bound at the hands and feet with heavy rocked attachments and then thrown into a water body. If the body floated to the surface, the accused was thought to be a witch. Otherwise, if the body sank to the bottom, the under-trial was considered to be innocent.

- **Dunking:** In this procedure, the accused undergoing witch-trials would be held under water repeatedly until they admit to their guilt.
• **Witch Cake:** This test had been devised with voodoo principles. A cake was prepared with rye meal and urine from the girls suspected to be afflicted by the witch’s evil incantations. Dogs are then given to eat this cake, after which the alleged witch should scream out in pain. The belief is that in the process of her cursing the victims, the accused sends invisible particles of herself that shows up in the urine. The cake naturally thus becomes a voodoo doll.

• **Witch’s Teat:** Teats represent any kind of moles or unusual skin blemishes which all witches are thought to possess. In this test, the teats would be pricked with a needle, and if the recipient didn’t bleed or feel it, then the individual is considered to be a witch. According to contemporary demonology, these marks were referred to as ‘devil’s stigmata’. These were insensitive marks on the skin, such as red spots, ulcers or depressions, which were considered proof of having had sexual relations with the Devil (Nemec 4). These marks are also known as **witch’s marks**¹⁰ (Zahradnicek 24).

• **Touch Test:** If any person was thought to be possessed by witches, who would throw fits and the like, then suddenly becomes calm after the accused places their hand on him/her, then the accused is considered to be a witch. The main reason given for this is that all the venom and assorted evil toxins (emanating from the witch’s eye) that afflicted the person was thought to be possessed by witches, returns to their evil host through the touch process.

• **Pressing:** In this process, the accused is placed beneath heavy stones, which were meant to literally crush the accused into forced submission.
• **Lord’s Prayer Test:** Here, the accused were made to recite the “Lord’s Prayer” without error. The accused were not supposed to stumble or stammer. Those who do would be considered to have failed during the witch-trials and would have to undergo conviction.

• **Artifacts:** If any artifacts corresponding to witchcraft were found in the homes of the accused, it was used as evidence for condemnation. These included poppets (a type of voodoo doll through which spells could be cast), cauldrons full of ointments, books on palm reading, horoscopes, etc. If flying broomsticks, talking black cats and pointy hats were found, it would mean instant condemnation.

• **Testimonials of Eye Witnesses:** In many instances, there were witnesses who would confess to actually seeing the alleged witches practicing their black magic. This was enough to press charges of guilt on the accused.

• **Spectral Evidence:** Sometimes claims were made by accusers that they would see the individual accused of witchcraft in dreams or visions doing the Devil’s bidding. The argument given for this was that the Devil is capable of taking any shape.

In typical incidents of witch-hunting amongst the Bhil tribe of Madhya Pradesh, when locals swoop down on their targets, the local exorcist asks the victim to prove their innocence by holding a naked sword. If the sword wavers, the victim is proved to be a witch. Thereafter, the victim is given a sound thrashing and a lock of her hair is shorn, in order to take away her mysterious magical powers (N.K. Singh N.p.). In certain
instances, the victims are required to hold live electric wires and are told that if they were not witches, nothing would happen to them (Akula N.p.).

The trial appliances and methods pertinent to the Rabha community are outlined in Section 4.3.2.

2.4 Witch-hunt perspectives

Witch-hunting takes place in a wide variety of forms and magnitude. Both men and women can become victims of witch-hunts, but women are more vulnerable (Sultana 6). Moreover, women who do not have a strong family support (e.g. widows, single unmarried women, aged, etc) are more vulnerable for the attacks, but in some other instances, it has been observed that even women who enjoy strong family support also are attacked (Kalita 6). The hunts might take place in broad daylight, with a small group of people pouncing upon the victims or a large mob, and the entire village comprising the big and the small as mute spectators to the gory events that might even lead to death of the victims. Otherwise, the hunting might take place deep at night, with a small group covertly carrying out the torture and murders. In some instances, everyone in the village knew that a murder is brewing up, except the prospective victim (Masoodi N.p.). There have also been instances where a single victim has been in multiple instances and time. Moreover, a victim might bear the brunt of wrath from the community not because of practicing witch-craft, but for showing courage to denounce the rituals conducted by the sorcerers. Entire families are wiped out in some cases. Assaults may take place right in the residences of the victims or they might be summoned or dragged to the village community meetings where the trial and attacks take place (Rajalakshmi N.p.; Nityanandam N.p.). The assailants of witches, either goes underground after the witch-
hunting incidents or may themselves surrender before the police (Nityanandam N.p.). It has been observed that not only the fellow villagers and some family members are involved in the attacks; in one such instance that occurred in the Sundergarh district of Odisha, a tribal villager butchered all the remaining six other members of his family himself (Dixit N.p.). Moreover, it has also been observed that the attacks have not remained confined to the disadvantaged sections of our society alone. For example, a senior leader and his mother were attacked in the North Salmara district of Assam (Nityanandam N.p.). Yet some victims are lucky enough to escape the entire ordeals a normal witch-hunt victim have to undergo, if the accused manages to inform the police or the different non-governmental organizations just in time about the story that is slowly unfolding. In one instance from Rajasthan, a woman was beaten to death by seven people of the village because the victim refused to sell her plot of land to them. The assailants included a second year graduate female student and also a boy who was studying in the higher secondary level. This instance highlights the encouragement given by the community to the younger generation to participate in such crimes (PLD Report 28).

However, case studies have revealed that males are more likely to pounce upon their female targets compared to females (Agrawal and Mehra 26). Witch-hunting has not remained restricted to the poor and illiterate section of the communities alone in the present day context; it is also practiced by and upon the educated as well as the economically well-off sections as well (F. Choudhury 6).

2.4.1 Witch-hunt violence: Physical

During the witch-hunt surge in Europe, different types of tortures inflicted upon the victims were of the magnitude which was perhaps not even seen by military surgeons
Once the verdict of ‘being guilty’ is passed by the so-called ‘kangaroo courts’, there is no looking back. The victims are subjected to severe forms of abuse and physical violence which can take multiple forms. The victims are subjected to different forms of lynching (beaten with wooden bars or sticks; beaten after being tied to a tree; sprinkling of red chilli powder on injuries after beating; burying alive; hacking to death; slit the throats; beheading; strangling; electrocuted from electric poles; tongue and hands burnt with flaming ash; stoning; kicking in the stomach; dragging by hair; earthen pitchers broken over heads; branding with hot iron rods; burning by candles; putting hands in boiling water; forcible plucking of teeth i.e. defanging; hurting of genitals; chopping off tongue and breasts), a variety of public acts of humiliation (blackening of faces; stripping naked and parading in public places; tonsuring; molestation; gang-rape; forcible consumption of human excreta, urine, sewage water and blood of chicken) and mental tortures (forcible eviction from homes and separation from kith and kin; driven to commit suicide). (Agrawal and Mehra 33; Akula N.p.; Banerjee N.p.; I. Das 255; Dixit N.p.; Drolia N.p.; Khan N.p.; Malik N.p.; Masoodi N.p.; Mathur et.al. 190; McCoy N.p.; M.P. Singh N.p.; Nagvanshi & Khan N.p.; Navayan N.p.; Nemec 5; Nityanandam N.p.; Pioneer, 06.10.2015; Rajalakshmi N.p.; Rakesh N.p.; Shalz N.p.; Sharma N.p.; Shrestha 15; Vaishnavi N.p.; ). Due to physical torture, the victims when ask for water when their mouths were parched, the attackers urinate into their mouths. When they bleed profusely, the attackers leave them to die (Akula N.p.). In states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, cutting or shaving off hair is commonly done, with the intention of erasing the sexual powers of the victim, since hair is perceived as a symbol of sexuality or womanhood (PLD Report 21). In a number of instances, the agricultural fields, houses
and important documents of the victims are also destroyed by the perpetrators (Agrawal and Mehra 33). In other instances, it has been observed that if a woman alleged to be a witch is killed, her body is cut into several pieces and buried separately as it is popularly believed that if the dead body is buried in one place with all the parts intact, rebirth of the witch might take place (Rajbongshi et. al. 110).

In Nigeria, children suspected to be witches, are abandoned by their parents/guardians in deep forests. Sometimes they are chased off into the bush, slaughtered, bathed in acid, buried or burned alive, poisoned to death with a local poison berry, drowned, chained to trees, imprisoned and even tortured in churches to extract ‘confessions’ (Foxcroft N.p.; Schnoebelen 17). Children are also severely beaten, burnt with acid, fire or hot water, forced to ingest hazardous chemicals, nails and machetes driven into their heads, raped/molested, thrown into rivers, chained, subjected to starvation and forced to participate in exorcisms (Liepe 11). Suspected witches are thrown off from cliffs and dragged behind cars in countries like Papua New Guinea (Schnoebelen 9).

According to sociologists, the communities and areas where this phenomenon is observed are places where the people live in constant stress. So whenever the people in the community find an alibi, they resort to all sorts of violence against the targeted victims, which in fact, becomes a representation of stress relief. The mob violence against the weaker victim makes the attackers feel relieved of their stress (Akula N.p.).

2.4.2 Witch-hunt violence: Non-physical

The very act of labeling or accusing an individual to be a witch amounts to emotional and psychological abuse (Foxcroft N.p.). Apart from physical violence, the victims of witch-
hunts are subjected to various forms of verbal abuse and banishment from their native villages. In states like Bihar, the perpetrators verbally accuse the victims by calling them names like haramjaadi, baap chodi, behaya, besharam, randi, kulachhini, kutiya, beta khauki, aadam khauki, bhai khauki, mans khauki, maradmuhi, khendi, bisahin, khachadi, khachadna, jakhai, etc. The victims are also abused verbally by the use of certain phrases viz. bhoot pujti hai tou, sabke khayele tou, pati ko khane wali, bhoot rakhti hai tou, mantra phoonk kar sandesh bhejati hai tou, sari khol kar marbo, talwar se katwo, kokh ujadane wali, hamar beta khaach lelek, etc. In Jharkhand, the terms of insults and abuse are not very different. Additional terminologies and phrases like churail, najom, bhoot posni, etc are used against the victims. In Chhattisgarh, the victims are abused by calling them jaaduwali, tanane wali, bhuri maatiya, bhootahi, tonchahi, vaishya, nakti, naarijat, neech jaat, chinal, kaljimmi, najarheen, bhosdi, charkatar, tor gaad ma baas daalav, etc. (Agrawal & Mehra 32).

2.4.3 Witch-hunt violence: Consequences

Subsequent to the branding process, the victims had to undergo different negative consequences apart from physical violence. Social stigma, psychological/mental torture, social/economic boycott, loss of properties and livelihood, etc can be the companion of the witch-hunt victims either for a short duration or for their lifetime, depending upon the circumstances (Agrawal and Mehra 3; Schnoebelen 13).

The socio-economic consequences of witch-hunting may be broadly classified into five major categories, viz. -
• **Payment of fines.** Sometimes the accused are made to pay a hefty fine amount, which served to meet the drinking bouts of the villagers (Banerjee N.p.). In Jharkhand, after the victims are ostracized publicly, they are directed to leave the village. If the victim desires to stay in the village, a payment of an amount of Rupees Five Thousand is to be paid as penalty which is then spent on alcohol and *arrack* (PLD Report 16). In another instance from Odisha, the victim was asked to pay a fine of rupees one lakh as penalty in return for permission to stay in the village and in case if the money could not be paid, the land and property of the victim would be taken away (PLD Report 19). In another variation of the sentence pronounced upon a witch victim in Madhya Pradesh, the labeled woman is required to supply food grains to the entire village for a whole year, which is an instance of gross economic exploitation. If the demands are not met with, these women would be subjected to different sorts of physical violence (PLD Report 20).

• **Social stigma.** In many cases, the victims are forced to spend lives in isolation and many of them ultimately die, waiting for justice (Akula N.p.). Once a woman is labeled as a witch, the family members and other relatives of the victim are often forced to boycott the victim under social pressure (Shalz N.p.). The victims invariably face social stigma and ostracisation. The victims are not invited to social gatherings and functions as well as community events. People turn away or hide their children at the sight of the victims. They are stared at or taunted publicly and their children find difficulties at the time of their marriage. The victims who worked as daily wage or hired labourers are not allowed to work in
their native villages. They may not be allowed to cultivate in their own farmlands or in the paddy fields of other villagers (Agrawal and Mehra 34). The children of the victims also find themselves aloof in schools as they are treated by their fellow mates in an unfriendly manner. Thus they end up as drop outs (Thakur 259).

- **Denial of access to public resources.** The victims are denied access to public facilities and amenities like village community wells, hand pumps, local PDS shops and NREGA amenities (Agrawal and Mehra 34).

- **Physical dislocation.** There are several instances where the victims and their families are forced to move out of their native villages (Agrawal and Mehra 34). In some situations, the properties of the victims are confiscated by the villagers. Even after physical dislocation of the victims, their *witch brand* spreads very fast to nearby areas. Even in those new places, where the victims get engaged with new livelihoods, they have to hide their identity for fear of the past catching up with them again (Talukdar N.p.). Physical dislocation might lead to further complicacies like husbands marrying another woman when his former wife is forced to live far from her native place for long time. The resultant trauma has to be faced by the children of the victim also. The education of the children also gets hampered (Thakur 259).

- **Loss of property and livelihood.** As a result of both social stigma as well as physical dislocation, the witch-hunt victims not only lose their landed properties but at the same time lose certain professions they were engaged with. The victims also lose their livestock as well as poultry in the process. The victims are also
forced to discontinue certain income-generating petty activities like cooking, liquor making, working in brick kilns, etc after they are victimized as well as stigmatized (Agrawal and Mehra 34).

- **Miscellaneous.** The victims, if lucky enough, are forgiven and set free by the villagers, just by making them swear by the name of God or some Holy scriptures in some of the religious places within the village. In other instances, the victims are made to perform some rituals either to prove their innocence or as ‘cleansing means’ (Agrawal and Mehra 35). An instance of this variety can be cited from Sikarigaon in Majuli Island of Assam, where the villagers kept the victims confined for twenty two days, subjected them to humiliation and finally made them go through a ‘purification’ ceremony (The Telegraph, 12.11.2013; Borpujari N.p.).

All the above consequences lead to severe mental trauma and depression amongst the victims as well as their family members. The victims might lose their psychological balance (Thakur 259). In one of the case study carried out at Goalpara district (A/GLP-12; Appendix – A), it was learnt that the victim woman had to leave behind her husband and children after being banished away and remained separated for seven long years. It quite evident how much trouble the father had to overcome for bringing up his children in the absence of their mother. Thus the family members of the primary victims also become collateral victims in many cases. Many women have to take recourse to prostitution in order to earn their day-to-day living, while many fall victims to human traffickers (Foxcroft N.p.; AFRUCA Report 14). A HelpAge International Report of 2008
has indicated that ninety percent of banished women from Burkina Faso commit suicide, flee to neighbouring localities or die of starvation (Schnoebelen 13).

In countries like Nigeria, witchcraft accusations have forced many children onto the streets, where they become vulnerable to child traffickers, ritualists\textsuperscript{11} and rapists (AFRUCA Report 15). Once on the streets, the children have to undergo a second round of ordeal. These children are beaten and abused by older street children, by the public and even by the security forces. These street children become organized not only by neighbourhoods, by age or even by the place where they sleep. Both boys and girls become victims of repeated rapes by civilians or security forces. The street children often get addicted to drugs like cannabis, glue, etc which provides them with a sense of force and power, helps them to have a sound sleep at night and eliminates the sense of shame and even hunger (Cimpric 43). The boys earn their livelihoods as beggars, street cleaners and carriers of loads or in some cases work in underground mines. Girls begin prostituting as young as six or seven years old (Cimpric 44). These children are denied education at schools, which ultimately forces them to lead a poverty-stricken life as adults. Rejection by friends and families leads to serious emotional problems like depression, lack of self-confidence and low self esteem (AFRUCA Report 15). The key rights that are affected for such children and which are guaranteed under international as well as national human rights laws\textsuperscript{12} include right to food and shelter, right to family life, right to education, right to healthcare, rights to cultural life, right to protect against trafficking, right to be free from torture, violence, abuse and neglect, etc (Secker 26).

There are positive consequences of witch-hunting as well. There are instances where some survivors who have learnt so much about the law through their experience
that they have taken up legal studies as their chosen field of study and thereafter became established lawyers of the society. These women have felt the need to offer legal help to other victimized women and therefore emerged as defenders of women’s rights, social workers, lawyers and counselors, who had an inclination to dedicate their lives for the welfare of other witch-hunt victims (PLD Report 35). A glaring instance from Assam is that of Dr. Birubala Rabha, who has been awarded an honorary doctorate (*Honoris Causa*) by the Gauhati University in 2015, for her contribution in the field of witch-hunt prevention and mitigation.

### 2.4.4 Witch-hunt stages

A total of nine stages have been identified in a typical witch-hunting exercise (Agarwal N.p).

1. Stories and myths are circulated regarding the description of the suspected witches. Targets are selected in such a way that they easily fit in the preconceived notions of the people.

2. Occurrence of some personal tragedy, disease/ epidemic or some natural calamity takes place in the locality or area, for which the people finds no explanation

3. People levies accusations against the targeted individuals, whatever may be the motive

4. Accusations are circulated on an experimental basis to gather public acceptance if the audience is found to be receptive

5. Accusations gets circulates as gossip and flows through social fissures until enough allies in the projected persecution comes together

6. Local religious practitioner/witch doctor is approached to know who has caused the malice
7. Practitioner uses divination method to identify the suspected ‘witch’

8. Charges get established

9. Punishment of the targeted victims by the accusers

The prosecution for witchcraft was also divided in five stages for witch-trials that were held in Scotland viz. occurrence of an socially unsanctioned act and identification of a suspect, decision of the community that the suspect needs a criminal trial, decision of the court to hold a trial or not (which includes imprisonment of the suspect and use of different torture methods to extract confessions), the holding of the trial itself and lastly the passing of the sentence (Zahradnicek 21 – 25).

2.5 Discussion

Belief in the existence of witches, practice of witchcraft, witchcraft accusations and witch-huntings is a world-wide phenomenon, which still continues in modern India. Over the ages, witches have been blamed by mankind for a wide range of misfortunes that befalls upon it. Women who are branded as witches are subjected to inhumane torture, amounting to medieval madness. It was for a long period of time thought that the witch-branding and witch-hunting was superstitious. However, in the modern age, witch-hunting has become a modus operandi by certain vested people for serving as a conspiracy towards fulfillment of various self interests. Using a veil of superstition, various perpetrators in our society has been hiding their true motives behind the witch-related tortures and killings. The phenomenon has also been continuing due to different reasons like ineffective police investigation, inaccessibility of laws, lack of stringent punishments, ineffective rehabilitation or support systems, etc (Parthasarathy N.p.).
Social and economic inequalities have also played an important role in fuelling such incidents. Witch-hunt targets seen 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. An alarming situation arises whenever a majority of the community or villagers are involved in the attacks, where the village headman either remains as a mute spectator or becomes a part of the attacking mob. Moreover, it also another matter of concern that majority of the incidents occur overtly in broad daylight and only a few number of incidents are committed covertly during night-time. It has been found that male members of the community take much more initiative in flaring up of the incidents, mostly from the younger generation. The primary triggers for initiation of witch-hunt incidents in the context of India include illness in the neighbourhoods which is complemented by personal envy, disputes and vested interests. Once the perpetrators become successful in attaining their goal of branding and ostracizing a victim, the grounds are cleared for fulfillment of a wide variety of interests. For attaining their goals, the perpetrators have also devised various ways and means to identify the ‘witches’ in their targets. Once the ‘witch’ gets successfully identified, the victims are subjected to a wide variety of inhuman tortures. It is not only that only the targeted victim had to suffer, but in most of the cases, the entire family of the victim had to bear the brunt, which makes the situation much worse. In many cases the stigma and socio-economic losses suffered by them
becomes life-long and certain extreme cases the tortures culminates in the death of the victims.

Notes

**Sabbath**: Assembly of witches in remote locations to worship the Devil collectively. In such assemblies, witches allegedly kiss the Devil’s buttocks, trample on the Holy Cross, and have themselves rebaptized in the religion of their new demonic master. In such assemblies, the witches are alleged to reverse all moral norms of the society. They dance after getting naked, engage in promiscuous sexual relations with the other witches and the numerous demons that are present. Young and unbaptized children are sacrificed to the Devil and later eat them up. In some countries, it was believed that witches flew to these assemblies, sometimes on broomsticks or on the backs of animals (Rose N.p.).

**Magic Potions**: Magic potions called *korobela* are believed to cause a person to fall in love. The potion *intelizi* is administered to warriors for making them preternaturally violent (Ashforth 2001, 7).

**Child witches**: The types of children who are vulnerable to being labeled as witches can be categorized into three categories viz. (a) Orphans, losing one or both natural parents; physically disabled children or those suffering from physical illness; especially gifted children or children showing unusual behaviour (b) Children whose birth is considered to
be abnormal, which includes premature children and twins (c) Albino children (Cimpric 2).

Albinos⁴: The albinos are not persecuted for being involved with witch-craft practices but for a lucrative illegal trade in albino skins, bones and hairs, which are used in potions and charms that are believed to bring good luck and riches to people. The President of Tanzania denounced the practice in 2008 and the situation has become such that police has to escort albino children to school. However, policemen itself are accused of being involved in the murder of albinos in Burundi (Schnoebelen 17-18). The body parts of albinos are also called ‘spare parts’ and parts like tongues, hands, ears, skulls, heart and genital organs are commercially traded. In Zimbabwe, it is believed that having sex with albino women can cure HIV (Cimpric 28-29). A variety of items are found in the market for sale, made from the body parts of albinos, viz. magic powders and potions, talismans and charms. These charms are used in Tanzania by diamond prospectors while Albino hairs are used by fishermen to attract fish in Lake Victoria (Cimpric 30).

Traditional healers⁵: When suspected witchcraft-afflicted children are taken to these healers, they would forcefully administer potions made from poisonous plants in the eyes or ears, which causes vomiting or defecation. This would prove that the child is getting well (Cimpric 37). In the Central African Republic, the healers would make an incision in the child’s belly with an unsterilized knife and cuts out a small piece of intestine, after which the child is considered to be ‘cleaned’ (Cimpric 38).

Deliverance ceremonies⁶: These ceremonies are meant to exorcise the individuals who are supposedly possessed by witches. The fees of the pastors and prophets are to be paid in terms of money or donation of items to the church or the mosque. The fees range from $ 25 - $ 250, which is quite above the amount an average Nigerian family can afford. In this way, the deliverance prophets have found the deliverance ceremonies to be a lucrative business (Liepe 13).
**Exorcism**: As per Collins English Dictionary, it is a process of expelling or attempting to expel, one or more evil spirits from a person or place believed to be possessed or haunted by prayers, adjurations and religious rites (AFRUCA Report 11).

**Comrades**: These young in South Africa are responsible for at least 389 killings in the Northern Province during 1985 – 1995. They tend to put pressure on the local African National Congress (ANC) leaders for eradication of witches in their localities, despite a legal ban on witch-huntings. The ANC leaders only tried to minimize the terrors unleashed by the Comrades, but they were unable to stop the killings and expulsions done by them. Even the Truth Commission were forced to grant amnesty to thirty-four such Comrades, who were accused of murder of twenty-six witches during early 1990s, on the grounds that their acts were driven by the traditional belief systems (Schnoebelen 33).

**HIV/AIDS**: Widows are accused of bewitching people with AIDS by self-appointed witch-hunters. It is believed that an HIV positive person possess a witch inside him/her, although looking like a normal human being and is secretly killing them (Schnoebelen 19).

**Witch’s marks**: These marks are thought to be created in the suspect’s body by the Devil after completion of the Demonic Pact and by nipping the witch. These marks are insensible to pain caused through pricking. The accused women might be unable to feel any sensation due to the shock of the experience they had undergone. Moreover, the prickers were also a group of people with malicious intentions and they might have had knowledge on acupuncture, and hence knew which points of the body could be successfully pricked without causing pain or bleeding (Zahradnicek 24).

**Ritualists**: There are recorded cases to show how body parts of children are in great demand for being used in certain rituals in places like Juju in Nigeria. There are frequent instances of disappearance of street children, who are abandoned by the family members on the streets due to witchcraft accusations. Many of these children are shipped to the
Gabon and Equatorial Guinea for being employed as labourers in plantations (Foxcroft N.p.).