6

Summary and recommendations

6.1 Summary of findings

Witch-craft practices, witch-craft accusations, witch-trials and witch-hunts are world-wide phenomena, spreading across different religions and communities. The use of the term ‘witch’ has been used in a loose sense denoting both males as well as females. In a similar way, the connotation ‘witch-hunt’ has also been used widely not only to mean the incidents that led to murders of the victims, but also incidents which involve different forms of physical and non-physical atrocities upon the victims. These practices have stopped in many developed nations across the globe and in the present day context, is mostly confined to some African, Asian – Pacific and Middle – East nations. In Europe, recent incidents have been reported primarily amongst the immigrant communities. In the Indian context, these practices are still continuing primarily amongst the tribal communities and there are available reports from twenty-four Indian States (including six different states belonging to the North – Eastern Region) as well as three Union Territories. The earliest recorded case in Assam that was found during the course of research is from 1989, for which an attempt was made to gather witch-hunt information through the RTI mode for the period 1989 – 2016. It transpired that out of the present thirty-three districts in Assam, this phenomenon has been found to be reported from twenty-two districts, while eleven districts have reported zero occurrences of witch-hunt incidents. Victims with as many as seventy-five surnames, belonging to five different
tribal communities and a few other non-tribal communities, from Assam have been recorded through this piece of research.

Altogether fifty-one different witch-hunt case studies were carried out amongst the Rabha community, 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. Out of surveyed cases in fifty-one families, it has been found that twenty-seven cases were registered in different police stations (twenty cases without NGO intervention and seven cases with NGO intervention). Amongst the registered police cases, charge-sheets were submitted by the police in respect of nineteen cases and final reports were submitted in three cases. In four cases, investigation is still pending, while in one single case (A/GLP – 24) details of present status has not been obtained. Out of these, thirty-two cases (seven police cases and twenty five without police cases) were settled through NGO intervention.

Amongst the Rabha community, since the practice is mostly prevalent among the economically deprived rural section, poverty and lack of education and adequate healthcare facilities has been assumed to be the primary causal factors. The primary triggers for the incidents have been found to be illnesses in the neighbourhoods, which gets fuelled by the additive action between predictions of the witch doctors and the long-term personal disliking, jealousy, family feuds or property-related disputes between the victims and the accused. The widespread and traditional consumption of locally brewed alcohol amongst this populace can be considered to be another fuelling element, since it has been observed that in many cases, the incidents took place, when the attackers were
under the influence of alcohol. The Medieval mob sentiments brew up amongst the attacking section, after they lose all their logical and rational senses. From the fact that women are more victimized compared to men, even in the Rabha community, witch-hunting can be categorized as a gender-based violence, which not only directly affects the victims alone, but also a section of collateral victims like immediate family members, relatives, associates and even supporters. The witch-trials that have been practiced upon the male members also radically differ from those that are practiced upon the females. Witch-trials against male victims arise because of their tantrik practices and this itself constitutes the witch-hunt phenomenon. In case of females, witch-craft accusations arise when any female patient is believed to have been the possession by another woman, who is believed to be a ‘witch’. In such a case, the suffering patient undergoes the witch-trial process (involving physical torture) carried out by the villagers in collaboration with a traditional doctor. During the ordeal, if the tortured patient names any other villager (mostly a woman), the named woman is then targeted upon. At this point, the witch-hunt process starts. Another category of traditional doctor does not get involved with the witch-trial process, but names any suspect who might be responsible for the illness of the patient. Still, another category of traditional doctors exist, who does not resort to predictions, or physical torture methods, but makes use of mantras for curing the supposedly ‘daini-possessed’ patients.

There is no dearth of laws to protect and prevent the victims from any form of atrocities. A wide range of legislations starting from The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948 to The Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), 1984 are available, which have
their own mandates upon the various member states under the umbrella of the United Nations. In India, the various provisions of IPC and CrPC has been used to book people who are accused in witch-hunts in those states where anti-witchcraft laws have not yet been promulgated. In Assam itself, fifty different IPC Sections have been used by the police to book offenders in witch-hunt cases, while thirty-two numbers of IPC Sections were invoked in the Rabha witch-hunt cases. There is no dearth of laws to shield the accused; the accusing finger has only been pointed to the implementing authorities responsible for enforcing the laws. A common element that has been mostly raised all over the state is the lack of adequate and immediate response by the police. The lack of pre-emptive action and prosecution leads to impunity, which creates ground for continued victimization. Another problem that needs to be tackled is that witnesses do not come forward to testify about the incidents. The existing governmental policies/programmes on awareness creation, healthcare facilities, education innovation, rehabilitation and compensation packages for victims, etc have not put adequate focus on this social menace. Moreover, there is a lack of budgetary provision in the state to address and redress witch-hunting. Partnerships/coordination between various stakeholders is at the lowest ebb. However it needs mention that, despite the prevalence of stringent laws atrocities on women are continuing and rising, not only in the State, but also in different parts of India, which implies that witch-hunts cannot be prevented through mere promulgation of legislations and stringent laws alone. Something more needs to be done and this calls for the designing of a roadmap for dealing with the situation.

6.2 Foundations for a road map
During the course of the study, attempt was made to solicit opinions from a wide range of individuals, who acquainted with the various facets of witch-craft and witch-hunt by using a standard proforma. The list includes retired and sitting Hon’ble Justices of the Gauhati High Court, office bearers of Assam Human Rights Commission, senior bureaucrats (IAS and IPS officers), faculty members from foreign and other state universities, registrars of universities, principals of colleges, research scholars, NGO and women rights activists, office bearers of literary organizations and media activists. The interviewees put forwarded a wide range of mechanisms for tackling the witch-hunt phenomena, which have been consolidated and synthesized with a classificatory approach, as outlined below -

- **Vulnerability mapping:** The villages dominated by the various tribal communities, which are vulnerable and prone to witch-hunting must be identified for taking up necessary measures for future recurrence of such incidents (M Sahay, pers. comm.).

- **Ensuring constitutional rights and protections:** Adoption and enforcement of such measures can be expected for enabling concrete redressal of economic or social imbalances (J Zemke, pers. comm.; J P Saikia, pers. comm.; D Saikia, pers. comm.). The causes for social divide and economic deprivation needs to be addressed (S Rajkhowa, pers. comm.; P C Dash, pers. comm.).

- **Elimination of social conflicts:** Serious attention to social conflicts in marginalized communities needs to be given. Such a step would also work as a mechanism of control (U Valk, pers. comm.).
• **Stakeholder networking/synergetic partnership:** Witch-hunting is an issue which needs to be tackled comprehensively by a spectrum of stakeholders including police, health department, social welfare department, NGOs, civil societies and in fact every conscious citizen in a systematic and coordinated manner (M Sahay, pers. comm.). Different governmental and non-governmental agencies need to join hands along with other stakeholders like policy makers, educationists, medical and law practitioners, media and the witch-hunt victims themselves, and work in unison, through effective networking, to thwart the evil forces in our society that fuels and propagates social evils like witchcraft accusations and witch-hunts (Justice A H Saikia, pers. comm.; S Rajkhowa, pers. comm.; P Singha, pers. comm.; S P Saikia 10; L Deka 96). The government can make efforts to build up a systematic network of representatives of the vulnerable communities who would work together with village elders and other authoritative people, aimed for the protection of the marginalized and disadvantaged individuals (U Valk, pers. comm.). There should be good understanding and coordination between the public and the administration (K Brahma, pers. comm.). The local administration should be in constant touch with the village headmen, village leaders and social workers (N Das, pers. comm.). Strong networking with local students’ unions has also been prescribed (D Narzary, pers. comm.). It has been observed that coordinated efforts involving NGOs, police and local community structures such as village councils play an important role in reducing the recurrence of the incidents, especially amongst the Rabhas of Goalpara District (M Saikia, pers. comm.). Police and other enforcement agencies must
play not only the investigative role but also proactively to intercept and prevent such incidents based on intelligence and other proactive measures (M Sahay, pers. comm.). Unless there is a system-driven intervention, individual efforts towards curbing of this menace will not sustain (C Kakoty, pers. comm.). Given the extent of the witch-hunt menace (twenty-two districts in Assam have recorded witch-hunt incidents), the number of NGOs is far more less and these NGOs are not sufficiently teethed to effectively tackle the situation, which calls for enhanced NGO activism (M Behal, pers. comm.).

- **Change of mindset:** Social sanction given to the practice is a factor which has contributed to the rising incidents. Mindset of the people needs to be changed by sensitizing and bringing awareness amongst the people in general and effected communities and areas in particular (Justice A H Saikia, pers. comm.; M Das, pers. comm.). Adequate creation of awareness of scientific approaches and dissemination of scientific temperament amongst the illiterate tribal people through education may be done (Nityanandam N.p.; Munin Saikia 69; L Deka 96; Begum 100; J P Saikia, pers. comm.; P Singha, pers. comm.; D Deka, pers. comm.; S Nath, pers. comm.). The cultural mindset of the vulnerable communities needs to be changed (R Brahma, pers. comm.). The widespread use of traditionally brewed alcohol needs to be discouraged through counseling, by making the ignorant villagers aware of the potential threats to health and other adverse socio-economic consequences. The mindset of the younger generations needs to be moulded through effective education. Many victims prefer to bear the
agony in silence amidst their tormentors and do not come forward to testify the facts before the police.

- **Capacity building:** Measures must be taken so that the police and other stakeholders become capable enough to handle the situations in the case of any eventualities. Intelligence and investigative capacities need to be upgraded in the vulnerable areas. Better counseling and rehabilitation policing is also required (M Sahay, pers. comm.). In most of the cases that have occurred amongst the Rabha community, it was observed that locations that are considerably far from the police stations/out-post are more prone to witch-hunts, a fact which necessitates in setting up of more such security pickets in the vicinity of vulnerable areas. Adequate manpower and logistics, enhanced intelligence network, better public-police ties, effective training for handling such situations, etc will be a welcome step in this regard (D K Kalita, pers. comm.).

### 6.3 Final recommendations

Since illiteracy, ignorance, age-old superstitions and economic and social imbalances are the primary driving factors that lead to witch-hunts in our society, a witch-hunt curbing strategy needs to take into consideration all such factors. The problem of witch-hunting will continue to haunt the fair sex of the weaker section as long as economic inequities continue to exist in our society and women empowerment is not given due weightage. Increasing pressure on land and property has resulted in many incidents, which are camouflaged as incidents of witch-hunting, rather than incidents having socio-economic ramifications. Police action is definitely required in witch-hunting cases, but in a setting where people believe that their actions are justified on grounds of moral code and social
norms, provision of legal instruments and police action doe not merely suffice, as evidenced by the fact that in many instances the witch-hunters themselves surrender before the police after committing the hunt. The prime matter of concern is that, the culprits many a time not even aware that they have committed a serious crime. Enforcement measures will not be enough as this is a socio-legal issue and not a pure legal issue. However, if existing socio-cultural norms do violate the current human rights paradigm, the latter is to be given more priority compared to the former. Moreover, instances where ulterior motives or malicious intentions underlie the witch-hunt phenomena, then the eradication strategy will have to be considered in an all together new perspective. Diagnostic approach will be needed to supplement the symptomatic treatment.

6.3.1 Governmental measures

Governments may adopt certain measures and bring about a variety of reforms in the following domains -

6.3.1.1 Infrastructural domain

This domain incorporates a number of sectors, viz. -

- **Education sector:** School curriculum, mainly at the primary and secondary levels must focus on building up of a scientific temperament and rational attitude amongst the learners by writing on the blank slates of the young minds. This curriculum must include reading materials pertaining to facts related to health, hygiene and superstition. Such education must help to inculcate and imbibe spiritual and human values amongst the learners. Teachers also need to be
properly oriented to motivate the learners. Adult education, especially women education in tribal areas needs to be given more importance which shall serve as one of the means of empowering women. Educational organizations in the vicinity of the areas where potential witch-hunt threats exist or where it occurs, can organize awareness camps. The teachers residing in the witch-hunt prone areas can act as effective retarding factors whenever any situation arises.

- **Healthcare & sanitation sector:** Adequate provision and improvement of healthcare, sanitation, drinking water facilities/amenities in the backward regions can act as a deterrent to witch-hunt. Periodical medical camps and health surveys in the remote locations need to be organized for early detection of ailments amongst the villagers through synergetic governmental and non-governmental collaborations. Mobile health services may be provided in the interior places. ASHA/ANM/MPHW/Anganwadi workers can also extend their contribution towards the removal of superstitions amongst the illiterate class of people.

- **Transport and communication sector:** In many instances, the poor and illiterate women find it difficult to travel from isolated regions to lodge complaints with the police or other social organizations. In such a context, both surface and digital connectivity needs to be ensured in the vulnerable areas for the purpose of mainstreaming. Provision of all-weather road networks and good communication facilities can also ensure that information regarding occurrence of any incidents reaches the appropriate authority in a swift mode. The government can also think of introducing separate 24 x 7 ‘Help-Line’ facilities for witch-hunt victims. The advantages of widespread and multi-pronged use of community radio have also
been advocated as an instrument of social change and putting a check on witch-hunting. Satisfactory transport and communication facilities may encourage good doctors and teachers to work in backward areas. Adequate electricity and mobile networks is mandatory for the purposes of mainstreaming.

6.3.1.2 Policy matters and administrative domain

The police, civil and village administrators must work hand in hand, which can form a very powerful mechanism to give check to the witch-hunt process. The various ways in which these three agencies can extend their contribution is visualized as under -

- **Role of state governments:** A nodal agency/department in the witch-hunt affected states may be designated by the respective state governments for dealing with the witch-hunt related issues. A separate budget head must be allocated by the state government in different stakeholder departments, for awareness and prevention works in witch-hunt prone areas. The government can also include witch-hunting as separate programme within the purview of NRM. Right to free health care may be ensured for the rural poor, especially for those residing below the poverty line, which can lead to fall in the demand for traditional witch doctors, in the event of any illnesses. Governmental incentives or awards must be given to those employees/individuals/organizations who offer their services in the remote localities and comes up with success stories in their bids to check the witch-hunt menace. The government can also provide subsidies to the educational institutions set up in rural areas, which might serve towards changing the mindset of the rural illiterate class.
- **Role of civil administration:** The civil administration must work in collaboration and in unison with the police administration. The principal thrust it needs to give is on women empowerment. Opportunities must be created amongst the women belonging to the vulnerable sections for working and earning. Women must be organized at village levels and creative economic packages and special schemes implemented with their active involvement for enhancing their self confidence and economic independence through self-employment. Suitable resource allocations must be made for loss of livelihood and properties. Adequate creation of livelihood opportunities needs to be made amongst the affected communities, especially women. Women belonging to the vulnerable communities should be united by way of formation of associations (mahila samittees, mahila sanghas, clubs, self-help-groups, etc) locality-wise or at Gram Panchayat and Block Levels. The feminine energy of the community needs to be channelized for meaningful and creative pursuits. Such a step would not only install a sense of courage, firmness and determination in them, but would also enable them to raise voice and fight in a united mode, whenever any adverse circumstance arises. The women leaders of such groups should maintain periodical contacts with the administration and law enforcement agencies of the concerned jurisdictional areas so that any untoward incident whenever brews up can be immediately tackled in a firm and effective manner. The next important focus should be on rehabilitation and compensation Victims of illegitimate witch-hunting need protection on humanistic grounds. In many reported instances, the victims find it inconvenient to go back to the community that stigmatized her. Hence, rehabilitation of such
people is another challenge and governmental action is highly welcome in this regard also. The government needs to notify certain designated shelter homes, should there be a need. Schemes and mechanisms must be devised for providing adequate relief and compensation to the victims, including counseling and emotional support services. A strong governmental support and security system is also required for protecting single and deserted women of the women belonging to the vulnerable class is needed. The provision of adequate and free medical and legal aid will be another welcome step. The governmental poverty eradication policies need to be effectively implemented in the remote areas. The functioning and works of the traditional healers either needs to be regulated or banned altogether. A database of all practitioners of traditional healing and traditional medicines may be prepared and submitted village-wise by the concerned village headmen and submitted to the district administration. Arrangement must be made by the government to bring this unorganized class of people into the mainstream by providing them alternate employment opportunities and empowering them financially, so that they do not resort to any unethical or any other means to sustain themselves.

- **Role of police administration:** Police has a major role to play in the matter of deterrence of witch-hunts. Police administration must make arrangements for collaborative periodical meetings with village elders, VDP members, village headmen, etc on a routine basis, in witch-hunt hot-spots. A strong police intelligence network in vulnerable areas will always be highly welcome, for obtaining prior information, and so that swift measures can be taken even before
the trouble starts to brew up. There is also a strong and parallel need to protect whistle-blowers. Police patrolling can also be suggested in the vulnerable areas for instilling confidence amongst the weak and downtrodden class. Community policing models like *Project Prahari* requires to be strengthened, by catering to the ground reality conditions.

- **Role of village administration:** Village Panchayats must play an active role in creating awareness amongst the people on the various myths associated with the witch-hunt menace. The village headmen and Panchayat members should be made responsible for various immoral and illegal activities in the areas falling under their jurisdiction and it should be made the lawful responsibility of this class to report such matters to the concerned authorities. Responsibilities must also be fixed upon VDP Presidents/ Secretaries as well as Panchayat President/ Secretaries. Certain administrative mechanisms can be devised wherein the village headman or village defence parties can come to the police stations for periodical meetings. This system will provide a regular update on the happenings within the remote hamlets, which are susceptible to witch-hunts. A special provision enlisted in The Rajasthan Women (Prevention & Protection from Atrocities) Bill, 2011 is noteworthy in this regard [Chapter V, Sec. 17-2: “Whenever a revenue officer like Patwari, Girdawar or Sarpanch or any other member of the Gram Panchayat or Headmaster or any teacher of the school or any medical officer comes to know that such illegal action is being contemplated...shall immediately report the matter to the nearest police station...”]. A provision in The Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill, 2016 also have...
similar provisions [Chapter IV, Sec. 20-2: “All village officers...if they have reason to believe or have the knowledge that witch-hunt is about to be, or has been committed in the area, shall forthwith report such fact to the nearest police station”]. It has transpired from case studies that the headmen of the villages just remain mute spectators to the entire sequence of events of many incidents. Taking into consideration the administrative roles and responsibilities that are being entrusted upon the village headmen/Panchayat members/VDP members, such people must invariably be brought within the ambit of the legal prosecution, if they fail to cause deterrence in the witch-hunt incidents in their respective jurisdictional areas.

6.3.1.3 Legislative and Judiciary domain

An effective legislation is the need of the hour which can provide additional teeth to the law enforcement agencies in their combat against the witch-hunt menace. Witch-hunting needs to be recognized as a cognizable offence and under no circumstance bail must be granted to the accused. At present, the police in Assam are resorting to the use of various provisions under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for dealing with the witch-hunt cases. In cases where murder took place, Section 302 of the IPC is invoked. It has been observed that the police have been making use of as many as fifty different IPC Sections all across Assam for prosecuting the offenders who were involved with the witch-hunting cases and in the surveyed cases amongst the Rabha community, thirty-two numbers of IPC Sections have been found to be invoked against the offenders. There are legal provisions in almost all of the Bills and Acts that have been enacted in India to deal with the abettors and traditional healers, who are often involved in flaring up of the witch-hunting incidents.
The powers vested in the State Government to impose collective fines on the community [The Rajasthan Women (Prevention & Protection from Atrocities) Bill, 2011, Chapter VI, Sec. 19; The Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill, 2015, Sec. 8] can be considered to be another significant mechanism for combating witch-hunting.

There is another very pertinent point which the Indian lawmakers had not included in the legislations so far enacted within the Indian Territory. A provision of social insurance scheme if can be made available amongst the identified classes of people in the different States by the government might go a long way in alleviating the misery of the witch-hunt victims. Witch-craft violence may also be included within the purview of the PWDV Act.

All witch-hunting cases, especially where murders took place, must be heard and tried in fast track and exclusive courts, so that the perpetrators of crime may be punished within a shortest possible time-frame.

6.3.2 Non-governmental measures

Various non-governmental entities can play a proactive role in the battle against witch-hunts. The various ways by which it may be achieved is outlined below -

6.3.2.1 Role of non-governmental organizations

A number of non-governmental organizations are active all over the country as well as in Assam that are engaged with the task of tackling witch-hunt incidents and victims to various extents. Different NGOs need to be more vigilant and vibrant, for becoming crusaders and active campaigners of the malaise. They may plan and execute a wide spectrum of activities, aimed mainly towards awareness creation. The NGOs have a pivotal role to perform since they being from the vicinity of the affected areas and
individuals, can gauge the sensitivities of the people and also earn their sensitivities. The NGOs may organize different public awareness/sensitization camps/workshops in different tribal societies by active involvement of traditional/opinion leaders as well as different governmental agencies. The village headmen, local teachers and paramedical staff (ASHA workers) need to be made integral parts in all awareness meetings. Through such initiatives, adequate awareness amongst the vulnerable class of people may be created not only for inculcation of scientific temper but also to make them aware about the need to avail various governmental healthcare facilities/amenities so that many common diseases and ailments may be prevented. Such programmes may also aim towards providing legal education to the victimized class, especially women, so that they can understand their rights and promptly approach the justice systems whenever any violation of their rights takes place. The people in the witch-hunt prone areas must be made aware of the legal consequences if they make themselves tangled with witch-craft related crimes. Screening of film shows amongst the illiterate tribal people on different aspects of magic, occult and witch-crafts can be another measure. Demonstration of street plays may also be made and sit-in demonstrations can also form certain other measures. Issues like intervention, campaigning, rehabilitation and reintegration of victims can be better managed by the NGOs. These organizations also need to undertake effective studies to explore the underlying causes by coordinating with other stakeholder organizations.

6.3.2.2 Role of civil society organizations

The priests, naamghariyas, imams, etc who are the respected people in the community, must play a positive role in the context of witch-hunts. This section of people carries the
pious and responsible duty to remain alert that no individual in the society misinterprets the tenets of religion and does any mischief under its umbrella. The different youth clubs, cultural groups, science clubs, etc that are active in different rural areas can also play a proactive role in creating awareness amongst the people on various facets of the witch-hunt phenomena. Women organizations can also take a proactive role in checking the witch-hunt menace through various initiatives.

6.3.2.3 Role of media

Both print and electronic (audio-visual) media have the social responsibility of becoming partners in the campaign against witch-hunting. Publication of popular articles in the vernacular medium and telecast of different programs like debates and panel discussions can send a strong message to the society. All such media output must be based upon investigative journalism. Media must play a proactive role by encouraging the victims to approach them for widely publicizing their state of affairs, if any injustice is met out to them by any individual or group in the pretext of witch-hunting. Media reports must also portray vividly the socio-economic states of the backward people and the regions, and must put forth constructive criticisms in matters pertaining to implementation of government schemes meant for the rural societies and regions.

6.3.3 Individual efforts

At the individual level also, a lot remains to be done. The victims themselves must be bold enough and must take active part in fighting against this social evil. There are instances where some survivors who have learnt so much about the law through their bitter experiences that they have taken up legal studies and thereafter became established lawyers of the society. Such victims can become active members of those organizations
who are fighting for this cause. We need hundreds of Birubalas for counteracting the situation. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, religious leaders, etc who command respect in the society, can act as change agents by moulding public opinion and mindset. Experienced doctors should be willing to serve in backward areas. Even parents must shoulder the responsibilities of educating their children for disapproving various age-long negative myths and beliefs that are prevailing in our culture and societies, and which are causing our society to march ahead.

In spite of the numerous legislations, that have been enacted from time to time, witch-hunting has never subsided in our country, and the occurrence perspectives have changed over time. There are other pretexts as well. Witch-hunting takes place when both superstition and vigilantism overlap. Women are branded as witches only to serve as a conspiracy tool for fulfillment of various self interests. It has emerged as a popular extra-judicial and extra-legal method to gain masculine dominance over women. Many witch-hunts have resulted due to property disputes. From 2005 onwards, the witch-hunts having political ramifications also did take place. In order to counteract such situations, the Government needs to act very tough. The provision of community fines as outlined in section 6.2.1.3. will act as a deterrent to some extent for all the community members who would think twice before going for holding trials in ‘kangaroo courts’ and indulging in mob violence. The police must act swiftly on receipt of any information and strict action by police can have the potential to deter the occurrence and recurrence of witch-hunt incidences. The Government ought to send a strong message to the communities endorsing and practicing witch-hunting that it would not be tolerated and should instill a sense of fear and terror amongst those who indulge in these acts of crime against women.
6.4 Future scope of the study

The present study holds enough scope and potential for extensive works in future, utilizing different parameters that could not be covered under the present work due to time and other strategic constraints.

In the present study, data pertaining to the profiles of the accused were not within the predetermined objectives. Collection of such dataset may be able to portray the psycho-analytical criminal aspects that may be inherently linked with the witch-hunt phenomenon. The gender and age attributes of the accused, their educational background, professional/employment attributes, their alcoholic affinities, etc can all be tested for getting a fair picture of the psycho-analytical criminal aspects. The economic disparities between the victims and the accused may be cross-linked with other aspects of the crimes. It has been observed that in several cases, a woman is accused and gets branded as a witch, based upon the confessions of another woman, who has suddenly fallen sick or has been suffering from illness for quite a long time. It is very rare that such branding of a woman is done by a male in the society and vice versa. In a rural society, where majority of the women are unemployed and uneducated, when supplemented with personal disliking, envy and superstition, a potential breeding ground might be created for witch-craft accusations and hunts. These aspects carrying psychological ramifications in the context of one woman vis-à-vis another woman, has the scope of further studies. In many instances it has been observed that atrocities were committed upon different victims even by people belonging to other communities. These aspects bearing ramifications of communal violence may be researched upon for advocating solutions to meet up social imbalances.
The status of the crimes may also be tested with the profile of the accused who were directly involved in the physical tortures of the victims, using various test parameters, viz. status of crimes vis-à-vis age attributes of the accused, educational background of the accused, professional/employment attributes, intoxication levels at the time of the incidents, etc.

Further research can only ascertain as to why the different incidents amongst the Rabha community have mostly occurred during the period April – May. Studies may be made to correlate this finding with the observance of certain traditional festivals by the Rabhas during this period when there is a high consumption of traditional alcohol amongst the community members. Moreover, it also needs to be ascertained whether prevalence of any dominant diseases occur amongst the rural folk during this period, the availability of medical amenities in the regions and the reluctance/eagerness of the people for availing the benefits of modern healthcare facilities. The range of disease pattern that led to the different witch-craft accusations may also be compiled location-wise, to arrive at some justified conclusions.

The social recognition and status levels of the family members of the victims may also be tested to ascertain whether the presence of influential persons in the families act as deterrence to witch-hunts or not. The personal disliking or envy aspect that has been found to be the dominant factor behind majority of the witch-hunting incidents can also be further tested in the context of the economic well-being of the victims or the victimized families. Various key economic factors like gross annual farmland productivity or income through other means, extent of movable and immovable properties, etc may be studied for drawing refined and justified conclusions on this
aspect. Other relevance aspects like recent economic uplift, education and other well-being aspects of the victim’s families in contrast with the accusers may also be tested for ascertaining whether it could have triggered the incidents or not.

### 6.5 Conclusion

Witch-hunting is not merely a dark chapter in the annals of history, but is still a happening reality. Although the core concept remained the same, the versions and editions have changed over the years. Witch-hunting is mostly restricted to the poor and illiterate section of the rural tribal communities. But the fact that the phenomenon has been observed amongst different non-tribal communities is a matter of concern. Another matter of concern is about the persistence of beliefs amongst a few literate class of our society. Even during the period outside the purview of the present research, a number of witch-hunt cases might have taken place in Assam in general and amongst the Rabha community in particular, but the cases that have been reported in this work have come to light not only because of NGO activism and media coverage, but also that people might have become more assertive and aware about their rights, for which the victims come forward to report about the injustice meted out to them. Instances where the victims are threatened, mentally harassed, fines imposed and forced to leave their native villages, rarely comes to light. Thus, witch-hunts have been appropriately compared with the proverbial tip of the iceberg, and the propensity of the incidents and victims might be much more than it is actually thought.

It is indeed ironical that, the tribal segment of people who are mostly a God-fearing lot, don’t even repent after committing the serious witch-hunt crimes. It is also ironical that several victims themselves believe in the existence of witches. Whatever
may be the reason or circumstance, the bottom-line remains that a woman’s right to live with dignity is still not recognized by the society at large. Our twenty-first century civilization is marked by glittering cities and towns, dotted with swanky malls and apartments and barely within a radius of hundred kilometers or so, innocent women are silently leading lives of hopelessness and despair, being tortured mercilessly, banished from their villages and forced to live away from their near and dear ones. Unless and until people realizes the role of women in the civilized society, mere framing and implementation of laws, in whatever harsher way it might be, witch-hunts will continue to make the lives of a section of innocent women of our society miserable. To counteract this situation, the energy of the community needs to be channelized for meaningful and creative pursuits. Most importantly, the thought process of the educated ones has to change. For achieving this, synergetic partnership between civil societies, medical and educational bodies, professionals, the police and civil administration and policy makers is a must to root out the problem. It also needs to be remembered that witch-craft and magic cannot be totally eradicated from any society where it exists. There will always be some individuals or groups of individuals who would nurture and propagate these beliefs. Hence, the entire gamut of the strategy that needs to be adopted is about controlling the ramifications of such beliefs and setting the limits of social approval or disapproval.

Witch-hunting itself is a gross violation of human rights when considered in the context of the wide range of human rights legal instruments. It tends to choke human rights, curtails human developments and undermines all four core values viz. Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity adopted in the Preambular vision. The solution to this burning problem cannot be simply worked out in the context of lack of education,
appropriate legal apparatus and lack of health services alone. Such measures are capable of creating only insignificant ripples, incapable of shaking off the age-old beliefs and perceptions that had been consolidated over centuries and generations. It is much more than that. The entire gamut of the issue needs to be studied in socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-psychological and even socio-political contexts. Social changes, change in religious views, liberal outlook brought about through the education system, economic well-being and the absence of superstitious fear, all have their individual potentialities to bring about a paradigm shift to the phenomenon in general.

As far as the Rabha community is concerned, it may be fairly well concluded that the ground situation till now is still outside the red alarming zone, but the matter is indeed of prime concern, which needs focused attention as well as action. The various parameters that provide a fertile breeding ground for witch-hunting needs to be understood in the context of ground realities, so that it can be effectively tackled with a scientific and focused approach, instead of dealing it with a myopic vision.