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## Witchcraft, Totemism, Religion and the question of Gender amongst the Bodo Community of Assam

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**Abstract:** *The Bodo Community of Assam is a community whose members is traditionally a nature worshipper and deeply rooted to totemic ideas and beliefs. This fact led to attribution of their human sentiments and superhuman powers to natural objects. Bathou, the traditional and the original religion of the Bodos, is a totemistic religion where the Sijou plant is worshipped as God. The Bodos have a strong belief in supernatural Powers. The belief in the magi co religious practice of witchcraft has been present in human society since times immemorial and is prevalent in many cultures and society today. But, one thing common in most cultures and societies is that witchcraft is seen as something evil and harmful which is also a common ideology of most of the religious beliefs. Thus, the practice of persecuting witches is as old as witchcraft itself. As its practice is considered harmful to the society, it is believed that the witch can bring destruction, harm, illness and diseases to people and so, in Bodo Society the suspected person is hunted down, driven out of villages, socially excluded and in some cases killed on the alleged charge of practicing 'witchcraft' and being 'witch'. Witchcraft is not free from the question of gender. The word 'witch' refers to 'woman having evil power' and on the other hand, the word 'wizard' is used for men having special powers, which do not have a negative connotation as the word 'witch'. Taking for granted the traditional and religious belief in witchcraft, now-a-days people find it easy to brand anyone as 'witch' by spreading constructed evidence among the folks. The condition of the victimized person also reveals their marginalized status and tells us about an inherent power-structure and power-politics at work which leads to a social problem, 'witch-hunting'. The paper highlights on some aspects of religion and gender issues in witchcraft practices among the Bodos of Assam, analyzed from the field work done in Kokrajhar and Udalguri district of Assam by using unstructured interview method and observation method.*

**Keywords:** *Totemism, Witchcraft, Religion, Gender and witch-hunting*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'witchcraft' has evolved and changed into different forms over the years and in different cultural contexts. The belief in witch-craft, carried over from generation to generation continues to hold sway over the minds of people in this modern age of science and technology.

A 'witch' is simply understood as someone who possesses magical powers and practices sorcery, and its practice itself is called 'witchcraft'. Witchcraft involves the tapping of supernatural powers through prayers, petitions and rituals. Witches are believed to possess special spirit of animals that perform services for the black cats, newts and snakes. They are said to use plants, herbs, hairs, pieces of cloth, nails, spit and indulge in destructive activities. They are believed to possess powers that can cure people of their illness, who can also use these powers to harm others. They are reputed to frequently visit the burial places and often prepare their concoction from the ashes of the dead. They are regarded as harmful for the society, so, in most cases they are hunted down, socially excluded, displaced, severely punished or killed which is popularly known as witch-hunting.

In fact, it was legally sanctioned in countries like France, Ireland, Norway, Russia, Netherlands and Switzerland from the 1300s and legal witch-hunting continued in Europe till the eighteenth century (Burns, 1959: xxi). After the enlightenment period, witch-hunting has been regarded as an illegal accusation and violation of human rights but it is still practiced in the current 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the developing countries like India, South Africa and other underdeveloped countries.

In India, though not legally permitted today, finding out witches is an established process for most of the villages or tribes who still has this practice. In contemporary period, the practice of witch-hunting is more prominent mostly among the people living in rural areas. Evidences has been made clear by the National Crime Record Bureau that, in

India, each year there is about 200 women killed as witches in rural India. During the year 2000-2001, there were 253 cases of witch-hunting, and in between 2008-2012, more than 768 women have been murdered for allegedly practicing witchcraft. The report consist of the registered witch-hunting cases in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orrisa, Rajasthan and West Bengal. Here, middle aged and elderly single women in tribal as well as non-tribal women are orchestrated as witches and they suffer from social stigma, displacement, economic boycott, torture and murder. This is prominent mostly among the tribal living in rural areas. (Chakraborty, 2013:17)

The traditional belief that the person, who practices witchcraft, causes harm to his or her community through abuse of magical power has been existed around for millennia. This social evil or superstition has raised its ugly head in Assam following recent incidents of killing of innocent people in the name of witch hunting. The lack of scientific understanding results in loss of life of a large number of innocent people and damage of properties. The villagers, as well as a section of educated people, the folk in contemporary times elevated witch killings (witch-hunting) to the status of an 'art' and their slogan is that 'Witches should be massacred'.

Taking for granted the traditional and religious belief in witchcraft, some powerful people of the village find it easy to brand anyone as 'witch' by spreading constructed evidence among the folks. The condition of the victimized person also reveals their marginalized status and tells us about an inherent power-structure and power-politics at work which leads to such social problem as witch-hunting.

In Assam, the practice of witch-hunting is mostly prevalent among the Adivasis, the Bodos, the Mishings and the Rabhas living in districts like rural Kamrup, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Karbi Anglong. The present study is based on the Bodos living in Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts of Assam which are taken as field area. Three Villages which are affected by the social tensions of witchcraft and incidence of witch-hunting cases have been Chosen for collection of field data.

## **2. OBJECTIVE**

The study aims at understanding the context of identifying 'witches' by relating to the traditional beliefs and religion of Bodos and to explore the connection between witchcraft and gender.

## **3. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY**

Secondary data has been collected from the existing books on witchcraft and witch-hunting, besides resources like newspapers, magazines, articles and documentaries of related subject matter has been used for the study. Three Villages in Kokrajhar and Udalguri which are affected by the social tensions of witchcraft and incidence of witch-hunting cases have been Chosen for collection of field data. These primary data has been collected by using unstructured interview method and participant observation method.

As methodologies, the present study has been guided through the idea or theory of discourse and power relations by a French philosopher, historian of ideas, social theorist, philologist and literary critic, Michel Foucault.

## **4. THE BODOS**

The word 'Bodo' denotes both the language and the community and is pronounced with a high tone on the second syllable. The Bodos (pronounced Bo-ros) represent one of the largest of the 18 ethnic sub-groups within the Kachari group, first classified in the 19th century. The Bodos have settled in most areas of North-East India and in some parts of Nepal. The Bodos are an ethnic and linguistic community and early settlers of Assam in the North-East region of India. In features and general appearance, the Bodos are very close to the Mongolian races, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race. The Bodos are recognized as a plains tribe in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Udalguri and Kokrajhar are considered as the nerve centers of the Bodo area in Assam.

The culture of the Bodo people of Assam in India is influenced by the land where they currently live in. For a long time, Bodos have been farmers, with a strong tradition of fishing; rearing poultry, piggery, silkworm; rice and jute cultivation; and betel nut plantation. The Bodos also cultivate mustard and corn. They make their own traditional

attire. Rice is the staple of the Bodos and is often accompanied by a non vegetarian dish such as fish, chicken or pork. Traditionally Bodos are non-vegetarians.

## **5. TOTEMISM AND RELIGION**

Bodo society is based on totemistic clannish division. They have beliefs and faiths regarding certain objects of nature which they accept their own. Thus we find clannish division of Bodo society like Mosahary (the tiger folk), here, 'mosa' means tiger and 'hary' means 'folk'. Similarly, Owary (bamboo folk), Swargiary (the heaven folk), Boisomuthiary (Earth folk), Goyari (areca nut folk), Hajoary (hill folk), etc. based on their totem. So, common last names (surname) of the Bodos are Owary, Swargiary, Brahma, Boro, Mohilary, Basumatary, Dwimary, Goyary, Khakhlary, Mosahary, Narzary, Iswary, Chamframary, Hajowary and so on which are always related to natural objects. (Brahma, 2011)

Traditionally, the Bodos were followers of the Bathou Religion. However, through the ages, a large number of Bodos have converted into other institutionised religions of the world like Hinduism, Christianity and Islam etc. In recent decades, they have been influenced by social reforms under Brahma Dharma, Assamese Sarania, Islam and the spread of Christianity. Today, there are people who follow Bathou, and a sizeable number of followers of Christianity and followers of Brahma Samaj.

The Bathou religion incorporates rites, rituals, social norms, ethics and philosophy of the Bodos. P.C. Bhattacharjee opined that the supreme God of the Bodos, 'Bathoubrai' also known as Sibrai (Siva in Hindu) created the Universe with the help of his wife Sibru. The *siju* tree (Euphorbia splendens) is taken as the symbol or created as an emblem of supreme god and the altar. The religion 'Bathou' is based on the 'philosophy of five' or 'the principle of five'. In the Bodo language 'Ba' means five and 'thou' means deep. Their philosophy is- "Sijoua siriba, Bathoua bandoba," which means Sijou tree has five spines and Bathou has five ties. Five is a significant number in the Bathou religion which denotes the five spiritual elements viz.- Ong, Hring, Khling, Fwt and Che, they are - soil, air, water, fire and sky. Bathou always believes in five principles. They believe that, though Bathou the creator is not visible, He can be realised by his five elements or virtues. Those five elements of earth and sky have been tied into five bond unions or principles. (Brahma 2006:15)

A clean surface near home or courtyard is considered as an ideal place for worship where a 'sijou' is planted. Usually, a pair of arecanut called 'goi' and betel leaf called 'pathwi' is used as offering there. On some occasion, worship offering could include rice, milk, and sugar.

Kherai, the biggest festival of the Bodos represents the theosophical, ethical and religious perspective of their life. It is observed by praying to 'Obonglaori' (Almighty) for the well being of the villagers and society as a whole. Though they worship other eighteen gods or goddesses or 'Modai Daodai', their belief mainly centers around the supreme being - Almighty 'Siuborai' or 'Bathou borai'. During the Kherai festival, the Ojha (traditional healer and spiritual leader) plays the primary role of chanting mantras for praying to god and forwarding with necessary instructions for the purposes. *Douri* assists him in divinity and ritual activities. *Doudioni* is not only a dancing oracle but she also turns into another form of divinity who advices and forwards with instruction to the villagers with her power of foretelling. All of them must have to perform certain discipline concerning to sacred and purity during Kherai Puja. (Brahma, 2011)

## **6. STATUS OF BODO WOMEN**

The Bodo society is patriarchal. According to Anil Boro, "The domestic life of the Bodos follows the patriarchal family pattern. The male member of the family is the head of the family and the owner of the family but of course the female members of the family are never kept under suppression and excessive male domination" (2001:9)

However, Bodo women do have the liberty to work. The household works like cooking, maintaining cleanliness in the house, providing food for each and every member of the family and so on are done by the women. Moreover, extra work for additional income such as rearing of pigs, hens, goat and ducks is done by women, and the kitchen-garden owned by her in the house is often used as she wishes. So, the division of works between husband and housewife in a Bodo family is based on the necessity and physical capability to support family life.

The 'Dongkha Haba' (*Dong* means possess, *kha* means ever or already) is a traditional widow remarriage system which has the significance of ensuring dignity and sanctity of the Bodo women. There is no bar in getting married with a widow. Even a widower or unmarried youth can enter in to such a marriage through mutual understanding of guardians concerned and the villagers. Bodo women has right to participate in the decision making of village council or 'Gamini Affat'. 'Ishing' (a room of mother house with kitchen called 'Noma No' with an alter of 'Bathou Borai' and 'Mainao'), and 'Bakhri' or granary are exclusively under the care and control of Bodo women. (Brahma, 2011)

## **7. WITCHCRAFT AND RELIGION**

It is generally seen that belief in the existence of supernatural powers is very often corollary to a belief in religion. One takes recourse to magic when religion fails to produce desired results. Unpredictable natural events, inadequate health facilities and calamitous situations lead to the belief in supernatural forces. The control of supernatural forces by means of compulsive formulae is known as magic.

Magic is practiced and it cannot be separated fully from the worship of Gods. While the gods are moved by prayer, and the gods are petitioned for general wellbeing, magic is always used with reference to specific problems. Magic is an integral part of the tribal religion and its importance is equally noteworthy in the case of Bodo traditional religion. The chants of the Deuris, the oracles of the Doudini, and the different performative feats during the religious Festivals particularly Kherai as mentioned above are important aspects of the ritual.

It is important to note that in the cultural milieu of Assam, the traditional belief in witchcraft is prevalent in many communities. According to Brahma, in most tribal communities of Assam, religion and magic are often treated together and regarded as complementary to each other (Brahma, 1992:145). For instance, in the Bodo community of Assam, *dayna* or a 'witch' is believed to possess special spirit of animals that perform services for them. They are thereby considered harmful to the society as it is believed that they can bring harm, illness and diseases to people. The suspected person is hunted down, physically tortured, driven out of villages, socially excluded and in some cases even killed on the alleged charge of being 'witches' and practicing 'witchcraft'.

New forms of wealth and inequality, rapid growth of individualism and enmity increased social tensions among the Community. These are explicable in terms of occult power of witchcraft.

Montague Summers argues that "Witchcraft was inextricably mixed with politics". The *Malleus Maleficarum*, published in 1484 by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, two of the inquisition's foremost prosecutors and both Dominican monks, pieces together a patchwork of the many political, religious, and personal anxieties associated with the construction of the witch in the late fifteenth century. (Fischlin, 1996: 1).

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

When we look back to the history of witch-hunting in the Western Countries, it is easy to understand that during the 1560s-1600s, The French Wars of Religion between Protestants and Roman Catholics divide France and encourage witch-hunting (Pavlac, 2009:XV). Prior to the process of Christianization, metaphysical powers were understood as ambiguous terms. With the spread of Zionism, however, 'good' and 'evil' were increasingly constructed in binary opposition. And witchcraft came to be identified only with the 'evil' side of this polarity. Emic evidence such as dreams, divination, mysterious events and confessions could be sufficient for witchcraft accusations even in situations where no social tensions were present. (Niehaus, 2001)

## **8. DISCOURSE AND POWER RELATION**

Witch-hunting attracts more attention than the craft itself. The traditional belief on witchcraft is most common among poor rural communities with little access to education and health services, and so, having more and longstanding practice of witch-hunting. Among the Bodo Community, when an individual gets sick or harm befalls the community, the blame falls not upon a virus or crop disease, but upon an alleged witch. The Ojha, who works as a local/village medicine man plays a crucial role in this context. Witch-hunting cases most often reveal that the marginalization of the alleged witches start with the discourse of the Ojah's pointing out of the work of witch. The alleged witches are blamed and the accusation process takes its road.

The discourse of the victim of witch-hunting is powerless compared to the group of people in the community who stands against her, as said by Foucault that individual is powerless compared to institutions, groups or the state.

Witch-hunting has a high incidence among certain tribes like the Bodos and Adivasis of Assam. Illiteracy, poverty and lack of access to health-care are definitely contributing towards perpetuating the scourge. The situation is extremely disquieting- a grim reminder as it is to the fact that the even in the millennium when scientific knowledge is breaking new grounds, many of our societies have not been able to put their dark-primitive days behind, with ignorance and superstition throttling rational thinking and fuelling mass frenzy. In this backdrop, the recent gruesome killings of some innocent men and women, mostly elderly married couple, on the alleged charge of being 'witches' and practising 'witchcraft' thereby inducing harm, disease, illness to some co-inhabitants in certain Bodoland and Adivasi areas of Assam are not only diabolic but inhuman too.

Among the Bodo community, the belief in witch-craft first originated due to polygamy. The conflicts among co-wives and their resentment led to the intensity to harm others out of envy, hate, selfishness, power and wrath.

In the article, *The Idea of 'Evil' among the Bodos: Text and Context*, Anjali Daimary discusses about the Bodo-Adivasi practice of witch-hunting and the resultant murder of poor women among them. According to her, it is believed that remedy of a disease caused by an evil spirit or black magic can be cured only by the *ojha* (medicine man) or *Kaviraj* (shaman) who has the power to drive away the evil spirit. It is a belief that a disease caused by black magic can only be countered or cured by counter-magic. The *dayna* (witch) and the *ojha* are, therefore, constitutive of the everyday life, health, sickness, cure and the culture of indigenous medicinal knowledge of the Bodos. *Dayna* is seen as the propitiator of that evil. The majority of the Bodos believe that one requires an *ojha* to identify a *dayna*, but the irony is that, as case studies reveal, the *kaviraj* is no different from *dayna* and often uses his privileged position as the medicine man to marginalize and subordinate the *dayna*, associating her with all that is evil. This establishes a hierarchy of actors that functions in accordance with the contexts of need and belief in Bodo society. Also, Daimari says that, it would not be overstatement to say that evil arises from a hierarchical social order, and when the order fails to deliver, it attempts to sustain its legitimacy by those practices that have evil effect. Daimari's exploration into the conflict between *dayna* and *ojha* and the marginalization of the former by the latter brings out this not-so-easily understandable mechanism of authority and legitimation within Bodo social hierarchy (Daimary, 2012).

## 9. GENDER AND MARGINALIZATION

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (a medieval treatise on witches) stated, "All witchcraft arises from lust, which in women is insatiable." Witches' lust was supposedly for the devil, echoing the story of Eve and it was believed that the devil could easily seduce women to join him. This explained why most of the accused witches were female.

In the book "*Counterfeiting God*": *James VI (I) and the Politics of Demonologie*, Fischlin Daniel says that the history of witchcraft is the history, in part, of male anxieties about their own empowerment, sexual or otherwise. But it is also the history of women's oppression as gendered political subjects constructed by the patriarchy and as subjects who posed in their demonized collectivity particular threats to male empowerment. There is a substantial, though often unrecognized connection, between sexual empowerment and political empowerment and, as Deborah Willis has noted, "To varying degrees and with varying emphases, elite discourse about the witch was concerned with promoting a new religious orthodoxy and maintaining political order and social hierarchy". In most of the incidents or cases, accuses are made because it is believed that, the witch gains subversive power not only through her ability to dismember but also through her control over the choice of the male member. She also has the power of critique, her comment regarding the parish priest being an obvious anti-clerical dig at the widespread corruption of the clergy and thus an attack on a form of religious hierarch (Fischlin, 1996). The similar kind of marginalization of the sub-ordinate section of the society is seen in the Bodo Society.

In rural Assam the *ojha*, a traditional medicine man also known as the *kabiraj*, is revered for his supposed skills at countering black magic. According to traditional folklore, the medicine man learns his skills. Witches, however, are said to be born with their powers. This is a convenient distinction in what are typically patriarchal communities. It is rare to find a female *ojha*. "When a woman practices [traditional medicine] it's considered to be something evil," (Daimary, 2012)

Denial of sexual favour, for instance, can also be a strong motivating factor behind witch-hunts. Tradition, thus, becomes a shield and justification for violence against women. While one section of the community is absolutely convinced that witch-hunting is “good”, there is another section that uses this tradition for their own benefit. However, it remains a fact that generally everyone does believe in the power of witchcraft. Witch-hunting is a powerful emotion that can drive a crowd to a state of mass frenzy. In most cases, the prevailing atmosphere after a “successful” witch-hunt is one of joyous triumph over evil. There is no doubt in the minds of the believers that the “hunt” is necessary to wipe out evil. (Nath, 2014)

Diane Purkiss in her book, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representations*, examines the way early modern villagers, and especially women, themselves fashioned stories about the figure of the witch, stories which helped to define their identities. She argues that the witch is not solely or simply the creation of patriarchy, but that woman also invested heavily in the figure as a fantasy which allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires, centering on the question of motherhood and children. Purkiss looks at the presentation of the witch on the early modern stage. She examines the way in which these village stories were taken up and reshaped by early modern dramatists, who turned them into stage spectaculars and interpretative challenges leading to moral homilies; the effect was to give the witch public meaning in defining the place of the stage and the notion of good order in the political and social realms. She also examines the way the women accused of witchcraft used the opportunity of supernatural agency and confession to shape an identity for themselves which represented a compromise between their understanding of the world and the categories developed by more educated people (Purkiss, 1996). Witch-hunting practices have exploited women and their empowerment. Women are branded as witch very easily and the beliefs of witchcraft are very fast spread among the women folks themselves through gossips and groupings. So, the issue of witch-hunting seems to be a gendered, moreover a feminist issue.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

There is a deeply rooted traditional belief on witchcraft at works that are connected to witch-hunting practice among the Bodos. In reality, the witch hunter wishes to punish the victim for a perceived transgression, such as refusing sexual advances, enmity, property dispute or challenging an authority figure. But by taking the advantage of the traditional and strong belief on witchcraft, the hunters brand someone as witch and the rest are handed over to the villagers and they spread constructed evidences and narratives. The villagers are not aware of the selfish motive of the hunters that always stays behind the screen. Almost all the narratives about the witch remain unquestioned because the villagers regard all of them as true. P O Bodding (1986) mentioned, “There is no genuine Santal who does not believe in witches” (Sinha 2007: 1673). This statement is equally applicable for the Bodos of Assam. The Bodos' belief system relating to totemism and religion shows that the belief in witchcraft is a deep-rooted structure existing since from times immemorial. But in this world when religion is regarded as irrational and non-scientific, how can one regard witchcraft as scientific? Ignorance of all this fact on the other hand encourage the Bodos to believe in the practice of witchcraft. Taking advantage of this, some people having personal motive makes an instrumental use of their belief system. As a result, it is seen that witch-hunting is like a kind of legitimized practice among the community where it exists. In relation to this, the question of gender gets place in the issue of witch-hunting. If we look historically, it is found that women have been most targeted, marginalized and victimized in the cases of witch-hunting. But we cannot conclude here that women are not involved in the process of witch-hunting. Infact, they play a role of networking in the form of gossiping and spreading rumour among the folks. This in a way contributes to witchcraft accusations and practice of witch-hunting.

The members of the whole village or community are in one way or the other involved in the accusation of the victims of witch-hunting. It is not only the male section of the society who accused the ‘witch’ for practicing witchcraft. It is not more about marginalization, domination or discrimination of women by men but rather more about the deep and strong belief on witchcraft, which both men and women spread while in interaction with the people not necessarily confined to the members of their own village. Subjectivities from different people get connected to each others’ as a result of which the evidences, either real or constructed become expanded and popular narratives among the people. The spread of superstition occurs due to lack of information among the folks who mostly are illiterate and finds hard to adjust with the changing aspects of science and technologies.

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