# THE AFTER EFFECTS OF WITCH-HUNTING: TRAUMA, STRUGGLE AND REVOLUTION

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# THE AFTER EFFECTS OF WITCH-HUNTING: TRAUMA, STRUGGLE AND REVOLUTION

## INTRODUCTION

'This process will never come to an end. For as long as you make sure that the villagers keep believing in Daina-Daini, you don't need any other way to fool them to get your work done,' said Lakhyamati Daimary, a survivor of witch hunting from the Udalgudi district of Assam. Daina-Daini, in the Bodo language, means a witch. Belief in Daina-Daini is predominant in the region that Lakhyamati comes from. She was accused of practising witchcraft in 2014 by her brother-in-law, who also happened to be her neighbour. Her house was destroyed and burnt down by the villagers, her family was attacked, and her children were left with severe injuries. Lakhyamati was forced to eat human excreta as a part of community punishment. Eventually, her family was ostracized from the village the following year.

The quote mentioned above is an extract from an extended interview with one of the survivors. And it is merely a peek at the

horrific outcomes of witch hunting and what follows in the aftermath, affecting both the survivor and the family.

The narratives of the women that I interviewed might have differed from one person to another, but they were mostly left with tales of trauma and struggle. And we need to remind ourselves here that the experience of trauma and what an individual thinks about a 'revolution' are subjective. And somewhere between the unspoken bits in their controlled narratives, the survivors of witch hunting that I met during my fieldwork gave me a clearer idea of what the consequences of such a traumatic experience is. My attempt in this paper is to articulate the experiences of these women, and let the others know what happens to a 'witch' when she is not killed.

I grew up in a small town in Lower Assam, where, like every other place, formal education and rationality are believed to go hand in hand. However, terms like Daini or Deo dhora, which roughly translate to a situation where a person has acquired supernatural and evil powers, are still an active part of our vocabulary. Certain beliefs have existed across all the communities, irrespective of economic and educational disparities. And although the urban population is believed to practise neither witchcraft nor witch hunting, the consensus amongst the populace has not been strong enough even today to criticize this practice or curb it. This collective silence has rather made us complicit in enabling it.

Several months ago, when I sent a proposal for a research grant funded by the Zubaan Sasakawa Peace Project, I mentioned that I wanted to write about the struggles and the aftermath of these incidents, as well as the toll that such they take on the survivors' mental health. But I was unfamiliar with the nuances of the issue, including the kind of struggle the women had to go through after they were branded witches.

My primary focus during the fieldwork was the BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area Districts) areas and Goalpara district – the only non-BTAD area which is largely populated by the Bodos, Rabhas, Koch Rajbangshis and a very small percentage of Adivasis. The sole reason behind conducting the fieldwork in these areas was that the previous

records of such instances were found to have been comparatively more frequent here. And although the fieldwork was conducted across different communities in these areas, the common feature in almost all the cases was the role that the local healer or the Bej/Oja played in locating the Devil or the Witch. Given the fact that they have been natural healers and traditional doctors, they have managed to secure a position for themselves in primarily the rural regions of Assam. The Oja or Bej plays a very crucial role in instigating people against the victims. I also came across instances where one Bej is found to counter the accusations of witchcraft by another Bej.

A Bej or Oja is mostly an outsider, mostly from a nearby village, and is paid a lump sum either by the village headman or the other villagers who want the Witch to be located. It should also be mentioned here that local healers who instigate most of these witch hunts choose the victims at random and mostly choose women – daily wage labourers, widowed or old women. But very interestingly, an Oja or Bej is not restricted to any gender. So, despite witch hunting having snowballed into a gendered crime with an overwhelming number of women being its victim, the ones who accuse these women of being witches also include other women - whether it is the villagers, or, at times, a local healer (Bej/Oja) herself.

I started with a blank slate, and my starting point for each district was visiting the police station or a referred outpost and rummaging through the case files for the last several years. While doing so, I could understand how the process of lodging a complaint was an intimidating one because of an overwhelming male presence at these police stations. For a complainant whose complaints would not only include accusations of practising witchcraft, but also public humiliation, ostracization, rape and death threats, it didn't provide a suitable environment that would necessarily aid the vulnerability of the victim.

The ruling of July 2018 turned the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention) Bill into an Act, and thereafter witch-hunting was considered a cognizable, non-bailable and non-

compoundable offence. Although branding someone a witch in Assam could land the person in jail for seven years, the perpetrators in almost all the cases that I covered were acquitted after a statutory period in jail, and most of them had been on the run ever since. I decided not to get into the legalities of the issue and stick only to the personal aspects, but it was difficult to ignore the fact that the absence of the role of the police in arresting the perpetrators and putting them in prison was completely missing from the scenario. It took me several extra minutes to explain to each survivor the new Act that had been passed, and I always got a few minutes of silence from the police when I asked them about the new ruling.

I met eight women from the three districts of Goalpara, Udalguri and Kokrajhar. The district of Kokrajhar alone had a record of 20 cases of witch hunting being recorded since 2011, and although there were noticeable similarities in some cases, some had had much more brutal and long-lasting effects. As time passed and my fieldwork progressed, my idea started encompassing more variations, and I tried to categorize the issues instead of taking up each case individually. While proceeding with my work, I was reminded of a very crucial aspect, something that I had read a long time ago, written by Annie Finch – a poet, writer and feminist. In an article published by Huffpost titled 'Remembrance for the Witches', she had very aptly commented that most of those who were accused of witchcraft were women, and whether we called it a simple sexist domination, or called them scapegoats in a society that was plagued with a crisis in modern masculinity and economic injustice, the torture that was inflicted on those who were accused of practicing witchcraft was not only a horrific violation of human rights but a violation of religious freedom as well.

The terminologies 'witchcraft' and 'witch hunt' began getting intertwined in the medieval era. If the practice of the former can be traced to some of the earliest sources, the first record of a witch hunt trial comes only from 1324 in Coventry, United Kingdom. And although it may not be as prevalent as it once was in certain parts of the world, it continues at 'full tilt' in Africa, Asia and South America.

The only reason why I wrote this paper on a 'she,' is because although the phenomenon of witch hunting has existed in this region for a long time, it is primarily women who have been accused of practising witchcraft. The considerably small figure of men getting victimized cannot be denied either, but the data that has been collected over several years through various sources has made it clear that the idea of 'witch' or 'witchcraft' is mostly associated with women. It has been termed a 'gendered crime' which further leads to more atrocities against them, including horrific outcomes like rape.

The belief that one person can harm another person, or has the potential to harm an entire village through acquiring supernatural powers is where the very crux of witch-hunting lies. Due to the absence of regional media, until very recently this phenomenon did not make it to mainstream reports, and the practice continued with impunity. But with the rapid rise and influence of print and broadcast media, it is now known that witch-hunting is still widely practiced in various pockets of the state. Through the various stories that finally began coming out, the gendered aspect of the crime could not be ignored as well. Even though around 2,000 people have died in the last 15 years due to witch-hunting, as per the records submitted by various sources to the media, the women who have survived the ordeal are made to face even worse situations. The community punishments, as has been mentioned previously, include torture, eating human excreta, being paraded naked and often being ostracized by society.

As much as superstition is believed to be one of the prime reasons for witch hunting for a very long time, recent data shows that property feuds in the guise of such beliefs eventually turn out to be the crux of the matter. Personal feuds and rivalry fuelled by property ownership are primarily the reasons why women, some of them widowed, are targeted by their immediate family members, often with the non-interference of the rest of the community. The reasons for the non-interference of the rest of the community vary. On the one hand, traditional beliefs cemented in their minds do not allow them to get involved in a process associated with a potential evil spirit. On

the other hand, the community does not want to get its hands dirty by making rounds of police stations and the courthouse if at all a complaint is lodged by either the instigator or the accused. A well laid analysis of the whole process has already been done by the Northeast Network (by J. Chakraborthy and A. Borah).

According to government data, around 77 people (with a large number of them being women) were killed in Assam in 2010-15 after being labelled witches. The state government issued an order to rehabilitate the victims, with each being given Rs 3-5 lakh as compensation; but despite everything, as per the records, in 2017, 12 people were killed in the name of witch hunting. It is also very important to keep in mind that most of the incidents do not make it to official records. Hence, keeping the ground realities in mind, this number could be much higher

## THE PRIME INSTIGATOR

The assumption I went with was that most of these places would be devoid of formal education and healthcare facilities, and the Bez/Oja/healer took advantage of such a situation and accused the most vulnerable members of society of practising witchcraft. This assumption did not turn out to be totally untrue, but I found that the victims or survivors were not necessarily the most vulnerable members of the community. Nor were the villagers in some cases unaware of such practices being superstitious, further letting the Bej or Oja take advantage of their naivety.

In 2014, in Sapkhaiti village in Udalguri district, the Basumatary family began facing accusations of practising witchcraft by their relatives as well as the rest of the village.

When I went to meet them at the address mentioned in the FIR, all I found was a deserted residence and a few neighbours gazing from across the road. On being asked about the family, they gave me

the address of a Hemi Basumatary's office, who is now an engineer in the Department of Public Health. I found Hemi in her office, and she introduced herself as the eldest daughter of Sonamani Basumatary, who was accused of practising witchcraft by the villagers. In the interview that followed, she detailed the aftermath of the ordeal for me.

This case received massive coverage in the regional media, and as much as it served the purpose of making people aware of such practices, it had its drawbacks as well. The news spread to the town of Udalguri as well, where Hemi lives with her 4-year-old daughter. Even something as simple as buying a plot of land became an excruciating task for her, as not many people were ready to sell their land to the daughter of a woman who was accused of witchcraft. The fear of being associated with a witch or her family is still so deeply ingrained and so prevalent that despite the fact that she was looking for a house in a relatively modern and progressive area, her association with witchcraft was too much for anyone to bear.

'I was not allowed to take part in the 'trial' as I was married off several years ago, and they considered me an outsider,' said Hemi, who had to watch a public trial of her family from afar.

On the night of 28 September, 2014, Sonamoni Basumatary along with her husband and two sons were gheraoed by the entire village on the campus of the village church.

Inside the church, Sonamani, who was otherwise known as the Principal's wife, was accused of practicing witchcraft by her brother-in-law's family. The brother-in-law's daughter, who was suffering from dengue, had a dream that her aunt was practicing witchcraft, and she held Sonamani responsible for her current ill health. With this accusation started the ordeal of the Basumatary family. No one in the village questioned the legitimacy of the dream; and based on these grounds as the primary reason, the family was asked to leave the village immediately, or else they would be killed one by one.

'I had lived in this village all my life, and I had to leave the place within the next two hours. I was asked to never come back,' sighed Prafulla Basumatary, the former Principal of Rowta College.

There was no apparent Bej or Oja who instigated the events in this case. But despite being one of the most widely covered cases by the media, no arrests amongst the villagers were made by the police either. 'We believe in forgiving. We have forgiven them in spite of the fact that they took everything from us, and God had better plans for them,' said Sonamoni's husband when I asked the family about why they never fought against the villagers for not being arrested.

The sexagenarian Sonamoni didn't talk much and let her husband tell me the entire tale. She would, however, look at me and smile from time to time. Before I could ask her anything, she looked at me again and said, 'I know I never did any wrong to anyone, and I am not afraid of anyone either. They can call me whatever they want. All I regret is the pain that my family had to go through because of all this.'

### *Settling down with unsettling memories*

It took me several hours to find the villages where the survivors currently lived. Many of the families never dared to go back to their villages, as there was no one to protect them from any untoward incidents in the future. Although several assurances were given to the families by the police and the organizations who work for the survivors, the trauma and fear of the incidents made it difficult for the families to go back to the place where an entire village once came to attack them. This was apparent in the case of the Basumatary family which had to settle in a faraway place at Bhairabkunda after they were asked to leave their village overnight. A retired Principal along with his wife had to not only start from scratch, but they also remain stressed by the fact that the property they left behind in the village of Sapkhaiti is occupied by the same family members who accused them of practising witchcraft.

But very often the decision to move and settle in a new place takes a financial toll on the families, and the burden of debt increases manifold for the ones who are mere wage labourers.

On March 24, 2017, in Seetarpara Gaon in Kokrajhar, Raja Soren's mother Komila Murmur was dragged out of her house in the middle of the night and axed to death by five village men. She was dragged through a rice field, and her body was buried in the same field. It took the police nine days to find her body. When I went to village Balajan, I got to know that Raja and his wife Jeta had migrated to another village, and no one knew about their whereabouts. The Inspector in Charge of the Balajan Outpost told me that Raja came to the police station if he was required to cooperate during the course of the investigation, and now that the all the five accused men have been acquitted after keeping them in judicial custody, even the police station couldn't tell me where the late Komila's son and daughter-in-law had migrated.

There is clearly a pattern where the family not only settles in another village, but some of them disappear into thin air without leaving any trail, and some purposely do not appear under the radar. Raja and Jeta were daily wage labourers in village Balajan, and they did not have any other property apart from the home that they were living in. They never went back to sell it off, nor did they contact the police after the five men were acquitted.

The other clear pattern is abandoned properties, including land and cattle, which the family never dares to claim ownership of. The role of the police is almost next to nothing in this process of struggle or follow up status of the accused families. And since the accusations are made by either relatives or fellow village men, it is not very difficult to assume why the incident took place or what must have happened to such abandoned properties.

In another incident, when I went to find Sumitra Gaur in village Amlaiguri in Udalguri, I was directed to the village of Senapani, by her relatives who are currently looking after the property she and her family left behind. It took me an additional two hours to find the said village.

Sumitra Gaur had just returned from her work in the nearby Hatigar tea garden. Already frightened at seeing a crowd gathered near

her house, Sumitra seemed quite uncomfortable with the idea of being interviewed about the incident. She remained standing in one of the corners of the courtyard, and I pretended to leave in order to disperse the crowd. The aspect of the physical as well as mental well being of the survivor becomes even more crucial when one doesn't seem eager to narrate the story on one's own.

It was only sometime later that an ideal situation arrived to begin speaking to them. I requested her husband and her son to talk to me about the incident.

Sumitra's husband Gopal Gaur, who also works as a daily wage labourer in another private tea estate, began telling me the story - 'There was a wedding at our neighbour's house, and a girl fell sick. I can't really tell you much about why or how it all happened, but the fingers automatically started being pointed towards my wife Sumitra. A Kabiraj (village healer) was brought after the girl fell sick, and he accused my wife of casting a spell on the girl. He further claimed that she will gradually make the entire village fall sick through her spell.'

'The following day when Sumitra was going for work early in the morning accompanied by another woman, there was a person waiting for her, hidden in the roadside bush, who attacked her with a machete,' Gaur continued. The prominent cut mark on her hand and on the right side of her head started making more sense. Gaur added that the woman who accompanied her to work ran back to inform him of the incident. She was taken to hospital, and within a week the family had left the village.

They were left with no choice, as they were barricaded by death threats by the rest of the villagers unless they moved to another place. 'Shifting took a financial toll considering that both of us earn Rs 150 and Rs 130 per week as tea garden labourers,' sighed Gaur. Although an FIR was filed, and they had to sell off their cattle to provide the fee for a lawyer; the man who attacked his wife, who also happened to be one of their neighbours, is roaming free today.

**A portrait of Sumitra Gaur from before the incident.
Sumitra was not comfortable letting me take a picture of her face;
however, she did hand me a passport size photograph of her before I left.**

But not every family could afford to leave their belongings behind and start a new life in a different place. Lakhyamati Daimary from Jangalgaon (Udalguri) was made to eat human excreta in front of the whole village at a public meeting. Her son Nandeswar, who was only 14 when this incident happened in 2014, was beaten up along with Lakhyamati's husband; their house was wrecked, and they were threatened that everyone in the family would be killed. A cook at the Lower Primary School, Lakhyamati said, 'My brother- in-law said that my daughter's friend has been possessed by an Aai Goxani (local deity), and she claimed that I was a witch, and I will wreak havoc in the entire village. How does a 16-year-old girl claim such things and the villagers believe her? You tell me! I did not pay much heed at the beginning, but then the villagers started coming to our house one after another.'

The villagers demanded that Lakhyamati along with her four children leave the village. 'They asked my husband not to leave his ancestral home, as only his wife was an outsider. I was from another village before I married him.'

Lakhyamati left for Kokrajhar, for another relative's house. However, the family defied all odds and returned to Jangalgaon after one month. The local police and the All Bodo Students' Union, which is the most prominent and powerful students' organization in the BTAD region, helped them resettle in the village despite the entire village opposing it. 'We were left with no other option, and we had nowhere else to go,' the mother and the children said when I asked if they were scared of coming back and living with the same people who were planning to kill them a month ago.

This entire incident was narrated to me by Lakhyamati, who not only resumed her work as a cook immediately after coming back to the village, but is also the General Secretary of the Association of Cooks, and has relentlessly been working as a part of self-help groups in the village. 'I know that I am empowered, and this is how I have always been. They are insecure and they are scared,' she said when I asked her about resuming work and providing services to the people who once accused her of witchcraft.

Lakhyamati unflinchingly narrated the horrific time. She said that she has both rage and love in her heart, and she wants others to know about what happened to her and how she coped with the situation.

Although the prime instigators against her were her brother-in-law and the 16-year-old girl who claimed to have been possessed by the local deity, no arrests were made even after the police became hugely involved in the process. Most of the men who attacked them disappeared for months from the village. Their case in the High Court is still pending, and the family is not sure for how long they can continue this due to financial constraints. 'We are still trying to forget the atrocities that were inflicted upon us, and we are still in the process of bringing normalcy to our day-to-day life,' said Nandeswar, her eldest son.

Lakhyamati later said that although it took a lot of time, the women in the village have finally started regretting that they kept quiet throughout the period when their husbands were wrecking her house and harassing her entire family 'If I have gained the women's trust, I must be doing something right,' concluded Lakhyamati, with a smile on her face.

**The house that Lakhyamati and her family currently resides in. A thatched house with a tin shade roof, which was built after the previous one was burnt down. Near the house can be seen a Shijou tree, another common sight in every Bodo household which practices Bathouism.**

### *Grief, Pain and Vacuum*

While I was going through the case files at the Kokrajhar police station, one of the sub-inspectors walked up to me and handed me a sheet. 'This is one of the most heart wrenching stories that we have dealt with recently. You should go to this village and talk to her.' When I read

the FIR written from the victim's perspective, the narrative was just as stomach clenching for me as well. I asked if someone, who could speak Bodo, would accompany me to village Pub-Maligaon. We set off for Gaijrai Basumatary's house whose son was brutally killed by five men from the village in 2016. The only reason they resorted to killing her son was that they couldn't find Gaijrai, who was living at her parents' house at the time.

After several people fell sick in the village, a local healer alleged that 48-year-old Gaijrai was practicing witchcraft in her house, and that was the only reason why people were falling sick one after another in the village. When a group of men came and threatened her with death, Gaijrai left for her parents' house in another village. Her elder son Mahanta too left along with his wife to hide for a few days at his in-laws' house. The only one left behind was Asinta Basumatary, her youngest son, who was studying in 1st year BA. He refused to leave everything behind and run away, as he believed that the threats were empty, and that he would not be harmed.

When I reached Gaijrai's house, 5-6 of her relatives came to check whether, after all these years, the police had finally come with some news of the ones who had murdered Asinta.

I was initially unsure about how this conversation would pan out, and I requested my translator to ask her questions exactly the way I phrased them. The three of us sat down under a tree, away from the relatives and tried to start a conversation. Gaijrai did not make eye contact, and mostly looked at the ground, and answered in monosyllables when she was asked a question. She asked my translator what I was studying. When I replied that I had finished my MA recently, she rushed to her room and came out with a file. It contained her son's mark sheets and certificates. She took them out, her eyes beaming as she proudly showed the certificates to me. She said that he was the first member in the family to study beyond Class 9, and they had great expectations from him. There were also a few pictures of him which she had preserved along with his mark sheets. While going through his certificates and ID cards, I noticed that Asinta and I shared

**Gaijrai Basumatary's house with a few of her relatives and neighbours sitting in the verandah.**

the same birthday, and that he was exactly one year younger than me. He died in 2016, at the age of 21.

When Gaijrai went inside the kitchen to get us tamul (betel nut), her elder son and her sister who also happened to be her neighbours told us that the five men came around 11 pm, on May 3, 2016 and dragged the boy out of the house. He tried to run to his aunt's house, but they attacked him with an axe and injured his leg. He was then dragged all the way to the riverside where he was axed to death by the village men, men he thought would never harm him. Gaijrai came back to her village the next morning and had to wait for the next 7-8 days for the decomposed body to be found by the banks of the river.

Gaijrai's sister also told us that she (Gaijrai) blamed herself for the death of her youngest son. It didn't seem wise to ask Gaijrai, who clearly had not recovered from the trauma of her son's untimely death, about how she was coping. She told us that she wanted the five perpetrators who had been on the run ever since to be caught someday and 'rot in jail.' 'Death would be too easy for them. They should die a

slow death,' said her elder son following his mother's statement. The family has sold off most of their land, and they have almost given up on the police and the judicial system. Gaijrai told my translator to tell me that her 5-year-old granddaughter Lolita is her last hope in life, and she wants her to go to college and finish her BA degree.

**Gajrai with her granddaughter Lolita.**

The story of Gajrai Basumatary and her son made me come face to face with one of the ugliest consequences of witch hunting. The language barrier, along with the overflow of emotions from the family while narrating the incident, also made me realise that sometimes it is better for the researcher to let the words go undocumented and let the silence of the survivor be counted as a part of the narrative.

## WHO CONTROLS THE NARRATIVE?

The narratives of women accused of witch hunting could possibly be modified as per the convenience of different agencies including the police and the judiciary that are involved in the aftermath of the accusations being made. Social anthropologist, Helen Macdonald, who has extensively worked on accusations of witch hunting in Chhattisgarh, strongly suggests that in cases of accusations of witchcraft, a woman's experience is moulded to fit a framework of court admissible evidence, to testify to police efficiency, or simply deemed irrelevant and disqualified.

Women's language and narratives are often either ignored or their voices are systematically silenced. Almost all the women that I have mentioned so far have never had the experience of stepping out of community life and entering an arena which is predominantly full of legal activities and processes.

### *Media and the Police*

The media has often fed the narrative that juxtaposes scientific innovations that take place in the 'modern' world with a frail helpless woman who is accused of witchcraft by some villagers. The story begins mostly with the man of the family hijacking the entire narrative, explaining the story only from one perspective, pushing the survivor into the background, where the subjectivity of her experience,

perspective and struggle does not gain ground. And if any of the reports are merely based on the FIRs lodged in police stations, chances of the stories being misconstrued are extremely high, as my experience with reports or complaints and the actual interviews with the survivors shows. I found a stark difference between the testimonies provided by the witnesses and the charge sheets during the course of my fieldwork.

The FIRs are often filed by a relative, and in case of reports covered by the media, the language of the suffering is often inauthentic, as the reports often come from the perspective of a third party; and they often do not include an account by the actual survivor. Besides, there are few records of the police trying to work on any allegations of damage done to one's mental health or the trauma that the horrific incident leaves, even if the woman is not physically or sexually assaulted by a mob. Since some media reports are based solely on the unreliable narratives provided by the police, or in some cases, the police concocting them on their own, the story that reaches the readers or viewers also misses out on these crucial aspects of the aftermath of witch hunting.

### *The one who hunts the witch hunters*

The most interesting turn that my fieldwork took was when I went to meet the person who hunts the witch hunters. I had decided to dedicate a part of my paper to Birubala Rabha from Goalpara district, who is considered nothing less than a crusader against the practice of witch hunting. When I went to meet Birubala, I had a pre-conceived notion of what and how her life must have been, which I had formed over the years from the various reports and articles that I had read about her. Her achievements and the successful campaigns against witch hunting have been well documented by the media since the very beginning, but what didn't fit the facts that I had known about her was that she never liked being called a victim, or even a survivor of witch hunting, something which people widely believed her to be.

She blamed the media for telling her story to the people in a way that she never wanted it to be told. 'People have come and interviewed me so many times, but my narrative is altered and modified as per their convenience. Only a few have documented what I really wanted to say all this while. It's like a black spot on a plain white sheet. The very fact that this rumour is still prevalent disturbs me at times,' she said to me.

When I reached Birubala's residence in Thakurvila village in Agia, she started telling me how Mission Birubala came into being. The organization was established in 2011 to accelerate the process of eradicating witch hunting in Assam. Born in 1949, Birubala was married off when she was only 14 years old. Her first born, however, started showing signs of mental illness at an early age, and due to a lack of awareness and health facilities nearby, it was a Deodhani in her village who claimed that her son was possessed by a fairy and would be killed within a few days. Conditioned to believe in certain rituals and systems while growing up, Birubala never raised her voice against the village healer then, but also noticed that the Deodhani's predictions did not come true. The only help that Birubala could be provided with for her son was some medical assistance. And even though he is in an asylum in Shillong now, he is alive.

In her conversation with me she reflected on the events that shaped her life to what it is now. Her husband, who had unflinchingly believed in her, was diagnosed with cancer in 1996, and passed away in the same year. 'Four years after my husband's demise in 2000, I spoke up against the evil practice of witch hunting at a meeting in Lakhipur, something that changed the path of my life forever,' she said.

She spoke at an awareness programme organized by a local organization called the Assam Mahila Samata Society. 'Five women who were accused of witchcraft were also present at the meeting. The crowd gathered for the meeting was already displeased at the fact that there was supposed to be an open discussion on how those five women were innocent, and although no one was willing to speak even a single word at the meeting, I chose to speak up and called it "blind faith",'

**Birubala outside her house.**

Birubala said. She added, 'I knew the repercussions of my statement, but what kept me going was the fact that once a Deodhani had claimed that my son would die within the next three days, and none of his claims turned out to be true.'

The women present at the meeting were shocked to hear Birubala's statement. Using this as an opportunity, a relative of Birubala's, who was also one of her neighbours tried to start the rumour that she was practicing witchcraft, and accused her of being responsible for both her son and her husband's ailments. However, before the rumour could spread, a public meeting was organized in the village at Birubala's behest, and the woman who was found spreading the rumours was

found guilty. Although the relative was not punished and the decision to resolve the matter within themselves was taken, Birubala often finds herself in a situation where she still needs to clarify her past and how she was never made the victim of witch hunting. However, she was boycotted from her village later for speaking up against witch hunting, as it invited a lot of the villagers' hostility. It was during this period that she started travelling extensively with different NGOs to campaign against witch hunting.

Birubala never let this incident break her spirit, and her courageous journey working towards the welfare of society and empowering women found a stronger reason for her to continue her work. She had founded the Thakurvila Mahila Samiti in 1985 and was already fighting against alcoholism, dowry deaths and rapes in her village. But it was the Assam Mahila Samata Society and the meeting that she participated in in 2000 that finally let Birubala come out of her cocoon and allowed her to go forward with her vigorous campaign against witch hunting all over the state.

It was not just the women who benefited from her work. She also got a pucca road built in her village and was also instrumental in raising her voice whenever any innocent boy was picked up by the security forces. Thakurvila borders villages in Meghalaya, and during the late 1990s and early 2000s, these places were one of the primary hideouts of various insurgent groups traveling from one place to another.

Keeping in mind what Birubala has done for the community is what made the villagers repent and regret their decision of ostracizing her, and she was welcomed back eventually. Finally in 2012, with the help of a few social activists, Mission Birubala was established with Birubala Rabha as its chief functionary. The team comprises of several members who were branded witches once and joined the Mission's rescue team as social activists after their rescue operations were successfully handled by it. In 2013, it was Mission Birubala, under the leadership of Birubala that rescued 35 women accused of witchcraft from village Sikarigaon. Rescuing women is not the only task that Birubala is assigned. The rehabilitation of these women is equally important, and

at times, the organization is not left with many options but to make truce between the villagers and the survivors' families. Resolutions are signed by the villagers in the presence of the police as an assurance that these families will never be attacked again. Birubala said that once the villagers are made aware of the authorities keeping an eye on them, they are not seen repeating any such activity again.

The women who are banished from the village leave without any trail. Shelter homes, particularly for the victims of witch hunting, not only provide refuge to these women but also help them in coping better with the aftermath of such a horrific incident. During the interview Birubala told me that this plan has been on hold for several years now as only building a mere Home without any facility of rehabilitation won't contribute much. A bigger plot of land, along with the provision of farm animals and other training centres for handicrafts, is also a part of the plan which will provide a source of employment to the survivors and help the shelter home run more efficiently. The Mission has financial constraints and is yet to collect a significant amount through donations, after which this idea can be executed.

Birubala knows that the Mission is yet to go a long way, and she has prepared herself to continue fighting for the cause.

With several awards and accolades at both the national and international levels, Birubala also received an honorary PhD from Gauhati University in 2015. When I entered Birubala's room, which is not a pucca house yet and she is still waiting for her Pradhan Mantri Gramin Vikas Yojana house to be approved by the government, I saw awards scattered all over the room, in makeshift bamboo racks as she does not possess an almirah. 'A lady has promised to buy me an almirah. I will keep these inside the almirah if that is ever delivered to my house,' she said.

Birubala never liked being financially dependent on her sons, and hence she manages her life with the help of a plot of land that was left behind by her husband. And although she has been the recipient of several awards, the amount received has already been put to use for the welfare of women; and they still need finances to continue the work

they are doing. She also practices as a mid-wife in the village. This brave sexagenarian's recent achievement was another international recognition, this time at the Geneva based Women's World Foundation Summit, which awarded her for the innumerable lives that she has saved so far, even though at times it required risking her own.

**A collection of portraits by Birubala Rabha of six different women whose lives she saved. Rabha keeps a portrait of each woman from all the rescue operations that she has been involved in.**

Birubala's life has not been an easy one, and although her image in the media has been portrayed as that of a brave-heart, who crusades against an evil practice, the only request she made to me was not to

portray her as a victim of witch hunting, although the idea of 'a victim of witch hunting who rescues other victims' seemed like a narrative which was not only inspiring but would also help raise awareness about the whole issue. But somewhere, while the media frenzy was busy making a hero out of her, we also forgot to let her tell her own story. Not that the after effects were any better for her than they were for the other women that I met during the course of my fieldwork, but as I mentioned earlier, my pre-conceived notions about Rabha were of a brave woman who had been fighting against all odds and had taken a huge responsibility of eradicating witch hunting from the region. I came back with much more than what I had thought of her. Her tireless efforts are not any different in reality from what has always been written about her. With a straightforward approach and a humble lifestyIe, my sense of admiration for Birubala, if anything, grew.

## WITCHES AND THEIR SEXUALITY

Women who have been considered witches also have an added history of being tortured and killed for asserting their sexual desires. The very fact that female sexuality is considered the root of the evil led to the widespread belief that these sexual desires led them to consort with evil.

While reading Terri Kapsalis' work The History of Hysteria, I found an interesting reference to witches. The piece talks about the Middle Ages, where, very much like contemporary times, any reference made by a woman to lust or carnal pleasure made her evil, and very specifically – a witch. Female sexuality was the problem then. But how are these incidents of accusations of witchcraft from the Middle Age different from contemporary times? The first accusations of witchcraft in Europe grew out of church-affiliated male doctors' anxieties about competition from their female counterparts.

Although this aspect of witch hunting was not supposed to be included in this piece, the idea kept developing along with my fieldwork as I navigated through different cases in different regions. One such case was that of Fewishali Narzary from Kokrajhar. I couldn't meet Fewishali as she had left her village Bijulibari along with her two children after her husband passed away. A group of 10-15 people had already gathered outside her house, curious to know what exactly was going on. It was only when I started asking the neighbours about her that they told me about Fewishali's alleged extra marital affair. A detailed description of Fewishali not being a faithful wife was given to me by the villagers. I could see my translator smirking from time to time when the women in the crowd explained various incidents; and what I could understand from their exchange through hand gestures was that the incident of Fewishali's alleged extra marital affair had snowballed into a scandal. The translator seemed to have omitted a lot of details while translating it to me as they continued talking about her. According to them, they held a Raij Mel or a public meeting and asked her to sign a resolution to not continue the affair as her husband was unwell and was almost on the verge of dying. Although the villagers mentioned nothing about the accusations of witch hunting, the FIR lodged at the police station said otherwise.

The FIR that was lodged at that time said that the villagers had accused Fewishali of witchcraft and also accused her of being the reason for her husband's constantly deteriorating health. The police might have had some idea of her whereabouts, but they refused to give me any details about her apart from what I had already gathered from her complaint. The resolution that was made for Fewishali to sign was also submitted to the police station. I could not get access to the resolution, but the police ascertained that there were indeed accusations against her of being a witch, and that that was the only reason she wanted to seek help from the police to protect her.

'She left the village a month ago, and we haven't heard from her since,' said one of the women. Fewishali's house had an open back gate

where all the villagers entered from and gathered in the backyard when I wanted to talk to them about her. When I asked them what would happen to the house and the property now, they said – 'We don't know yet. Let's see what happens."

I couldn't meet Fewishali. Although the narratives and evidence that I gathered did not reflect a clear picture, a woman with two children, who had to leave her home after her husband passed away, and who according to the police was too scared to return to her village, spoke volumes about how adultery saw a woman's moral character as 'loose' and how that further made the villagers accuse her of witch hunting along with death threats. It also showed another very efficient way of using witchcraft accusations as a tool or excuse of property ownership. A woman's sexuality was the root cause, and though it didn't follow the same pattern as in the Middle Ages, this one example made me question if we have really moved ahead with time, and if at all women's sexual desires will be considered a non-issue and not a deviation.

## CONCLUSION

While looking for an academic source that I could refer to on witch hunting, suggestions to read Professor Helen Macdonald's work started pouring in. As mentioned earlier, her extensive work on witch hunting in Chhattisgarh gave me a fair idea of the emotional toll that it takes on the victims and how prepared one should be before proceeding. Macdonald had written that as researchers, closer attention should be paid to the processes of forgetting (as a form of not remembering) and grieving as forms of control articulated through the body. She further added that we need to take up the debate of individual narratives and social memory, especially when it comes to writing about something as crucial and sensitive as witch hunting. I was constantly negotiating with myself how to go about the interview

process without triggering the trauma associated with the memories I wanted to talk to the survivors about. Before I began our investigative fieldwork, in the writing workshop that was held in the first week of August, we were asked to think critically about the methodology of research that we wanted to use. Hence, I tried not to restrict myself to any particular methodology and to go beyond the mechanics of interviews and research and solely rely on my interactions with the survivors. I tried to write this paper as a summation and recording of not only what was recounted to me by the survivors of this horrific practice, but also a lot of things that were left unsaid by them.

I was asked a question during the Methodology Workshop on what terminology I would be using instead of 'witches' as the English translations often turn out to be awkward while using them for Indian notions. I wanted to stick to Daini for its colloquial reference because, whether it was Bodo and Adivasi villages that I went to or meeting Birubala who is fighting against this practice, the terminology used by all of them was restricted to only Daini. A Daini, just like the Bej/Oja, could be a man or a woman, and it has no gender specificity. This was also considered an option for avoiding the confusion that would come with the use of different terminologies.

I was unsure about how to restrict 'Revolution' to only one person until my fieldwork had started. When a woman is accused of witchcraft and is considered a Daini, she not only has to live with memories that keep surfacing from time to time, but also with the entire burden of guilt because of what the family went through in the aftermath of witch hunting which is seen solely as her doing. Most of the women that I met constantly kept mentioning the land and cattle that were sold to hire a lawyer and fight the case in court. And amidst this constant pressure, most of the women that I met also began to bear the ordeal with resilience – some chose forgiveness and some chose reconciliation with the past.

Sumitra Gaur started working at another tea plantation with two major injuries that very month. Lakhyamati Daimary not only rejoined as a mid-day meal cook immediately after she came back to

her village, but she also took signatures from everyone in the village so that nobody would be able to remove her from her only source of livelihood. Birubala Rabha walked miles to save someone's life from witch hunting, even if people were fined in her own village for keeping any sort of contact with her after her boycott.

However, these are not to be perceived as references to bravery alone, and should also be looked at from a different perspective. The emotional toll that the experience took on the women profusely affected their mental health. In a society where treatment for mental health is considered to belong only to the privileged, these women are not even aware of the care and time that they should give to the process of healing. Besides, these women are equal financial contributors to their families, and they are left with no other option but to continue working or starve. There was a silent revolutionary hidden in all of them. I had invaded their private space, and their silence was not only expected, but rather it was a major contribution to my articulation in this paper. This paper was written mostly based on what was not said to me. I cannot claim how successful I have been in doing so, but through the narratives of these women, what I tried to study and understand was the power wielded in private spaces, patriarchy, households and bodies.

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