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Role of Education and Legal Procedures in Eradicating Witch-Hunting Practices in Rural Assam

Dr. Ratul Das

Assistant Professor

Department of Education

Bapujee College, Sarukshetri

Email : ratuldas33@gmail.com

Abstract

Witch-hunting remains a serious social problem in some rural areas of Assam, where superstition, fear, limited literacy, and weak access to healthcare combine to produce violence against vulnerable individuals, particularly women. This paper examines how education and legal interventions can work together to eliminate this practice. Education promotes scientific temper, critical thinking, gender sensitivity, and awareness of human rights, while legal measures provide protection, punishment, and institutional accountability. The study is based on secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government reports, and legal documents. The analysis highlights the importance of school education, adult literacy, community awareness, and the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015. The paper concludes that a coordinated strategy involving educational institutions, local communities, law enforcement agencies, and civil society organizations is essential for the complete eradication of witch-hunting in rural Assam.

Keywords: Education, Legal Awareness, Rural Assam, Witch-hunting.

Introduction

Witch-hunting refers to the act of accusing a person of possessing harmful supernatural powers and subjecting that person to humiliation, exclusion, or physical violence. In Assam, this practice has affected many rural communities and has led to displacement, injury, and loss of life. Those targeted are often widows, elderly women, socially isolated persons, or individuals possessing land or property.

The roots of witch-hunting are complex. They include low educational attainment, inadequate healthcare, traditional beliefs, gender inequality, and local disputes. Diseases or unexpected deaths are sometimes misinterpreted as the result of black magic. In such contexts, education helps people interpret events rationally, while

legal systems establish deterrence and protection. This paper explores the combined role of education and law in ending witch-hunting in rural Assam.

What Is Witch-Hunting?

Witch-hunting is the practice of accusing a person, usually a woman, of possessing supernatural powers and blaming them for illness, death, crop failure, or other misfortunes. In parts of rural Assam, these accusations have historically led to severe human rights violations.

Birubala Rabha and Witch-hunting

Birubala Rabha was one of Assam's most influential social reformers and a leading campaigner against witch-hunting. She dedicated her life to protecting vulnerable people-especially women in rural areas-who were falsely accused of being "witches" and subjected to social ostracism, violence, and even murder.

Birubala Rabha's Contribution

1. Personal Experience Led to Activism

Birubala Rabha herself was once accused of witchcraft. This experience motivated her to challenge superstition and defend those targeted by such accusations.

2. Public Awareness Campaigns

She travelled extensively across Assam, organizing meetings, discussions, and educational campaigns to explain that diseases and misfortunes have scientific and social causes rather than supernatural ones.

3. Rescue and Rehabilitation

Birubala Rabha helped rescue many victims of witch-hunting and supported them in rebuilding their lives.

4. Collaboration with Organizations

She worked closely with Mission Birubala and the Mahila Samakhya to spread awareness and mobilize communities.

5. Advocacy for Legal Reform

Her activism played a significant role in creating the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015, which criminalizes witch-hunting and provides protection to victims.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives have been formulated to conduct the present study

Objective I: To examine the socio-cultural causes of witch-hunting in rural Assam.

Objective II: To analyze the role of formal and non-formal education in reducing

superstitious beliefs.

Objective III: To study the legal mechanisms developed to prevent and punish witch-hunting.

Objective IV: To suggest educational and legal strategies for long-term eradication.

Review of Related Literature

Previous studies indicate that witch-hunting is closely associated with illiteracy, poverty, and social marginalization. Researchers have shown that educational interventions can challenge myths and strengthen community understanding of health, rights, and scientific explanations. Scholars and activists in Assam have also emphasized the contribution of grassroots organizations in spreading awareness. Legal scholarship highlights the significance of state legislation, particularly the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015, which criminalizes branding a person as a witch and provides safeguards for victims. Existing literature suggests that neither law nor education alone is sufficient; both must operate together.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary data. Information has been collected from academic publications, newspapers, government documents, and legal texts. The material was organized thematically to understand the relationship between education, legal awareness, and social change.

Causes of Witch-Hunting in Rural Assam

Major factors contributing to witch-hunting include:

- ⊕ Low literacy and limited scientific understanding.
- ⊕ Dependence on superstition and occult explanations.
- ⊕ Inadequate healthcare facilities in villages.
- ⊕ Gender discrimination and patriarchal attitudes.
- ⊕ Property disputes and personal enmity.
- ⊕ Influence of self-styled healers and occult practitioners.
- ⊕ Economic insecurity and social exclusion.

Educational Role in Eradicating Witch-Hunting

Education can transform beliefs and behaviors by promoting reason, empathy, and constitutional values.

- ⊕ **School Education:** Curriculum can include lessons on scientific temper, gender equality, and human rights. Teachers can discuss the harmful consequences of superstition and encourage questioning.

- Adult Education: Literacy and continuing education programs help adults interpret health and social problems more rationally.
- Community Awareness: Street plays, workshops, radio talks, and village meetings can spread anti-superstition messages.
- Health Education: Awareness of disease prevention and medical treatment reduces reliance on magical explanations.
- Value Education: Educational initiatives can strengthen respect for dignity, equality, and justice.

Legal Procedures and Institutional Measures

The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015 provides a dedicated legal framework to address this practice. Key provisions include:

- Declaring witch-branding and related acts as punishable offences.
- Imposing imprisonment and monetary penalties.
- Enhancing punishment when severe injury, displacement, or death occurs.
- Directing authorities to provide protection and support to victims.
- Assigning responsibilities to police and district administration.

Legal procedures generally involve filing a First Information Report (FIR), police investigation, arrest of accused persons, prosecution in court, and victim protection measures. Public legal awareness is essential so that communities understand both rights and consequences.

Analysis and Interpretation

The evidence indicates that education acts as a preventive force by changing attitudes while legal action functions as a corrective and deterrent mechanism. Areas with stronger awareness campaigns tend to show greater resistance to witch-branding. However, fear, social pressure, and inadequate implementation can reduce the effectiveness of legal provisions. Sustainable change requires integrating educational outreach with responsive law enforcement and rehabilitation services.

Major Findings

Witch-hunting is rooted in superstition, social inequality, and lack of awareness.

- Education helps communities adopt scientific and humane perspectives.
- Adult literacy and health education are especially important in rural areas.
- The Assam Witch Hunting Act provides a strong legal basis for prevention and punishment.
- Legal protection is most effective when communities know how to access it.

6 Collaboration among schools, police, health workers, and NGOs is crucial.

Recommendations

1. Introduce anti-superstition and human rights content in school curricula.
2. Expand adult literacy and community education initiatives. Conduct regular legal awareness camps in villages.
3. Strengthen healthcare services in remote areas. Provide counseling, shelter, and rehabilitation for victims.
4. Train teachers, police personnel, and local leaders. Encourage participation of women's groups and youth organizations.

Conclusion

Witch-hunting is both a human rights violation and a developmental challenge. In rural Assam, the practice persists where misinformation, fear, and discrimination remain strong. Education offers long-term social transformation by nurturing rational thinking and ethical values. Legal measures provide immediate protection and accountability. When these two forces are implemented together, supported by community participation and effective governance, the possibility of eliminating witch-hunting becomes significantly stronger.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies may explore district-wise trends, comparative analyses with other states, the role of women's collectives, and the impact of digital media in spreading awareness.

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