

WITCH HUNTING IN ASSAM:

Individual, Structural
and Legal Dimensions



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
List of figures and tables	3
Introduction	5-13
A. Belief systems, assumptions and policy discourse in the context of Assam	6
B. Objectives and scope of the study	7
C. Geographical coverage, socioeconomic and demographic features	8
D. The collaborating partners, their roles and methodology	10
E. Qualifications and limitations	12
Chapter 1: Contextualizing the Victims of Witch Hunting	14-21
A. Attributes of the primary victim	14
B. Persons collaterally victimized in witch hunting	19
C. Conclusion	21
Chapter 2: Instigators and Perpetrators in Witch Hunts	22-25
A. Relationship between the instigator and the victim	22
B. Role of <i>ojhas</i>	23
C. Sex of the instigators	23
D. Caste/group identity of the instigators in relation to the victims	24
E. Economic condition of the perpetrators in relation to the victims	24
F. Conclusion	25
Chapter 3: Factors that Trigger Targeting and Victimization	26-30
A. Structural factors that enable witch hunting	26
B. Individual factors	27
C. Conclusion	30

Chapter 4: Victimization and its Consequences	31-34
A. Gradation and range of violations that comprise victimization	31
B. Consequences of witch hunting for the victims	32
C. Consequences for the victim's family	34
D. Conclusion	34
Chapter 5: Responses of Family, Neighbours and Authorities to Victims of Witch Hunting	35-43
A. Response of the immediate family	35
B. Response of the extended family	37
C. Response of the community	38
D. Response of the local authorities and the police	39
E. Conclusion	42
Chapter 6: Insights from Police Records	44-49
A. Victims	44
B. Relationship of the accused with the victim	46
C. Reasons for targeting the victim	46
D. Description of violence, offences registered and action taken	46
E. Who is the complainant	49
F. Conclusion	49
Conclusion	50-54
Annexure : Case studies 1-16	55-83
References	84

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This study is inspired by and draws upon the conceptual framework, methodology and data gathering tools from an earlier action research study carried out by PLD in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar, the findings of which have been published as *Contemporary Practices of Witch Hunting: A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law*. The similarities in the structure and presentation of this study on witch hunting in Assam with the above mentioned study is therefore intended and acknowledged. The contribution of all the state partners and individuals involved in the preceding study, although not explicitly named here, is affirmed, as it shaped the contours of our approach to witch hunting.

For this report, the fieldwork and data collection was carried out by AMSS and NEN in Goalpara and

Sonitpur respectively, the two districts where the field study was carried out. Both AMSS and NEN identified and documented the lives of 16 victims of witch hunting in both these districts (with each organization working on eight cases), and cases from police records in Goalpara that were connected with witch hunting. The information on each of the two districts, the demographic and ethnographic insights have been provided by AMSS and NEN.

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for data collection in this study, deserves mention. Our gratitude to Anuja Agrawal for reviewing and commenting on an initial draft of this report, which helped improve it, and to AMSS and NEN for their comments on the final draft of the report.

The collective spirit of this endeavour is displayed as much by the division of roles between the three organizations as by the sharing of costs involved in conducting the study and the production of this report. While this report draws its strength from the synergy shared by the three organizations, the responsibility for its limitations, mostly on account of pulling together the data at a substantial distance from the context of inquiry, lies with PLD alone.

LIST OF FIGURES & TABLES

- Figure 1.1. Age groups of victims of witch hunting
- Table 1.1. Marital status of the victims of witch hunting
- Table 1.2. Group identities of victims
- Table 1.3. Landholdings of the victims
- Table 1.4. Education status of the victims
- Table 1.5. Collateral victims in the cases of witch hunting
- Table 2.1. Relationship between the main perpetrator and the victim
- Table 2.2. Involvement of *ojhas* in victimization
- Table 2.3. Sex of the main instigator
- Table 4.1. Gradation of violations in witch hunting
- Table 4.2. Consequences faced by victims of witch hunting
- Table 5.1. Response of the immediate family
- Table 5.2. Response of the extended family
- Table 5.3. Response of the community
- Table 5.4. Response of the local authorities and the police
- Table 6.1. Sex, social group, living status of primary victims
- Table 6.2. Age and sex of secondary victims
- Table 6.3. Relationship of the accused with the victim
- Table 6.4. Provisions of law/offences invoked and types of violence in FIR for 12 cases
- Table 6.5. The complainants

NOTE: The term Bodo is also spelt as Boro. Both spellings, Bodo and Boro, appear in this report.

INTRODUCTION

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that 768 women were murdered in India following accusations of being 'witches' in the period 2008-12.¹ A report published by the North-East India Studies states that there were more than 65 cases of witch hunting in Assam alone in the years 2007-2012.² An NDTV report of September 2013 claimed that the Assam government reported 105 cases of witch hunting in the period between 2006 and 2012.³ Murders of persons, predominantly women, labelled as 'witches' appear to follow a pattern of brutality which has been of concern to women's groups, progressive voices, media, state agencies and the judiciary, generating discussions about ways of addressing this violence. Even as murders are all that get reflected in crime records and news reports, they are not the sum total of victimization. A large number of victims are humiliated through community punishments, ostracization and dislocation from their homes and villages, resulting in impoverishment and a life of fear and isolation. In addition to examining violations and motives associated with witch hunting, which are the focus of most discussions, it is necessary to call attention to the underlying

factors that enable targeting and victimization. The development indicators, deprivations, access to basic needs and governance conditions are aspects that must be spotlighted. Likewise, there is need to examine the responses of institutions and actors proximate to the site of targeting and victimization, for a comprehensive understanding of conditions that enable witch hunting to take this form. This would be foundational for charting a course of action to prevent and redress such victimization. This study examines all these aspects, including the roles/responses of different institutions in relation to witch hunting, in order to inform policy and action agendas.

Even as it investigates the specific nature of witch hunting in Assam, the study seeks to contribute to the national level discourse and public policy concerns related to the phenomenon. This report is an outcome of a collective effort by Partners for Law in Development (PLD), Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and North East Network (NEN), and is modelled entirely on an action research developed and applied by PLD for an earlier study conducted in Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh.

¹ National Crime Records Bureau (2011), <http://ncrb.nic.in/>.

² J. Chakraborty and A. Borah (2013), 'Witch Hunting in Assam: Strategising Alternative Media for Women Empowerment and Overcoming Superstition', *Journal of North East India Studies*, Vol. 3(2).

³ A. Pandey (2013), 'In Assam, a rising trend of murders on allegations of witchcraft', <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/in-assam-a-rising-trend-of-murders-on-allegations-of-witchcraft-414016>.

I. Belief systems, assumptions and policy discourse in the context of Assam

While the focus of the fieldwork for this study was documenting first person accounts of victimization, it also included discussions with the communities where fieldwork was undertaken on the meaning and significance of ideas like 'witch' and 'witchcraft'. Some responses describe a witch as an individual who has a certain evil potential to cause harm to others – individuals as well as society at large. These powers, it is believed, can be acquired from practising certain kinds of rituals and chanting specific mantras. Ritual practices like worshipping trees or stones, or performing specific types of dances under big trees are believed to be the medium for acquiring evil or supernatural powers. One of the respondents during the fieldwork refers to the performance of a secret puja on a new moon night. Women tend to be more associated with acquiring supernatural powers, with local terms amongst adivasis referring to trance conditions as *deo dhorise* or *chatiyauthise*.

In rural parts of Assam, the belief that witches can cause drought, disease, death of children and livestock with a curse is common. It is also believed that once the powers of a witch are acquired, the person can change forms, i.e. from human to animal and vice versa. In the broadest sense, superstitions are not specific to Assam or indeed to rural parts of Assam. Superstitions about the 'evil eye' (*huri nazar*), fear of the supernatural and antidotes for self-protection are common across regions, communities and disparities in education levels and economic status. Equally common are beliefs in symbols and objects that can attract prosperity and good luck. What distinguishes areas where witch hunting is practised from areas where it is not are the development indicators, economic prosperity, access to education, basic needs and primary healthcare, as well as the quality of

governance. Poor performance in all these areas combine to make the beliefs the dominant lens through which reality, mishaps and conflicts are viewed. In other words, the areas where fieldwork was undertaken, selected for their reporting of witch hunting, were defined by weak development indicators, where population groups, regardless of their individual economic status, lived with significantly poor sanitation, health care and governance, and as a consequence were more reliant upon the local faith healers for addressing/ rationalizing problems, conflicts and losses at the personal and collective levels. The section describing the social, economic and demographic characteristics of the districts where the field study for this report was conducted testifies to the deprivations and neglect that lend impunity to witch hunting.

In the context of the civil society discourse on witch hunting in India, including in Assam, there are some frequently articulated assumptions. Witch hunting is viewed as targeting women who are widows or single, making women without a male guardian most vulnerable to targeting, particularly if they are in ownership or possession of land or property. The material motive is seen as an important trigger as widows do not attract stigma within tribal communities, with whom witch hunting has traditionally been associated. The emphasis on superstition is integral to all narratives on witch hunting. In Assam, it is widely believed that this practice is most predominant in the Rabha, Boro and adivasi communities. This study, through fieldwork and case studies, confirms that witch hunting largely manifests itself as a gendered crime, in that women are the prime targets, although there is little evidence to suggest a linkage between witch hunting and widowhood, or indeed that it is more prevalent among the Rabhas. Interestingly, married women who enjoy substantial support of their husbands

appear to be more vulnerable in our data. Even as material reasons underpin many of the case studies, witch hunting appears to be a tool by which conflicts, tensions and jealousies are overcome to restore status quo swiftly and absolutely, in a manner that brooks little or no opposition from the community – and, indeed, little or no intervention by those tasked under law with protecting the security of people and property, and of keeping peace.

Against this background, there have been demands for policy interventions at the state and, more recently, at the national level, with discussions leaning in favour of a special law for witch hunting. In Assam, such discussions began in the wake of a case in 2006, where the victim was killed along with five family members. The Gauhati High Court, in response to a public interest petition that drew attention to 132 witch hunting related killings (between 2002 and 2012 in Assam), directed that the state government allocate district-wise funds for the rehabilitation of victims of witch hunting, recommending that compensation of Rs. 3-5 lakhs be given. It also recommended heavy penalties to the accused as the only way of preventing attacks on women in

II. Objectives and scope of the study

This report is based on 16 case studies collected through fieldwork in two districts, Goalpara and Sonitpur, of the state of Assam. Its findings provide insights into factors that enhance vulnerability to being targeted as a 'witch', causes that trigger such accusations and underlying factors that enable them; it also throws light on the different types of violations that constitute victimization, its long-term consequences for the

the name of witch hunting.⁴

The Assam State Commission for Women also constituted a select group for drafting a special law on witch hunting. This draft has been submitted to the Assam government in 2012,⁵ and is expected to be proposed as a bill.⁶ While these discussions have moved forward in terms of a state bill on the subject, the framework remains that of redress through criminal law remedies specifically designed for witch hunting. In the context of the ongoing policy discussions on a special law, this study highlights the need for greater evidence – systematic documentation that goes beyond narratives of brutality to examine the role of institutions and underlying conditions, which can help us move closer towards developing effective responses to witch hunting. This report is a step in that direction, using data from case studies to understand the problem, the consequences, the agents and the conditions that enable such targeting. We believe that field studies such as this contribute towards framing solutions that speak to the needs of the victims and, more importantly, to conditions that cause and enable such victimization to take place.

victim and finally, the responses of state and non-state actors towards victimization and victims, in particular the role of the police. While these findings are relevant in the context of the state, they also offer insights for revisiting the dominant discourse on witch hunting across states and at the national level. The study is aimed at providing a set of recommendations for creating public awareness and institutional support to combat

⁴ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/HC-notice-to-Assam-govt-to-check-witch-hunting/articleshow/27007558.cms>.

⁵ As per reply from the Assam State Commission for Women to an RTI by NEN.

⁶ PLD (2012), *Targeting of Women as Witches: Trends, Prevalence and the Law in Northern, Western, Eastern and Northeastern Regions of India*, Delhi.

witch hunting and advocate for policy change.

By focusing on the specific narratives and the local situations, this report situates the understanding of witch hunting in particular contexts, to identify structural, systemic and individual factors that trigger and enable such victimization. To that extent, the report seeks to shape the discourse, policy deliberations and action agenda on witch hunting, shifting it beyond accounts of violence and superstition towards examining the enabling conditions, sites of action and inaction, impunity and accountability connected with it. This shift in focus facilitates a move beyond solutions based on special laws to explore instead accountability for the implementation of existing laws and structural failures, and for restorative justice for victims. The structure of the report is based on the earlier study conducted by PLD in three states of Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh where special laws on witch hunting practices exist, *Contemporary Practices Of Witch Hunting: A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law* (2014). The findings of this study are therefore organized to correspond to the same axis of inquiry as the earlier study on Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh, making this report Assam-specific while enabling comparison across regions.

The findings are organized along six major themes on which the chapters of this report are based. The first chapter focuses on the victims, outlining their socio-economic background through definers such as sex, age, marital and

economic status, and social grouping/ community. The second chapter focuses on the relationship of the perpetrators to victims; the third chapter traces the factors, reasons and underlying tensions that triggered the labelling of the victim as a witch. Chapter four looks at the different forms of victimization and the lasting consequences for the victims, several years after the violent episodes have subsided, which have continued to mark their lives until the time this study was undertaken. Chapter five details the responses of state and non-state actors, the immediate and the extended family, the neighbours, the local authorities as well as the police in the case studies documented. Chapter six is based on witch hunting cases from police records, providing a different lens to validate findings from case studies, as well as understand the role of the law and law enforcement in responding to victimization in the context of witch hunting. Finally, the conclusion pulls together the findings to develop an understanding of witch hunting based on data drawn from case studies and police records, and to recommend an action plan for prevention, justice and accountability for witch hunting and, indeed, for similar forms of victimization regardless of the motive.

Each of the 16 cases that form the basis of this study has been summarized and annexed to the report. The case studies have been coded as ASMI, ASMII, upto ASMXVI, with the names of the victims removed to protect their identity.

III. Geographical coverage, socio-economic and demographic features

The fieldwork was carried out in select blocks in Goalpara and Sonitpur districts, with AMSS conducting fieldwork and data collection in Goalpara and NEN in Sonitpur. The selection of

these districts was done by the state partners based on news reports indicating the prevalence of witch hunting in these areas⁷, with AMSS already having worked extensively on witch

⁷ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Rape-behind-witch-hunt-murders-in-assam-6-held/Article1-712799.aspx>.

hunting at the community level. Additionally, preference was given to social, economic and demographic differences between the two districts in making the selection. The access of fieldworkers was also a consideration in the

selection. The districts, select blocks in each of the two districts from where the cases were documented, and the dominant social groups in these areas are represented in the table below.

Goalpara (Assam) and the area bordering Garo Hills (Meghalaya)	Balijana, Kushdhowa, Lakhipur, Tikrikilla, ResuBelpara	Rabha community
Sonitpur	Baghmara	Tea Garden Labour (TGL) and former TGL

The demographic character and socio-economic conditions of the two districts are discussed below. Although efforts were made to document case studies from diverse social groups, the sites of fieldwork and the dominant social groups present there eventually determined the selection.

Goalpara District: Goalpara is situated in the western end of Assam, in close geographical proximity to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Goalpara district was declared one of the country's 250 most backward districts by the Government of India in 2006, and receives funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF). As per our data, most families in Goalpara belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category. The cases where the victims belong to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) groups are predominantly from Goalpara.

The Rabhas are the predominant group in the three blocks of Goalpara, namely, Balijana, Kushdhowa and Lakhipur, and the border districts in Meghalaya. Besides the Rabhas, there

is generally a high population of other STs in this region. The ST population in this region is mainly engaged in daily wage labour and shared agriculture (*adhikheti*) carried out under wealthier landowners. Some are also employed as labour in coal factories in the Garo Hills in Meghalaya. The tribal population is not economically well off in these blocks, with the majority of the ST population falling in the BPL category. The overall educational status among the tribes is very low; although a sizable population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and other communities are educated, there is little formal education among the tribal communities.⁸

Sonitpur District: Sonitpur is located in central Assam, and within this district, the fieldwork was carried out in Baghmara block, selected for its socio-political significance, in that diverse social groups populate this block, consisting of adivasis who make up the Tea Garden Labour (TGL) and ex-TGL, in addition to Boros, Assamese, Nepalis, Bengalis and Karbis. The adivasis of the TGL communities form the majority in the Baghmara

⁸ The data on the district was provided by AMSS representatives from the data collected during fieldwork and interviews.

block due to the proliferation of tea gardens in the area where they work as wage labourers.⁹

The adivasis that comprise the TGL and ex-TGL or former TGL consist of Mundas, Orangs, Santhals, Kharias, Majhis, Gourhs, Bhumijis and Kishans originally from the Chotanagpur Plateau. They were indentured by British tea planters in the colonial period to work on their plantations, from the time when the Assam Wasteland Grant Rules of 1838 initiated the establishment of tea plantations in Assam. Having lost their ancestral rights over forests and land in Chotanagpur Plateau due to the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, they became easy targets as indentured labour in Assam. Although the conditions of the TGL have improved in the post-independence era – they are regulated by the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 – they still work under exploitative conditions, and are discriminated by the state. Flogging, rape, torture and murder continue to be concerns affecting these communities.

The weak political status of the adivasi communities is evident from their being categorized as Other Backward Class (OBC) and More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) in Assam,

groups with fewer benefits from the government. This is in contrast to the Scheduled Tribe status that they originally occupied in their native states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, which is accorded higher benefits.¹⁰ In spite of demands and agitation by the community for ST status, they have not yet been recognized as such under the Assam state schedule. The infrastructure for education, health, public distribution, sanitation and housing facilities in the coolie lines (TGL residential areas) are poor, and supply of electricity and drinking water highly inadequate.¹¹ The economic deprivations of the adivasi communities is a result of their historical status and present position as TGL, which gets compounded with the lack of ST status and weak political voice.

Sonitpur is also affected by the activities of armed groups such as All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) and National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB). The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), with its separatist movement also poses a problem in Sonitpur district. Regular strikes and counter-insurgency operations often obstructed fieldwork in this area.

IV. The collaborating partners, their roles and methodology

As mentioned before, this report is an outcome of the collaborative effort of three organizations: Partners for Law in Development, Assam Mahila Samata Society and North East Network. The work of each of these is briefly described below, particularly in relation to witch hunting. Their distinct roles and contribution to this effort are also outlined.

This study borrowed the conceptual framework, methodology and data gathering tools from an earlier study (also based on fieldwork) carried out by PLD in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar. Called *Contemporary Practices of Witch Hunting: A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law*, it was conducted with the support of the Ministry of Women and Child Development. During the

⁹ All information on Sonitpur district and the adivasi communities has been provided by NEN, which drew upon data from government departments (Block Offices); office of the Medical Health Officer; office of the Sub-divisional Statistical Officer; office of the Block Development Officer, Behali Education Block; Social Welfare Office, Baghmara Block; village headmen; Panchayat secretary/president; and noted individuals and academics.

¹⁰ W. Fernandes (2003), 'Assam Adivasis: Identity Issues and Liberation', *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections* (February).

¹¹ B. Saikia (2009), 'Development of Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam', *Dialogue*, Vol.10 (3).

course of PLD's socio-legal study in the three states there was immense interest from NEN and AMSS to conduct a similar study in Assam. The three state study by PLD was framed to include an examination of the impact of the laws, both the Indian Penal Code (1860) as well as the special laws on witchcraft related offences that exists in those states; the prospect of a study in Assam, where special laws did not exist, assumed significance as it promised comparative insights into the value of special laws in prevention, protection, and redress and reparation in the context of witch hunting. The collaborative study involving PLD, AMSS and NEN was thus forged. The similarities in the structure and presentation of the two studies, i.e. the earlier three state study by PLD and the present collaborative study on Assam, is deliberate; the current study draws upon the tools, methodology and data review process of the larger three state study.

A national legal resource group on women's rights, PLD addresses concerns related to gender justice in contexts of sexuality, culture, conflict and poverty. PLD commenced work on witch hunting as a result of exposure to the issue during its work in Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa, where little beyond anecdotal accounts and news reports were available to understand the contemporary dimensions, making informed policy discussions difficult. The group commenced several initiatives with the aim of building evidence on contemporary trends and roles of agencies proximate to the site of victimization, for

informing public policy discourse. Beginning with building alliances with organizations working in contexts where witch hunting was prevalent, the initiative moved on to organizing national and regional level consultations with wide-ranging stake holders on the subject.¹² After this a literature review was undertaken,¹³ which was followed by a socio-legal study on contemporary trends in witch hunting carried out through fieldwork in select districts of Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa.¹⁴ In the course of regional consultations in the North East, the idea of a collaborative study on Assam emerged, and the three organizations, PLD, AMSS and NEN, joined hands.

AMSS is an autonomous society implementing the National Mahila Samkhya (MS) programme as envisaged in the National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (1992). The MS programme uses education as a means of empowering women in communities, at the village, block and district levels, mobilizing community women into federated collectives to enable them to locally address health concerns, rights awareness, matrimonial conflicts and violence against women. AMSS has been playing a crucial role in addressing cases of violence against women connected with witch hunting; in relation to each of the case studies collected by AMSS, the MS workers have intervened to support victims and initiate community processes of conflict resolution at the community level.

¹² PLD (2012), *Targeting of Women as Witches: Trends, Prevalence and the Law in Northern, Western, Eastern and Northeastern Regions of India*, Delhi (a consolidated report of the regional consultations).

¹³ PLD (2013), *Piecing together Perspectives on Witch Hunting: A Review of Literature*, Delhi.

¹⁴ PLD (2014), *Contemporary Practices of Witch Hunting: A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law*, Delhi. The findings of this study are drawn from three sources of research: a) documentation of 48 case studies from Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand from the last five or six years; b) data from 86 police records collected from blocks in selected districts in the states from 2010 to 2012; c) 59 High Court and Supreme Court reported case laws from 10 states.

NEN, a women's rights organization, addresses issues of disparity and discrimination against women in the North East region, through trainings, documentation, mobilization and advocacy on a range of issues that impact women's lives in the region. Regionally, NEN has initiated and been part of campaigns on violence against women, and as part of the autonomous women's movement, they engage with issues of policy change and human rights monitoring. Using a human rights approach, NEN continues to engage with and influence the government and society at large.¹⁵ At the state level, NEN has engaged with policy discussions; through this study, it is keen to base policy discussions on witch hunting in evidence.

The study is based on 16 case studies and 12 criminal cases registered with the police. AMSS and NEN collected eight case studies each from the last five years, dividing the fieldwork and districts between them. AMSS works in Goalpara and its workers have access to the villages from where case studies were sourced. The case studies/victims were identified and selected by the District Implementation Unit (DIU) staff of AMSS in Goalpara. They have provided support to many of the victims whose cases were documented for this report, taking on crisis intervention as part of their field operations. Some of the cases covered by AMSS are from Balijana district and areas in Meghalaya bordering Goalpara. The fieldwork in Goalpara was delayed on account of the RabhaHasong

V. Qualifications and limitations

While this study is a significant contribution to understanding witch hunting in Assam through a systematic collection of cases occurring in the last five years, the number of cases is insubstantial.

Joint Movement (RHJMC) protesting against Panchayat elections and demanding an autonomous council for promoting Rabha rights. Periodic local disturbances by activities of ULFA also contributed to some delay in Goalpara. NEN conducted the fieldwork in Sonitpur district, identifying cases on the basis of media reporting of witch hunting and with support from a local organization named CADAT. Volunteers who were fluent in the local language were engaged as field investigators. In addition to documenting case studies, AMSS and NEN also gathered data from FIRs and police records on witch hunting in Goalpara – independent of and unrelated to the case studies from the district.

The data gathering tools consisted of questionnaires, templates and guidelines created by PLD, for its field work in Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh, guiding the larger study. The same tools and guidelines were adopted for fieldwork in Assam; the entire fieldwork was concluded in just over a year. Periodic meetings of AMSS and NEN with PLD and its resource pool were held to review the case studies, identify gaps, and discuss course corrections and trends. The information on the 16 case studies on which this report is based, as well as the information on the socio-economic and demographic particularities of the districts of Assam covered in the report, was provided by AMSS and NEN. Data from the 16 case studies was organized by PLD, as was the analysis and writing of this report.

Sixteen is not a statistically significant figure, and the geographic coverage of select parts of two districts does not make for definitive claims. Yet, its value remains by virtue of being one of the few,

¹⁵ See NEN's website: www.northeastnetwork.org.

if not the only study of the kind in Assam. The inferences in this study are drawn strictly based on the data from the case studies documented through fieldwork, as well as data from police records. Even as the claims made in this report are specific to the data of this study, the findings may be extrapolated more broadly to understand witch hunting in Assam, although the possibilities of analysis around different axes or of findings other than the ones in this report remain. That is to say, this is not an exhaustive analysis of witch hunting, and other evidence from the field may lead to additional findings that can enrich and add to the findings presented in this study.

The guidelines for selecting case studies incorporated diversity of age, social grouping, economic status and attention to the range of violations. These criteria were factored to the extent possible, as much depended on search channels in the field which relied upon various sources of information and news reports. Although men are known to be targeted as witches in Assam as evident from media reports and the data from police records documented for this study, a decision was made by NEN and AMSS to focus on women victims, to highlight the

dominant trend. The social grouping from which victims have been drawn appear limited because regions are dominated by one social group, which resulted in more cases from the dominant communities.

Also, although the fieldwork was meant to factor in views of perpetrators and community members, to document as many perspectives and narratives of the event, this was rarely possible with the polarization and suspicion within the community on the issue. The fieldwork and data collection was undertaken by several field investigators, with varying degrees of understanding and documentation skills. The information was gathered originally in the local Assamese and transcribed in English, which through the various stages of data processing underwent some transformation and simplification. The loss of some of the nuances and complexities is inevitably part of a process-oriented action research, which involves varying degrees of skills, understanding and distance from the field covered. To minimize this as far as possible, the report once written was returned to AMSS and NEN for their comments and inputs before it was finalized.

CHAPTER 1

Contextualizing The Victims Of Witch Hunting

There are two categories of victims that can be identified in cases of witch hunting. The 16 case studies from Assam show that the category of victims is larger than those primarily targeted as witches, for family members and supporters of those labelled witches also often get victimized during the course of targeting. Accordingly, the 16 primary victims constitute just one set of victims – those accused as witches. In addition, other people, particularly family members and supporters, who were collaterally victimized, make the total number of victims higher than 16 (or one per case study). Sometimes the collateral victims

also risk getting labelled. This chapter looks at the main or primary targets of witch hunting, as well as those who bear the brunt of the attack collaterally, on account of their proximity to and support of the main victim. These two categories– the 16 victims who were targeted as witches, as well as about 39 collateral victims– are discussed separately. The profiles of the main or primary victims are discussed in detail, while the section on collateral victims examines their relationship with the main victim, in order to understand the category of relatives (or kin) and associates that are likely to also be victimized.

I. Attributes of the primary victim

The criteria used for profiling of the 16 primary victims in the case studies include sex, age, marital status, caste/group identity, economic status and educational status, each of which is set out in a separate subsection below. The major

trends that appear in relation to each of these comprise the attributes that define a typical primary victim – in other words, attributes that render a person more vulnerable to being targeted as a witch.

A. Sex of the victims

The main victims who were targeted as witches in our case studies are all women. It does not follow, however, that men are never targets of

witch hunting. Indeed, there are cases where men have been known to be victims, in similar studies conducted by PLD in other states

as also in the data from police records in Assam.¹⁶ However, since women are the primary targets, and men constitute a considerably small figure, the case studies selected for

B. Age of the victims

The age of a woman signals her position in the household and in the community, as well as her social role, all indicators to why she is possibly targeted. The dominant trends relating to the victim's age point towards the category of women most vulnerable to such targeting. The data from the case studies on age is consolidated in the graph below.

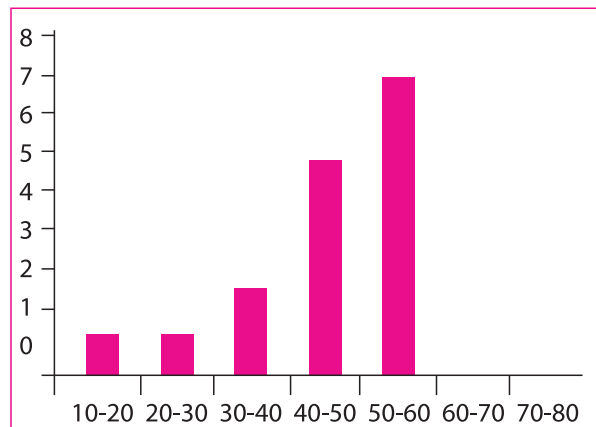


Figure 1.1. Age groups of victims of witch Hunting

The graph indicates that women in the age group of 50-60 years form the most vulnerable group, followed by women in the age group of 40-50. In our case studies, women in the age group of 40-60 make up 12 out of 16 cases, which is more than 75% of the cases, making this the predominant age group amongst victims. What also emerges is that women outside this age group, although not entirely immune, are not likely targets, reducing their vulnerability considerably. There were two victims in the age group of 30-40 years and one

documentation in this study pertain to women. It is learnt that female victims tend to be targeted more often and more brutally.¹⁷

each in the 10-20 and 20-30 age groups. The facts of these cases need to be examined more closely to understand the unique factors that contributed to their being labelled as witches, despite their age. It is noteworthy that we found no instance of victimization in the age groups of 60-70 and 70-80 years. However, we cannot conclude thereby that this age group is not vulnerable, since the population of this group is likely to be low on account of increased mortality at this age.

The 40-60 age group that appears to be most vulnerable, purely on account of their age, are likely to be women who occupy a fairly strong position in their household and in the community.

Our data also includes a case where the victim was in the 10-20 age group, i.e. below 20 years of age (ASM XIII). However, in this case, the victim was targeted when she was 19 years old, very close to the 20-30 age category. The peculiar facts of her case bring out ways in which the victim was perceived as distinct from her peers, in choosing to abstain from drinking with them, having a boyfriend who proposed marriage, all of which became causes of jealousy. The victimization of women of younger age groups is therefore not ruled out but is an exception, with vulnerability to victimization increasing from the age of 30 years, and highest for the middle and older age groups.

¹⁶ PLD (2014), *Contemporary Practices of Witch Hunting: A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law*, Delhi. This report on witch hunting in Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh includes case studies of two male victims from Chhattisgarh. The chapter in this report based on police records on witch hunting documents several male victims targeted as witches in Goalpara district of Assam.

¹⁷ According to the information provided by AMSS.

C. Marital status of the victims

The marital status of the victims in our data directly correlates to the age of the victims. All our victims were married, except one who was under the age of 20. The table shows the distribution of the victims into the categories of married, widowed and never married.

Never married	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Married	0	1	2	4	5	0	0
Separated	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Widowed	0	0	0	1	2	0	0
Total in age Group	1	1	2	5	7	0	0

Table 1.1. Marital status of the victims of witchhunting

The data shows that most of the victims were in marriages that were still subsisting, as 12 out of 16 women were married when they were victimized. There were three cases where the women were widowed and the only case where the victim was not married pertains to the victim who was below the age of 20. Notably, not a single victim in our data was divorced or separated. Although three of the victims were widowed, it must be noted that the social stigma attached to widowhood in large parts of India does not apply in the context of Assam, and in particular, in the communities the victims are from.

The most striking aspect of our findings on the marital status of the victims is the fact that 15 out of 16 victims were married at

some point in their life. The only unmarried victim was under 20 years, was about to get married before the victimization took place, and in fact, was targeted on account of jealousy due to the developments connected with her marriage. Indeed, in all the cases of married victims witch hunting took place while women were residing in their affinal or marital villages, which points to the role of the marital kin in victimization.

The findings from our data, limited though it is to 16 cases, show married women as being more vulnerable to targeting. It is also important to note that contrary to popular belief, widows are not over-represented in our sample; they constitute only three out of 16 victims.

D. Caste/group identity of the victims

As mentioned in the introduction, Assam has a demographic composition that is distinct from other states. According to the census of 2011, Assam has a tribal population of 12.4% which includes the indigenous population of Boro, Mishing, Deori, Rabha, Tiwa, Khamti, Sonowal, Kachari, Phakial, Dimasa, Karbi, to name a few. In addition, there are the tribal communities from the Chotanagpur region brought as indentured labour for the tea plantations in Assam during the 1860s who, despite sustained demands, have been denied the ST status they have in their states

of origin. This study includes cases from the TGL community, which cannot be categorized as urban or industrial nor as a rural population, as they belong to a separate stratum of the state economy that has been at the social and economic margins, and denied incentives attached to the ST status. It is this context that defines the lives of many of the victims of this study.

The table below reflects the group identities of the victims of this study, categorized according to their caste/tribal status into Boro, Rajbongshi,

Rabha and the adivasis who are employed as the TGL. The Boro and Rabha communities can be put under the broad category of ST for Assam, while the Rajbongshi and the adivasis are categorized as OBC and MOBC. The Rabhas are indigenous to Goalpara, while the adivasis are dominant in Sonitpur, which explains the group identities that figure predominantly in our data.

1	1	6	8

Table 1.2. Group identities of the victims

E. Economic condition of the victims

The economic condition of the victims, like their age groups, throws some light on the position of the women concerned. The victim's economic status outlined here is more in terms of the household's economic status rather than the individual victim's as it is difficult to distinguish between the individual's assets and those of the family in a rural context, especially where they live as a common household. The majority of the victims were not in paid employment or individual title-holders of property. Hence, the household economy is the only available indicator for assessing the economic condition of the victims. However, the few instances where victims were employed or owned property have been mentioned as well. The economic status of the victim and her family in some cases appears to have been the cause for targeting and victimization, inevitably resulting in loss of property.

- **Ownership of land:** The districts chosen for fieldwork are predominantly rural, where landownership is a major indicator of prosperity. Of the 16 victims, nine had access to family and household land and assets, and only in one case did the victim herself have individual title to land in her paternal village acquired through

In terms of religious identity and practices, the Rabhas are known to follow animism, incorporating some Hindu practices in their rituals; most of the adivasi victims, seven out of eight, have self-identified as Hindus, with only one amongst them a Christian, a convert (ASM XIII).

inheritance. The table below provides details regarding landownership of the victims.

7	3	3	3

Table 1.3. Landholdings of the victims

The data shows that all seven landless victims are from the adivasi community, and were using encroached land (i.e., land not registered in their name) temporarily. Only one adivasi victim owned between 1-5 bigha land, as inheritance after the death of her father (ASM VII).

The rest of the victims, all with varying quantities of land, are from the Rabha, Rajbongshi and Boro communities, which are indigenous to Assam, and distinct from the TGL. Amongst the landed group, there are some with very little land, between 1 to 5 bigha (ASM V, ASM VI, ASM VII) and others with marginally modest holdings of more than 5 bigha but less than 10 bigha (ASM II, ASM III, ASM X). There are also three cases where the victim's family possessed more than 10 bigha of land (ASM I, ASM XIV). The highest recorded land owned, i.e. 18 bigha, is actually not too large for a family whose primary source of livelihood is

cultivation (ASM XVI). An important distinction between the adivasis on the one hand, and the Rabha, Rajbongshi and Boro on the other, is that former constitute the TGL communities who came into Assam as indentured labour to work in the tea gardens; the latter are indigenous to Assam and primarily involved in agriculture, which also explains their land titles.

The economic status of victims in our data can be broadly catalogued as follows: those from the TGL community were landless, and those from the Rabha, Boro or Rajbongshi groups had minimal to modest land. The only TGL victim with landed property inherited it, apparently leading to jealousy that led to her being targeted. The fact that some of the victims had landownership does not imply that they were economically well off, particularly given the modest landholdings (as they were primarily agriculturists), but that they were better off than the TGL.

■ **Living conditions, ownership of livestock and vehicles:** This section will discuss the living conditions, and the livestock and vehicles owned by the victim as indicators of their economic status.

The data indicates that most of the victims owned small quantities of livestock, comprising cattle, goats and poultry, with three having no livestock at all (ASM III, ASM VIII, ASM XIII). The largest ownership of livestock consisted of three cows and five to six hens (ASM X), four cows, one pig and three ducks (ASM VII), and two cows and two bullocks (ASM I). The remaining three victims and their families either owned much smaller number of animals, or owned none at all. For most of the families, the livestock was not a primary source of income but supplemented the nutritional needs of the household, besides enabling them to generate a small income through the sale of dairy produce.

As for vehicles, the victims and their families

possessed only the most basic forms of transport. Most owned a cycle or at the most a motorcycle. The highest number of vehicles belonged to ASM XIII who had three cycles, followed by ASM II who owned a cycle and a motorcycle. The rest owned one cycle each.

In terms of the living condition of the victims, most of their houses were pucca, prior to their victimization, with only one victim (ASM VIII) living in a kutchra or thatch house before her victimization. Of the 15 victims living in pucca accommodation, 13 owned their own accommodation, and two did not own a house, living instead in the company quarters provided by their employers (ASM XIII, ASM XI). In ASM IV and ASM XVI the victims had two pucca houses and one pucca house respectively. One of the victims also had a house constructed under the Indira Awas Yojana (ASM II). Only one victim lived in very poor conditions even prior to her victimization.

Besides livestock, vehicles and housing, some of the victims had other property also, such as a weaving loom (ASM I) or a pucca well (ASM V). Other forms of ownership included rubber farms or betel gardens (ASM III, ASM IV), or a fishery (ASM VI).

■ **Occupation:** Agriculture is the primary occupation of the village communities in Assam, and this is reflected in nine out of the 16 victims' families being involved mainly in agriculture. In addition, most of the families of the victims were also engaged in non-agricultural economic pursuits. Our data shows that a large number of victim families from the adivasi communities were employed in tea gardens as both permanent and temporary casual labour, in addition to working as shared agriculture labour (ASM VIII, ASM X, ASM XII, ASM XIII). There are a few cases where the victims' husbands had some other livelihood: one had a tea shop (ASM V) and one worked as a caretaker in a nursery (ASM XI). There

is also an instance of the victim being a widow whose primary sources of income were raising livestock, undertaking contractual farming with owners (*adhikheti*) and receiving a widow's pension from the government (ASM XIV).

Other secondary occupations with which the victims and their families supplemented their household income were selling farm products, like betel nuts, mustard seeds, seasonal fruits,

vegetables, or forest products, like firewood and straw (ASM IV, ASM V, ASM IX, ASM XV). Working as casual labour also appears to be a common source of secondary income (ASM II, ASM III, ASM VII, ASM XVI). There are a few cases where the supplementary household income came from contractual shared farming or *adhikheti* (ASM XI), weaving (ASM I) or working as a *dhai*, midwife (ASM XIV), or an *ojha*, healer (ASM XVI).

F. Educational status of the victims

The data on the educational status of the victims is dismal with 12 out of the 16 victims in the case studies having received no formal education.

12	3	1

Table 1.4. Education status of the victims

There is a lack of formal education among the victims of witch hunting. Even if our sample size is too small to make conclusive claims that lack of education creates an enabling environment for

witch hunting, at the very least, it indicates a plausible link that needs more attention.

There is some evidence in our case studies, however, of highly educated individuals being present in the village communities where the targeting and victimization has taken place. While it is clear that all victims are defined by lack of formal education, establishing a plausible connection between denial of education and victimization, it is equally apparent that formal education alone is not enough to tackle practices like witch hunting.

II. Persons collaterally victimized in witch hunting

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, a number of persons other than those directly labelled witches are also victimized in many of the cases, making the total number of victims higher than the actual number of cases documented. This section looks at the secondary victims of witch hunting, to map relationships that render a person vulnerable to secondary victimization and

the types of victimization that occur.

The number of secondary victims is more than twice the number of primary victims. Based on a modest calculation, the table below shows an approximate figure of 39 secondary victims for 16 primary victims. In most cases the entire family has been affected and victimized.

ASMI	The victim's daughters	The daughters are not receiving marriage proposals.	3
ASM III	The victim's family	They are socially isolated; her daughters are not receiving marriage proposals.	7

ASMIII	The victim's husband and children	They suffered a lot for supporting the victim.	5
ASMIV	The victim's husband and children	The victim's husband was threatened and asked to assault the victim. The children are separated from their mother.	3
ASMV	The victim's sister and nephew	They had to pay a fine for supporting the victim.	2
ASMVI	The victim's daughters	The daughters were also called witches and defamed; the older daughter committed suicide in the face of such threats.	3
ASMVII	The victim's husband	He was hit on his ear and turned deaf as a result, and was evicted from the village along with the victim, ultimately losing his livelihood.	1
ASMVIII	The victim's family	The husband was tied to a tree, beaten up and raped with a rod; the daughters were gang-raped and rods were inserted in their vagina; acid was thrown on all of them.	2
ASMIIX	The victim's husband and uncle	They were beaten, threatened and asked to leave the place.	2
ASMX	The victim's husband	He had to change residence.	1
ASMXI	The victim's husband	He lost his job along with the victim and they live in a makeshift shed with their children.	1
ASMXII	The victim's family	The victim's family was threatened and asked to leave the village; they lost their primary source of income.	5
ASMXIII	None	None	0
ASMXIV	None	None	0
ASMXV	None	None	0
ASMXVI	Husband and her entire family	Husband was killed along with the victim. Her family is still harassed in the village.	4
Total			39

Table 1.5. Collateral victims in the cases of witch hunting

The table above outlines the vulnerability of husbands, sons, daughters and other members of the main victim's families as collateral victims.

III. Conclusion

The attributes defining the victims reflect a combination of individual, social and economic characteristics that increase vulnerability to being labelled as a witch. Women emerge as the primary targets of witch hunting when they are in the middle and above middle age categories. Most victims are in subsisting marriages. In fact the data on collateral victimization shows that support of their husbands does not shield them from being targeted, and in fact makes their husbands vulnerable to equally brutal secondary victimization.

The data also indicates that landownership or the lack of it does not play a significant role in shaping

vulnerability or immunity from targeting. The victims from the STs of Assam, in most of the cases, are agriculturalists, owning landed property. In contrast, the victims from the TGL community are substantially poor, not landowners, and subsist upon the tea garden economy directly or indirectly. All victims are living at the economic and social margins, with little or no formal education, multiple sources of income for subsistence, and in contexts where there is little evidence of state welfare in education that has significantly impacted their lives.

CHAPTER 2

Instigators and Perpetrators in Witch Hunts

For the purposes of this study, we define the instigator as the one who accuses or labels the victim as a 'witch', regardless of the reasons for targeting. The instigator may be the *ojha* or village healer, but it would be incorrect to assume the involvement of an *ojha* in all the cases, or to view the *ojha* as the only instigator. In our data all

instigators are also perpetrators, and the two terms are therefore used interchangeably. This chapter contextualizes the social and economic backgrounds of the instigators, and their relationship with the victims, to help understand the motivations for targeting, which we examine in the next chapter.

I. Relationship between the instigator and the victim

The data reflects that in most of the cases documented, the instigators and perpetrators were known to the victims. They were either physically proximate to the victims or with familial ties to the victims. Our study shows a high rate of involvement of neighbours as instigators, followed by relatives and co-workers. In eight out of 16 cases, the main instigator was a neighbour of the victim (ASMIII, ASMV, ASMVII, ASMIX, ASMXII, ASMXIII,

ASMXIV, ASMXV). Relatives who instigated the victimization closely follow this number. In five out of 16 cases the victims of witch hunting were related to their perpetrators through marriage (ASMI, ASMII, ASMIV, ASMVI, ASMX). In the remaining cases the perpetrators were co-workers (ASMVIII, ASMXI) and in only one case the perpetrator was both related by marriage and was a co-worker of the victim (ASMX).

Cases	ASMI, ASMII, ASMIV, ASMVI, ASMX	ASMIII, ASMV, ASMVII, ASMIX, ASMXII, ASMXIII, ASMXIV, ASMXV	ASMVIII, ASMXI	ASMXVI
Total Cases	5	8	2	1

Table 2.1. Relationship between the main perpetrator and the victim

This proximity in relationship and location between the victim and the perpetrators also suggests a close social and economic

relationship, which could become competitive in some cases, giving rise to conflict between them.

II. Role of *ojhas*

In addition to the main instigators, discussed above, there may also be an involvement of *ojhas*, who are known to sometimes lead and, at other times, reinforce the accusation of witchery, which often signals the commencement of physical violence and active victimization. In at least 12 out of the 16 cases collected by us, an *ojha*

was involved in the process of labelling a victim as a witch. Notably, in our case studies, the *ojhas* did not intervene on their own initiative although their intervention and role magnified the impact of labelling. The table below demonstrates the involvement of *ojhas* in the cases documented.

Cases	ASMI, ASMIII, ASMV, ASMVI, ASMVII, ASMVIII, ASMIX, ASMXI, ASMXII, ASMXIII, ASMXIV, ASMXV	ASMII, ASMIV, ASMX, ASMXVI
Total Cases	12	4

Table 2.2. Involvement of *ojhas* in victimization

The findings of this data suggest that while the involvement of the *ojhas* is high in cases of witch

hunting, it is not imperative, as in four cases there was no involvement of *ojhas*.

III. Sex of the instigators

The data shows that the instigators and the perpetrators of witch hunting were not exclusively men. In a number of cases, women

were also directly involved in the targeting of the victim.

Cases	ASMV, ASMVI, ASMVIII, ASMIX, ASMXII, ASMXIV, ASMXV, ASMXVI	ASMIII, ASMIV, ASMVII, ASMX, ASMXIII	ASMI, ASMII, ASMXI
Total Cases	8	5	3

Table 2.3. Sex of the main instigator

The data indicates that although there are fewer cases in which the instigators were primarily female (only five out of 16), there are a number of cases in which men and women were both involved. In all, women were party to about eight

out of 16 cases of witchhunting, with or without male instigators, which is equal to the number of cases with only male instigators. Therefore in 50% of the cases women participated along with the men as primary instigators.

IV. Caste/group identity of the instigators in relation to the victims

Our case studies do not provide information about caste/group identities of the perpetrators. However, in case of perpetrators who belong to the familial circle of the victims, we can deduce that in these cases, the former belonged to the same group as the latter.

In cases where the victim and perpetrators were neighbours or co-workers, the case studies suggest that even here, they belonged to similar social strata. From the case studies we can deduce that in the eight cases where the perpetrators were neighbours of the victims, both the parties belonged to similar social groups, if not the same.

In ASMI, the main instigators belonged to the same caste group as the victim but the persons who were hired to murder her (disguised as army personnel looking for militants) were unknown and belonged to a different group.¹⁸ However, in the case of ASMIII, the difference in the

caste/social group of the victim and the perpetrator arose because the victim had married a person from a different community, and had irked the perpetrators (from her husband's social group) on account of different rituals and religious practices. This led the perpetrators to assume she was practising witchcraft.

Beyond these two cases of differences between the social group of victims and the perpetrators, which appear in the facts of the given cases to be more incidental than significant, we were unable to discern any significant inter-caste and community dynamic in the sample size of this study of witch hunting in Assam. This, however, does not exclude the possibility of caste/social group differences, or indeed other sources of structural conflict and tensions, feeding into victimization related to witch hunting.

V. Economic condition of the perpetrators in relation to the victims

Details of the economic condition of the perpetrators were available only minimally through the fieldwork, as the polarization between the perpetrators and the victims' families made it difficult to approach the perpetrators directly. Information was therefore pieced together through other informants and sources.

In the cases where the data on land, livestock, housing and vehicle possession is available, a sizeable number of cases show that the economic status of the victim and that of the perpetrator were more or less at par or that the differences were not significant enough to be the cause of the targeting, although material interests have played a role in some cases.

The available data on the economic status of the instigator, although not substantial or complete, suggests that in seven out of 16 cases the perpetrator was better off than the victim (ASMII, ASMIII, ASMV, ASMVI, ASMVII, ASMXI, ASMXIII), and in only three out of 16 cases are there clear evidences of the victim possessing more assets than the main instigator. In two cases the victim and the perpetrator were on economic parity, and the information in the remaining four cases is not sufficient for assessing the perpetrator's economic status.

In the seven cases where the perpetrators appeared to be of much better off economically than the victims, they were either owners of large tracts of land, as high as 70 bigha (ASMV), or they

¹⁸ Garo (a matrilineal tribe originally from Meghalaya, also residing in its bordering areas in Assam like Goalpara).

owned more livestock, vehicles and had much better housing conditions than the victims, although their land holdings were similar. There were fewer situations in which the

VI. Conclusion

While women appear to be the primary targets of witch hunting, the instigators (and indeed, the perpetrators) are not exclusively men. There are as many as half the number of case studies that reflect the primary involvement of women in instigating and perpetuating violence on the victims.

The findings in the sample size of this study show that the instigators and perpetrators were not strangers to the victims; indeed, there was a social and economic proximity between the two, in that they were related by extended marital ties, or were neighbours or co-workers. The caste/group identity of the perpetrator is not available in the collected data but one can deduce from the case studies that the victim and perpetrator belong to

victim was better off economically and in all those cases the victims were found to possess more land than the perpetrators (ASMI, ASMX, ASMXVI).

similar social communities, if not the same community.

The data on the economic status of the instigators is not adequate but to the extent it is available, it suggests that the instigators were economically better off in slightly less than half the cases; in only three of the cases were the victims economically better off. These variations in the economic conditions of the victims and the perpetrators do not allow us to reach any general conclusions about the economic basis of witch hunting except to say that only exceptionally are the involved parties very affluent and victims are less likely to be so than the perpetrators.

CHAPTER 3

Factors that Trigger Targeting and Victimization

This chapter throws light on motivations underpinning the targeting of persons as witches. While recognizing that superstition and belief systems of the community create a context that sanctions accusations of witchcraft, most case studies reveal other factors at play, including pre-existing tensions/ conflict between the instigator and the victim. These other factors make for a complex reading of witch hunting, where individual motives and tensions, as well as systemic deprivations and structural failures, come together to target and victimize particular individuals and those who are close to them. This section will examine the complex reasons – both individual and contextual – that appear to play a significant

role in the targeting of a particular person as a witch. We will also consider the structural factors that make it possible for victimization to happen with the tacit support and non-interference by the wider community. Superstition or the belief in witchcraft is not discussed as an independent factor, as it appears to be part of a wider belief system that is not limited to the regions where witch hunting is reported, but extends beyond those. We therefore believe that the belief system cannot be considered to be an independent or exclusive factor, but one that assumes greater force when it combines with individual motivations and structural and systemic failures that enable witch hunting.

I. Structural factors that enable witch hunting

By structural factors we mean the social, economic and political contexts that shape the lives, status and relations of the communities from which victims are drawn. We will look at the development status of the region from where the victims in Assam are drawn, as well as the status of the communities to which they belong. This section sets out the status of the two districts – Goalpara and Sonitpur– discussing the overall social and economic status, and within that, the communities to which the majority of the victims in our case studies belong.

Goalpara: This was declared one of the country's 250 most backward districts by the Government of India in 2006, and therefore it receives funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF). As per our fieldwork, most families in Goalpara belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category.

The Rabha, Boro and Rajbongshi communities, from which a number of victims of our case studies are drawn, are indigenous to this region. They remain one of the most backward in Assam

due to the lack of government initiatives to develop the area or the community. The Rabha community has been demanding an Autonomous District Council in Goalpara and some parts of neighbouring Kamrup district, which the state government rejected on the grounds that the region does not come under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This led to the Rabhas protesting against the Panchayat elections in the district in 2013, in the course of which riots broke out between the Rabhas and the Muslims, because the latter supported the elections and are against the formation of the Autonomous Council.¹⁹

Sonitpur: The adivasis comprising the TGL and former TGL community in Sonitpur, as mentioned in the introduction, is considered to be the most exploited and under-privileged community in Assam. In spite of demands for ST status, which they are entitled to in their states of origin, this community has only been recognized as an OBC or MOBC group in Assam. The TGL community is involved in the tea garden

II. Individual factors

Within the socio-economic context described above, we now take stock of the individual motivations and factors which lead the instigators to accuse the victims as witches. The motives have been clustered into broad themes for emphasis, although these are not exclusive but often interconnected with each other and, indeed, with the structural factors discussed above. Often, multiple conflicting motives appear to be at play in a given case – some alluding to personal reasons, and others based on narratives of witchcraft.

economy, with little access to state benefits on account of the lack of ST status. The infrastructure for education, health, public distribution, sanitation or hygiene in the coolie lines (TGL residential areas) is severely inadequate, with the supply of electricity and drinking water being below minimum health standards.²⁰

The lack of education, lack of availability of and access to a reasonable standard of healthcare, and administrative neglect in terms of basic needs and services create conditions where disease is common and routine illness can be fatal; it sets the context that enables rather than prevents witch hunting, and lends impunity to perpetrators confident of the inaction of the law enforcement machinery. The structural factors become important in understanding how witch hunting helps rationalize tragedies and resolve conflicts, and why superstition, which is not unique to any population group or region in India, can assume the form of witch hunting in select regions and communities.

A. Illnesses, deaths and tragedies

Our case studies show that an accusation of witchcraft is triggered by a situation that spurs the instigator in some way. There are also individual tragedies or collective ones that lead to despair, and search for a resolution in some way. We look at the various motives and triggers setting off the accusations and victimization in the case studies.

In a number of cases, the trigger was the illness or death of a human or an animal, and the

¹⁹ After the riots, although the Assam government agreed to hold Rabha council elections in November 2013, the social situation remains tense. This information is provided by AMSS.

²⁰ B. Saikia (2009), 'Development of Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam', *Dialogue*, Vol.10 (3).

attribution of this to the victim. In all the cases collected from Assam the victims were held responsible for an *actual* or *alleged* illness (ranging from wounds and infection, mental illness, stomach aches, diarrhoea, fever, malaria, tuberculosis, jaundice, etc.), inability to conceive a child or birth of still-born babies, deaths due to illness or even death of the victim's own children.

The accusations become all the more plausible in contexts where the victim shares physical and familial proximity with the instigator, which we know is a common feature of all cases (already discussed in the first two chapters). Anxieties and grief in these situations play into existing tensions between the parties, or are manipulated by *ojhas*, *deodhanis* or such local healers, who confirm the accusations. The *ojhas* do not introduce the idea of a 'witch'; they confirm the idea and perform or reinforce the identification. The lack of medical facilities or necessary infrastructure in the concerned areas makes the *ojhas* more important than they would be in a context where quality health care is available and accessible.

It may be added here that once a woman (or a man) is identified as responsible for any particular undesirable event, a series of other accusations may be made which reinforce and further establish claims about the suspicious conduct of the victim. Often extreme religiosity, difference in religious practices, any novel ritual practice, etc. are themselves read as signs of witchcraft and may be treated as evidence to support the labelling.

B. Jealousy, animosity and conflict

Often, inconsequential or random events such as repeated bad dreams, death on account of an undiagnosed illness a few days after a feast offered by the victim or a visit by the victim or, indeed, an altercation with the victim seem to trigger accusations, especially where pre-existing conflict, tension, animosity or jealousy

is evident. The accusations of witchcraft enable the instigator to resolve such conflicts through means that brook no opposition or debate. This accusation may be intentionally orchestrated in some cases; in others, certain peculiar mishaps feed into existing tensions, leading to blaming the victim, who was accidentally found in proximity to the person or place where such mishaps took place. That is to say, the case studies indicate that witch accusations are sometimes used to settle scores, and at other times it appears that belief in superstition fuels suspicion against someone with whom animosity in the broadest sense already exists.

In one case, the perpetrator's ailing wife would often see the victim in her dreams, leading her to suspect the victim of being a witch (ASMI). There is also an instance where the victim had verbally abused and cursed the instigator's daughter; later, when the young girl happened to get wounded and contracted an infection, the victim was blamed – although the victim herself explained the targeting as an excuse to deny her wages (ASMXI). In one case, the instigator's wife died after consuming rice beer served at the house of the victim and the death was seen as an outcome of some black magic practised by the victim; although jealousy appears to be at play as the victim, despite being a woman, had inherited land from her father, and her husband had grown vegetables on the instigator's land without permission (ASMVII). There are cases where the need to rationalize a death or illness appears to have been combined with the desire to settle scores with an inconvenient relative, neighbour/village resident or a co-worker. There is one instance where a rejection of a sexual proposition by the victim festered animosity; the perpetrator (male) had made sexual advances, and on one occasion attempted to sexually impose himself on the victim who hit back, injuring him in the process (ASMVIII). Similarly, the 19-year-old

victim appeared to have been targeted because not only did she have different habits from her girlfriends, she also had a boy friend who had proposed marriage to her. The girlfriends were infatuated with the same boy, making jealousy a strong factor underlying the targeting (ASM XIII).

C. Material and economic reasons

In two-thirds of the case studies, it is possible to identify factors that may have formed a material basis for a conflict between the perpetrator and the victim, more often between the families of the two. It is striking that in these cases, disputes over land, intentions to grab land or houses, attempts to offset legitimate claims to property, jealousy over the prosperity of the victim's family due to their economic entrepreneurship or holding more property due to circumstances such as inheritance, failure to establish control over the victim or her family (socially as well as economically), jealousy over the victim's strong marital bonds or possibility of acquiring inheritance through a second marriage caused discord and animosity, leading to the targeting of the victims and their families.

In six out of 16 cases, there was property dispute or conflict over material wealth within the context of a familial relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (ASM IV, ASM V, ASM VI, ASM VII, ASM IX, ASM XII). There is yet another set of cases where jealousy over other forms of prosperity in familial bonds and relationships led to victimization (ASM II, ASM X, ASM XII). Attempts to avoid payments or sharing of income with co-workers and neighbours lay behind victimization in two cases (ASM XI, ASM XIV). To avoid rightful payments to the victim, the instigators orchestrated the accusation of witchcraft to get rid of the victim.

D. Transgression, non-conformity, difference

The personality of the victim, particularly her assertiveness and characteristics that set her apart as different or transgressive, also become a reason for labelling. In a few cases, the victim's outspoken and assertive behaviour evoked suspicion within the community which fuelled the targeting. In one case, the victim was labelled a witch because she was vocal, articulate and assertive in the village community, and continued to demand justice for her sister's murder (ASM XV). An outspoken woman who challenges, questions or demands, rather than accepts male dominance, or the way things are, tends to get silenced through witch hunting. The victim choosing to marry a man from a different community, her confidence and habit of freely socializing and drinking with male co-workers, made her vulnerable to sexual advances, slurs and eventually witch hunting (ASM VIII).

There are cases where the primary reason behind victimization was either differences in ritual practices or failure to participate in ritual observation that is considered important by the community. Some victims followed Christianity instead of the common religious practices of the community members, or in other cases, adopted rituals of different sects even though they belonged to the same religion as the rest of the community. In one case, the victim along with most neighbours started following the cult of Shri Chaitanya (one form of Vaishnavism); in another case, she continued having non-vegetarian food even after converting to Vaishnavism. Their non-conformity evoked suspicion in the community, making them vulnerable to the accusation of witchcraft. ASM I, ASM II, ASM III, ASM IV, ASM VIII and ASM XII are cases that illustrate victimization on account of such differences.

III. Conclusion

This chapter was an attempt to understand the factors other than superstition or belief in witchcraft that appear to be the underlying determinants and triggers in witch hunting. When these factors, structural and individual, co-exist with beliefs in superstition, the targeting is most likely to occur.

We find that superstition alone does not appear to be sufficient reason – as in most of the cases the victim shares the belief system but is nonetheless aware of the concrete inter-personal reasons that motivate her victimization. In a majority of cases we found that the reasons stated by the instigator/perpetrators for the targeting of particular women as witches were not the same reasons stated by the victims, although they both share the belief system.

This difference in what the two parties view as motives signifies that even though the victims and their families subscribed to the same superstitious belief systems, they were aware of the tangible reasons that led the instigators to accuse them of witchery and, more importantly, recognize this as revenge. The

victim and the family of the victims provide complex narratives, with historical depth and concrete instances of animosity in describing the motives for victimization. This awareness exists despite the victims confessing that they believed in the existence of witches, the power of witchcraft, and therefore willingly participated in ritual practices to prove their innocence. They were clear that the accusations against them were motivated by tangible animosity between them and the instigator, not actual suspicion of witchcraft. There are fewer cases where the victim refused the innocence test, fearing that her ill-luck would confirm the accusation (ASMVII). In contrast, the version of the perpetrators that we gleaned through fieldwork appeared to be flat, a historic and simplistic, hinging entirely on the victim as witch and the role of witchcraft in causing harm to individuals or the community at large. For these reasons, superstition and witchcraft belief systems are not central to the targeting, but have instead been viewed by us as the larger backdrop within which these events take place and get legitimized.

CHAPTER 4

Victimization and its Consequences

Even as reported cases of witch hunting are linked with physical torture and murder, the victimization typically goes much beyond that, beginning with stigma, social exclusion and harassment, with episodes of violence following. The stigma and impoverishment are lasting

consequences of the labelling for victims and their families. This chapter sets out the means by which victimization was carried out in the 16 case studies to understand the extent of debilitation and impoverishment that follows in the wake of being targeted.

I. Gradation and range of violations that comprise victimization

A range and continuum of violations, with physical violence being a part of it, is witnessed in each of the case studies. The following chart displays the gradation and types of violations faced by the victims from our case studies.

The classification of violations is only for the purposes of broad differentiation, although many of these spill into each other. Even as there is a build-up in many of the cases, in some cases, murder is carried out immediately, without warning.

Cases	ASMII, ASMIII, ASMIV, ASMV, ASMVI, ASMVII, ASMIX, ASMX, ASMXI, ASMXII, ASMXIII, ASMXIV, ASMXVI	ASMIV, ASMV, ASMVI, ASMXI, ASMXIV	ASMII, ASMIII, ASMIV, ASMV, ASMIX, ASMX, ASMXI, ASMXII, ASMXIII, ASMXV	ASMVI, ASMVII	ASMI, ASMVIII, ASMXIV, ASMXVI
Total	13	5	10	2	4

Table 4.1. Gradation of violations in witchhunting

Verbal abuse appears to be the most common means by which a person is hounded, stigmatized and ostracized. We found that in a majority of cases, 13 out of 16, the victim was abused in a

variety of local common abusive words and labels that imply a 'witch'. Apart from the common labels used for women who are labelled as a witch (*daini*, *dayan* and *tikker*), different words are used

to abuse the victims as witches. Some of these words are *dahinajana*, *bej*, *ojha*, *najum*, *dainagorh*, *bateloga*, *ramini*, *sikkhal*, *boxi*, *jadu jana manuh*, *zara fuhak kara manuh* and *hawa khawa*. All of these words refer to a person who knows magic or who eats humans. The victimized woman is also called names like *randi* (a woman with multiple sex partners) and *baji maiki* (a childless woman). There are also instances in the cases collected from Assam where the woman has been taunted for being a follower of Christianity or called *masujhari* (mad). It appears that the accusations seek to punish differences, non-conformity or individualism in a broad sense.

Apart from verbal abuse, the case studies show how integral public humiliation is to demonizing the person targeted as a witch. Public humiliation includes being beaten up publicly by the instigators along with a larger group of perpetrators that may include the villagers (ASMIV, ASMXI, ASMVI) or being forced to undergo various tests to prove one's innocence (ASMV). In one instance the villagers chased the targeted woman out of the village (ASMXI). Even gory murders and gang rapes take place in the public (ASMXIV). In fact, unlike a typical murder, attacks and killings related to witch hunting, like the public humiliation, are often carried out in the public gaze.

II. Consequences of witch hunting for the victims

This section looks at the long-term consequences of witch hunting on the victims. The victims continued to experience the humiliation, fear,

Women branded as witches often live with the fear of being physically assaulted or killed. In our case studies, four women were brutally murdered, two faced grave physical violence, and 10 had been threatened and experienced physical attacks that could have turned serious. There are instances of women being brutally attacked with bamboo sticks and daggers (ASMIX, ASMXIII), being pulled by their hair, slapped, punched, beaten up after being tied to a pillar (ASMIV, ASMXII, ASMXI) or dragged by the neck and beaten up (ASMX). There is also an instance where the victim was made to undergo various agonizing tests like sitting on a stool made of thorny wood, holding iron balls or chewing full betel nuts to prove that they are not witches (ASMV). There are a number of cases in which attempts were made to kill the victims but they survived (ASMII, ASMIII, ASMV, ASMXII, ASMXV). Some of the victims also faced grave physical injuries. One of the victims was beaten up with an iron rod and sustained injuries on the head (ASMVI); in another case the victim was beaten up so brutally with a machete that she lost her front teeth (ASMVII). In one extreme case, the victim with her daughter and husband were raped by a group of seven men, rods were inserted into their private parts, after which they were burnt by acid from 24 volts battery (thrown on their faces and private parts) and killed (ASMVIII).

dislocation and social isolation discussed here, long after the immediate attack, at the time of the fieldwork for this study. This section pertains only

to those victims who survived the violence, and does not include the experiences of the four victims who were murdered. The impact on the families of victims, or the collateral victims discussed above, is not part of this section but the

one that follows. The long-term consequences themselves comprise many kinds of violations, which have been categorized under distinct heads to differentiate between types of continuing deprivations and harm that mark the lives of the victims.

Cases	ASMII, ASMIII, ASMVI, ASMVIII, ASMXI, ASMXIII	ASMIII, ASMIV, ASMV, ASMVI, ASMX, ASMXI	ASMII, ASMIII, ASMIV, ASMV, ASMVI, ASMVII, ASMIX, ASMXI, ASMXII	ASMII, ASMIII, ASMIV, ASMV, ASMVII, ASMX, ASMXI, ASMXII	ASMIV, ASMVI, ASMVII, ASMXI
Total	6	6	9	8	4

Table 4.2. Consequences faced by victims of witch hunting

Of the 12 victims who were not killed, nearly half faced social stigma, isolation and ostracization; of these eight were forcibly dislocated from their homes and villages as a consequence of witch hunting. At times the victims were living in complete isolation and were not invited to social gatherings and community events. Loss of access to public resources such as hand pumps, local shops, markets, community meetings and centres is also very common in these cases. There are instances where the victims and/or their families had to move away from their villages, disrupting their general way of life and livelihood. In the eight cases where the victims were evicted from their homestead, they were not allowed to enter the village for years, which reduced their entire families to abject poverty. There are instances where the villagers who tried to resume contact with the victim were fined, discouraging anyone from establishing social relations with the victim or their families (ASMVI).

Serious economic consequences are faced by the victims and their families after the accusation of witchery. In six cases, the victims and their families suffered loss of livelihood or property. This can take many forms such as having to pay large amounts of money to the local *ojhas* or to the villagers (ASMIII, ASMVI), their shop being destroyed and trees in their backyard slashed (ASMV), loss of residence and homestead (ASMIV, ASMX) or land mortgaged, livestock sold and fishery exploited by villagers (ASMVI). As already observed in chapter three, targeting is often triggered by jealousy for economic prosperity, so the loss of livelihood, material resources and resulting impoverishment appear to be intended consequences. There are a number of cases where the victim and her family were made to pay a fine and take an oath after being victimized (ASMIV, ASMVI, ASMVII, ASMXI). There are also cases where the victim and her family were prevented from participating in community rituals (ASMXV).

III. Consequences for the victim's family

That targeting also leads to victimization of the victim's family and supporters has been discussed in chapter one, under the section on secondary or collateral victims. The nature of victimization of collateral victims is compiled in Table 1.5 in chapter one, which may be referred to for this section. It shows that in five out of 16 cases, the victim's entire family suffered along with the victim. In one case the children were separated from the victim (ASMIV); in another, the victim's entire family including her children were victimized (ASMIII). There is one case where the whole family of the victim was murdered along with the victim (ASMIV); in others, the entire family was evicted from their homestead, forgoing their livelihood and being reduced to impoverishment (ASMIX, ASMXI).

The husbands bore the brunt of the victimization of their wives in many cases. In six out of 16 cases the husband of the victim faced minor to serious consequences. In the cases collected from Assam, where the victim had to leave their residence, their husbands followed them in most cases (ASMX, ASMXI). In ASMXI, the husband also lost his livelihood along with the victim. In two cases, the husband of the victim

was beaten up along with the victim, to the extent that he turned deaf in one case (ASMIX, ASMVII). In another case, the husband of the victim was forced to beat his wife (ASMIV); in another, the husband of the victim was also murdered (ASMXVI). In ASMVIII, when the victim's husband protested, he, his wife and their daughter were beaten with a rod, raped and killed, with acid from 24 volts batteries thrown on their face and private parts.

Daughters of the victims are particularly impacted when their mothers are branded as witches. It is commonly believed that a witch passes on the malevolent powers of witchcraft to her daughters, as a result of which the unmarried daughters of a victim rarely get offers for marriage (ASMI, ASMII). In one case, the victim's daughters were intimidated and threatened by the village community to the extent that one of the daughters committed suicide to escape the shame (ASMVI).

While the greatest impact is borne by the nuclear family, in a few cases, the extended family members were threatened, subjected to physical violence and fined for helping the victim (ASMV, ASMIX).

IV. Conclusion

This chapter has helped us understand the range of violations and consequences that the victims in our case studies faced after being branded as witches. While there are serious and extreme consequences like death and physical assault, for which criminal redress exists (although implemented unevenly), it is necessary that the legal vacuum in relation to recovery, healing, rehabilitation and promise of non-recurrence of violence be addressed. The social isolation, economic impoverishment

and forced displacement are wrongs that the state and legal justice must respond to. Criminal law remedies can only play a partial role in tackling witch hunting. Its gravity is not defined by physical violence alone, but by its ability to destroy the victim's social and economic relations for years to come, even a lifetime. It is the state apathy towards these lasting consequences that makes witch hunting as feared and dehumanizing as it is for the victims.

CHAPTER 5

Responses of Family, Neighbours and Authorities

This chapter takes stock of the responses towards the victim from the nuclear family, the extended family, the community/ neighbours, the local authorities and the police. These categories are the ones that commonly recur in the case studies. The nuclear family refers to the members of the same household unit, whereas the extended family includes relatives beyond the household unit, such as the relatives from the parents' extended family and the relatives by marriage. The category of the community is inclusive of neighbours and village residents who reside in the same village unit as the victim. The local

authorities for purposes of this study include state and non-state bodies that exercise leadership, wield a measure of authority and command respect within the community. They include local governance bodies like the Panchayat, the tea garden authorities, Village Defence Party (VDP) and women's welfare organizations like the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) as well as the All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) that is active in Goalpara. The last category is that of the police and the legal system. The attempts at a response to witch hunting made by each of these

I. Response of the immediate family

By immediate family we mean the nuclear family of the victim. This includes the husband, children and, at the most, the in-laws who are living in the

same household with the victim. The cases studies reflect that the immediate family of the victims more often than not supports them.

ASMI	The victim's husband was night blind and could not help her, but was supportive of her.
ASMII	The victim's husband and son supported and advocated for her. Her married daughter even gave her shelter.
ASMIII	The victim's husband and children supported her.
ASMIV	The victim's husband was threatened and coerced into going against her and her children also did not support her.
ASMV	The victim's daughter tried to help her.

ASMVI	Son, daughter tried to help. Her cousin brothers also tried to help.
ASMVII	The victim's husband and sons tried to support her but they were threatened by the villagers.
ASMVIII	The victim's husband and children were all on her side.
ASMIX	The victim's family supported her and tried to protect her.
ASMX	The victim's husband supported her.
ASMXI	The victim's husband and children supported her. Children were too young to be able to help her.
ASMXII	Her husband, 3 children and mother-in-law were with her at the time of labelling. All of them came forward to help the victim.
ASMXIII	The victim's family supported her. Her father was bedridden so could not do anything but her brother helped her.
ASMXIV	The victim's husband is dead and her adopted son was not around.
ASMXV	The victim's husband supported her.
ASMXVI	The victim's husband supported her but the attack was so sudden and brutal that he was rendered helpless, and they were all killed.

Table 5.1. Response of the immediate family

In all cases, the nuclear family extended all possible help to protect the victim during and after the victimization (ASMI, ASMII, ASMIII, ASMVI, ASMVIII, ASMIX, ASMX, ASMXI, ASMXII, ASMXIII, ASMXV). Protection here refers to the family standing by the victim, resisting and shielding her from the violence, and often getting attacked themselves.

In a few cases the immediate family was unable to help the victim, despite their support for her, on account of not being present at the time of attack, or being too frail or threatened by the instigators. There is a case where the victim's husband could not protect the victim because he suffered from night blindness and she was attacked at night (ASMI). There are also cases

where even though the entire family supported the victim, some were not present at the time of attack. In one case the father of the victim was bedridden and hence could not help her, although the other family members protected her (ASMXIII). In another case, the victim's children were too young to help her (ASMXI). In three cases, the victim's family was unable to support her because they were warned against helping her and threatened by the instigators (ASMIV, ASMV, ASMVII). In one case, the victim's husband was dead and her adopted son was not around when the attack occurred (ASMXIV). In another case, the victim's husband was caught unawares by the sudden murderous attack and killed along with her (ASMXVI).

II. Response of the extended family

ASMI	The violation was spearheaded by the victim's husband's nephew and his wife.
ASMII	The violation was initiated by the victim's marital relatives; her brother-in-law also suspected her and tried to assault her.
ASMIII	The victim's brother-in-law and sister-in-law did not help during the victimization due to fear of the villagers.
ASMIV	The victim's stepdaughter and stepson-in-law instigated the accusation and the attack. Her brother supported her for a while but due to pressure from his wife, fought with the victim and forced her to leave. The victim only visits her brother now and does not stay there anymore.
ASMV	The victim's family came to help her later on.
ASMVI	The victim was targeted and victimized by her marital relatives.
ASMVII	No role mentioned.
ASMVIII	Victim's sister supported her.
ASMIX	No role mentioned.
ASMX	The victim's in-laws went against her and supported the perpetrators instead. The perpetrators were also part of the extended family – her husband's brother and his wife.
ASMXI	No role mentioned.
ASMXII	No role mentioned.
ASMXIII	The victim's uncles saved her from being killed.
ASMXIV	Extended family did not accept that she was a witch.
ASMXV	The victim's extended family also protested against accusations made on her.
ASMXVI	No role mentioned.

Table 5.2. Response of the extended family

While the information on the role of the extended family is not adequate in all case studies, the available information does indicate where the extended family did not help or where they instigated the accusation and victimization (ASMI, ASMII, ASMIV, ASMVI, ASMX). In almost all these cases, the perpetrators were related to the victim by marriage. There are only four cases where the extended family came forward to help the victims, offering them shelter and protection after the

victimization and eviction (ASMV, ASMXIII, ASMXIV, ASMXV). In one case the extended family refrained from helping the victim due to threats from the instigators (ASMIII). In another case, opposing roles were played by two sides of the extended family – with the stepdaughter leading the instigation, but the victim's brother playing a supportive role, as he sheltered her after she was abused and evicted from the marital home after the attack by the stepdaughter (ASMIV).

III. Response of the community

ASMI	After the murder of the victim, her neighbours mourned her death and advised her husband to inform the police.
ASMI	The victim's neighbours participated in accusing and taunting her. Some of the community members tried to help the victim but they too were threatened by the community members. The community banished her from the village.
ASMI	The neighbours suspected her and contributed in the targeting. Some of them also accused her of actively undertaking witchcraft activities.
ASMI	Neighbours threatened and tortured her.
ASMI	Her neighbours contributed in the branding and victimization. They destroyed her property and evicted her from the village but one Garo woman from the neighbourhood tried to help her.
ASMI	Villagers contributed to the targeting and beating up of the victim. She was evicted from the village and her property exploited in her absence. She and her family were completely isolated.
ASMI	The villagers contributed in the violation and the victim was threatened and tortured. Later, she was chased out of the village by the community members.
ASMI	The villagers suspected the victim and were indifferent, overall. Her neighbours violated and killed her and her family.
ASMI	The entire Santhal community of the village contributed to the targeting of the victim (also a Santhal) as a witch. Some of them started beating up the victim and her husband. The Santhal community organized a public meeting where they took a decision to permanently cast out the victim and her family from the village. The Nepali and Rajbongshi communities were present in that public meeting. The Nepali people requested them not to do so and spoke up for the victim but the Santhal community warned them, asking them to not interfere with the rules and norms of the Santhal society.
ASMI	Neighbours and community members did not contribute to the violation but kept quiet and tacitly supported the perpetrators. Everyone suspected her.
ASMI	The victim's neighbours supported the instigators and assaulted her.
ASMI	The victim's neighbours believed the instigators and went against the victim.
ASMI	The victim was attacked by her neighbours along with the instigators. The neighbours did not attend the meeting called by the victim and her family.
ASMI	The victim's neighbours instigated and murdered her.
ASMI	The victim's neighbours became suspicious of her. Although they did not contribute to the targeting, they suspected her to some extent because her sister was also labelled a witch and then killed. The death of the perpetrator's daughter was another strong reason for them to believe that the practice of witchcraft was the victim's family tradition.
ASMI	The victim's neighbours instigated the murder. No one came to help the victims.

Table 5.3. Response of the community

The neighbours emerge as the most hostile group in our case studies, playing a significant role in carrying out the victimization. In eight out of 16 cases, the main instigators were neighbours. In six of these eight cases, the neighbours and the overall community joined the primary instigators in targeting the victims, participating actively in the victimization (ASMI, ASMV, ASMVII, ASMXII, ASMXIII, ASMXIV). The overall community participated in the assault and humiliation, and in driving the victims out of the village. There are a few instances of the community also participating in exploiting and destroying the property of the victims.

In ASMI, the victim's social group/ community was absolutely against the victim while the other social groups/communities in the village tried to

help her but to no effect. As for ASMXV, the community suspected the victim but did not contribute to the assault. In the remaining cases, the main instigators were not necessarily neighbours but in these cases too the neighbours played a decisive role in that they remained suspicious of the victim and joined the main instigators in the assault. Even where they did not participate in attacking the victims, they socially isolated and ostracized the victims. In some cases, neighbours of the victims helped the main instigators to murder them (ASMVIII).

Only in one case were the neighbours supportive of the victim and mourned her death (ASMI). The neighbours in this case also encouraged the husband of the victim to register a case with the police.

IV. Response of the local authorities and the police

This data combines the responses of non-state actors as well as state actors. The term 'local authorities' is used here to refer to both state and non-state organizations and leaders who command authority and respect locally; whereas the police represents the state. The local authorities include village bodies like the Panchayat, the tea garden authorities and influential residents of the village whose

voice matters because of their social and economic position. Also included are the Village Defence Party (VDP) and women's welfare organizations like Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) as well as the All Boro Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF). The second category is that of the police and the legal system, the responses of which are clustered separately.

ASMI	No role played.	Police intervened on receiving a murder complaint, after which the main instigator surrendered. He was in jail for 3 months but was released on bail and no one seems to have any idea if the case reached the court.
ASMII	AMSS and ABWWF intervened on her son's complaint and attempted negotiation.	A police complaint was filed by AMSS but the case did not reach the court. Victim is now allowed to stay in the village but no one talks to her and her family.
ASMIII	AMSS was approached and they persuaded the police to intervene.	Due to the persuasion of AMSS, SP Goalpara was involved. Policemen were sent from Lakhipur police station and Rongsai outpost. The police tried to bring about a negotiation.
ASMIV	AMSS intervened and provided the victim shelter.	Police complaint was registered but no action was taken

ASMV	AMSS intervened and requested the villagers to return her land but nothing came of that.	A police report was registered only after the cops were bribed. The police intervened later due to pressure from AMSS, after which the case went to the court; it is still pending.
ASMVI	AMSS along with the police helped the victim get back her property.	The victim's daughter informed the police; they then took her to the hospital. With the help of the police her family has cleared their land from the clutches of the instigators – the brothers-in-law and their sons. The police personnel warned the villagers not to give further trouble and arrested 10 instigators.
ASMVII	No role played.	The police intervened on receiving a complaint from the victim and came to the village but did not extend much help to the victim. Police inaction was due to the bribe they received from the villagers.
ASMVIII	The tea garden authorities informed the police and also gave Rs. 2000 to the sister of the deceased for post - mortem of the bodies. The victim's sister also got help from a local Mahila Samiti. So far they have given her a loan of Rs. 7000 to pursue the case.	The police was informed about the murders by the tea garden authorities. The bodies were discovered by the police. The main instigators were arrested but they were released after serving only 6 months in prison.
ASMIX	Some politically active people from the village sought to negotiate by explaining to the villagers that witches do not exist. They helped the victim and her family to resettle in their original plot. The victim expected justice and she got the assurance that she could return to the village.	Police was not involved.
ASMIX	The victim approached the village authorities but she was asked to leave the village. Even in her natal village the village authorities did not support her.	The victim wanted to report to the police but the perpetrator threatened her.
ASMXI	The victim did not approach anyone for help.	The police was not approached.
ASM XII	No role played.	The victim did not approach the police because she and her family were scared of the villagers.

ASM XIII	No role played.	The victim reported to the police, after which the villagers were warned by the police against harassing the victim.
ASM XIV	No role played.	The police intervened on the complaint of the victim's adopted son who got the information next morning after the respondent called him at his work place. The perpetrator served a 6 months' prison term and are out on bail.
ASM XV	The community members helped her. A community meeting was called by VDP members and the victim's family, and she got the chance to speak against the injustice done to her. Some educated people and the VDP members talked about the superstitions that give rise to belief in witchcraft to address the stigmatization of the victim by the village. The instigators were warned against attacking the victim in the future with threat of severe punishments.	Police was not approached.
ASM XVI	The village headman wrote a complaint to the police on the basis of which a murder case was registered	Police and AMSS intervened on receiving a complaint from the village head. The murder case registered is pending before the Court of Session Judge, Goalpara, at the stage of evidence. The family members expected that the instigators and killers would be punished by now but the police arrested the 3 killers, and the case continues.

Table 5.4. Response of the local authorities and the police

What appears overall is that the local authorities, particularly those that are non-state in nature, such as the AMSS, ABWWF and the tea garden authorities, intervene more promptly and positively in cases, and where they persist, they have ensured that the police and other state authorities respond to the case, to eventually make some difference. The local governance bodies and state authorities have the potential to intervene effectively, but seem to be open to influence. They have been known to be manipulated to not act or turn against the victim

in some cases. The law enforcement in our case studies was very slow to act, and was subject to manipulation or lacked diligence.

There are cases where the victim did not approach any of these authorities or did not receive any kind of support or help from these bodies (ASM IV, ASM VII, ASM X, ASM XI, ASM XII). In these cases either the victim did not approach the authority for fear of the instigators or the victims did go to the police but to no effect. In the latter cases, the victims claimed that the police was

bribed by the villagers to refrain from any kind of intervention.

The local authorities emerge as playing an active role in attempting to diffuse the stigmatization and threats, adopting various strategies. In nine out of 16 cases, the local authorities and NGOs played a lead role in informing the police, negotiating with the community members for rehabilitating the victims, and rendering the victims support to restore and rebuild their lives. AMSS was instrumental in initiating criminal proceedings and diffusing threats against the victims in many cases. ABWWF, which is active in Goalpara, played a significant role too. Local political leaders and the VDP also attempted to negotiate the problem with the community members through dialogue, with a view to preventing further harm to the victim and restoring her to normalcy (ASMIX, ASMXV). There is also an instance where the tea garden company tried to support the victim's family financially after the murder of the victim for post-mortem and pursuing criminal law remedies for bringing the accused to justice (ASMVIII).

That the police were involved in 11 out of 16 cases shows that the police was approached by the victim or informed by others after the physical violence occurred. What is not evident, however, is any initiative of the police in taking action

V. Conclusion

In many ways, this chapter speaks of the most significant aspect related to witch hunting – the existence and effectiveness of the different institutions to respond to witch hunting, in terms of prevention, redress and restoration of the victim's normal life. Assuming that witch hunting for various reasons will happen, the biggest challenge seems to be the extent to which institutions at the community level, closest to the victim and the site of violence, will act. The

themselves, or in taking effective action where the victim feels that justice will follow. In cases where the police did intervene, the perpetrator(s) was/ were taken into custody for a maximum period of six months (ASMI, ASMVIII, ASMXIV), sometimes less, without the victim/ her family knowing about the case. It left them feeling disillusioned and unsure if the perpetrator/s would be prosecuted at all. There are also instances where the police was informed about the victimization but took no steps to support or protect the victims (ASMIV, ASMVII).

In fact, there are only two case studies where the informants are clear that the case is now in the court for trial (ASMV, ASMXVI). In the remaining cases of police intervention, the respondents of this study report that role of the police was limited to negotiation, warning or extending medical care to the victim, which in fact amounts to not fulfilling their duty to protect and redress. Most importantly, there is not a single case in the 16 cases where the respondents have mentioned an exemplary initiative by the police in taking action against the perpetrators. Notably, in none of the cases was any preventive action taken although the labelling as 'witch' happened prior to victimization and physical violence. All action and interventions followed physical violence if not murder, pointing to a gap in preventive mechanisms at the community level.

findings suggest that the nuclear family plays a consistently supportive role, protecting the victim even if that leads to their own annihilation – economically, socially and sometimes physically, through fatal violence. The response of the extended family varies, depending on their role in instigating the violence. The marital extended family also emerges as a key instigator, but in the few cases where this is not so, the extended family is known to have sheltered the

evicted victim. The extended family's role remains uncertain and depends on the facts of the case.

The neighbours and community appear as predominantly hostile and actively aggressive. In most of the cases, the neighbours are the main instigators. Otherwise, they turn suspicious of the victim and support the instigator and participate in the assault and violation of the victim, or silently contribute to isolating the victim and their family. It cannot be assumed that they share the animosity, as in some cases, the community's position is also shaped by the backlash they will attract upon supporting the victim. It is because of this, perhaps, that it is rare for the community members to take a stand and protect the victims from being assaulted.

The local authorities appear to be best placed to intervene, and have in some cases persevered in engaging the community, the instigators and the state agencies like the police to restore a semblance of dignity for the victim. The potential of the local authorities is significant for any policy interventions that seek to prevent witch hunting. The proactive and positive role of the local authorities is contrasted against that of the police, which is expressly mandated by law to intervene, but is found wanting in carrying out their responsibilities. This can be attributed to the apathy of the police generally, and particularly against women and the poor; it could flow from influence or manipulation, so as to profit from cases. It can be assumed that these commonly cited shortcomings in the police assume a different colour in cases of witch hunting, where

the victims are demonized, making it easier for the police to turn a blind eye.

Whatever be the case, the inference for us is that reliance upon more criminal law remedies, specialized (special laws), or otherwise, will not dent the impunity attached to witch hunting, or touch the lives of victims. Preventive responses too, when vested exclusively with the law enforcement (as in the case of special laws in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh), are likely to remain on paper. A promising dimension, based on this data, is the involvement of socio-legal processes that involve participation of local authorities. These demonstrate an ability to ensure cooperation by the state agencies and the community, and enforce accountability from the police. The value of social processes, involving dialogue, awareness raising, long-term follow-up with the victim to ensure her security and facilitate support from state welfare agencies when required, are necessary to avoid re-victimization. Further, the local authorities, backed by the force of the police, could facilitate public apologies and promises of non-recurrence of targeting. The inclusion of local authorities, a heterogeneous and locally variable category as the data suggests, certainly needs more discussion; however, they must be integral for effective responses. In fact, their capacity to dialogue with the community makes each case an opportunity for unpacking superstitions and motives, and drawing the boundaries between what is socially permissible and acts that clearly constitute crime.

CHAPTER 6

Insights from Police

In addition to the testimonies of victims gathered from Sonitpur and Goalpara districts, this study also examined complaints of witch hunting registered with the police in Goalpara district. A total of 12 cases of witch hunting were identified in police records from Goalpara district by AMSS. Although an insignificant number for any quantitative analysis, the data from police records is relevant for the two reasons – first, to see the extent to which the findings from the police data validate those that emerge from the case studies; and second, to gain some insight and understanding on how law interacts with victimization related to witch hunting at the primary level.

This chapter discusses the data drawn from 12 FIRs (First Information Reports) connected with witch hunting and police records connected with these. All registered cases available from police records in the district of Goalpara in Assam were collected; a total of 12 cases were identified from the years of 2006 to 2012, with five of them from 2012.²¹ The initial search for cases was based on

looking for FIRs where the word '*dayan*' was used, but as this term does not appear in all FIRs, the assistance of the police was sought in identifying cases. Given the limitations of the search tools, it is entirely possible that there are more than 12 cases in Goalpara in this period. The data drawn from the police records has been disaggregated to identify patterns in relation to five categories. While social aspects such as the profile of the victim, the relationship between the victim and the accused, and the motive behind the accusation are covered, additionally, legal aspects, such as the nature of offences/ forms of victimization and who the complainant is, are also examined. Although inadequate, the data on social categories has been tabulated to see the trends that emerge, and whether these correspond to the information from the case studies. The information on the legal categories is adequate, as the police records are primarily concerned with facts of the crime and the penal provisions to initiate a criminal prosecution.

I. Victims

From the data available, the profile of the victim has been drawn in terms of sex, age, social group. There are two categories of victims discussed, the

first being the primary victim who is accused as '*dayan/ tohni*' or 'witch'; and the second, those who are victimized because they are related to or

²¹ Cases were reported in some, not all areas of Goalpara district; in fact, no cases were found in the Muslim majority areas of the district, as per AMSS.

supported the primary victim.

There are 13 primary victims in the 12 cases, as in one case two persons (a married couple) were accused of witchcraft. The table below clusters the information about the sex, social group of the

victim, and whether they were killed or living at the time of the complaint. By social group, we refer to the caste, religion and ethnicity that the victim is identified by. Information on the social group of the victim is not explicitly stated, but has been inferred from the names of the victims.

A. Primary victims

M	F	OBC	SC	ST	General	Unspecified	M	F
5	8	-	-	10	1	2	4	4

Table 6.1. Sex, social group, alive/dead status of primary victims

As a married couple was jointly targeted in one case, there are a total of 13 victims documented from 12 cases. Although both male and female victims are present, there are more female compared to male victims – with eight women and five men. The social group of 11 of the 13 victims could be discerned from the information available in the police records; of these 11 victims, 10 are from the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and one belongs to the General Category. Lastly, of the 13 victims, eight were killed; of these four were men and four were women.

The age of the victim is not available in nearly half the records, but in the six cases that it is available, pertaining to three male and four female victims, all are in the age group of 50-60 years.

B. Additional victims

There appear to be several additional or secondary victims in every case of witch hunting, and only a few are mentioned in police records.

Typically, these persons are those who are closely related to or supportive of the main person targeted as a witch. The police records do not register them as victims, although they appear in the facts of the case, especially when they too are injured or hurt. In most cases where the relatives were threatened but managed to escape the attack, they are not mentioned in the FIR.

M	F	M	F
1 ²⁵	-	3 ²⁶	2 ²⁷

Table 6.2. Age and sex of secondary victims

There are six additional or secondary victims mentioned in the facts of the 12 FIRs; of these five are adults and one is a male child. Of the five adult additional victims, three are male and two are female. In one case, there are three additional victims mentioned – 16-year-old (minor) nephew, an adult niece and the sister-in-law of the primary victim.

²² The caste/tribal status of the victim was mentioned in 11 cases, but in one case, was inferred from the names of the victims by AMSS.

²³ Although the number of cases is 12, the number of victims is 13, as in one case a married couple was targeted together.

²⁴ Of the 10 victims from the STcategory, seven were from the Rabha community. The Rabhas form a large percentage of the local population in Goalpara.

²⁵ Case No. 2.

²⁶ Case Nos. 4,5 and 11.

²⁷ Case No. 2.

II. Relationship of the accused with the victim

-	1 ²⁸	In 9 cases, the accused are from the same village as the victim. ²⁹ The records also indicate the participation of the community in the attack as well the labelling of the victim as 'dayan'/'tohni'	2 cases refer to the accused as unknown persons. ³⁰

Table 6.3. Relationship of the accused with the victim

The above table shows that except for two of the 12 cases where the accused persons were unknown, the accused was a

person from the same village as the victim.

In one case, the accused was a neighbour of the victim.

III. Reasons for targeting the victim

Information on motives or reasons is sketchy or absent in the police complaint or records. Of the 12 cases, four cases (pertaining to five victims) do not refer to any context from which the motive can be inferred; five cases indicate that the victims

were first identified as witches/dayan by a *kabiraj* or *ojha*,³¹ or by the accused persons,³² or the villagers,³³ after which they were attacked; and three of the cases allude to an illness for which the victim was blamed.

IV. Description of violence, offences registered and action taken

The information related to the law is the main feature of the police records, and the data has been tabulated to compare three categories of information for each case. The first column in the table below mentions the case number; the second column contains the penal provisions noted in the FIR and names the corresponding

offences in brackets; the third column describes the types of violence mentioned in the facts outlined in the FIR. The terms used to describe the types of violence are uniform for purposes of data tabulation, selected to convey the gradation in violence and their specificity to cases of witch hunting.

1	IPC 120(B), 302, 201, 506 (criminal conspiracy, murder, disappearance of evidence, criminal intimidation)	Trespassing, wrongful confinement, assault, murder
2	IPC 147, 148, 149, 447, 320, 302 (rioting, rioting with deadly weapon, unlawful assembly, criminal trespass, grievous hurt, murder)	Trespassing, assault

²⁸ Case No.10

²⁹ See Case Nos. 1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9 and 10.

³⁰ Case Nos. 4 and 12.

³¹ Case Nos.1 and 11.

³² Case Nos. 4 and 9.

³³ Case No. 8.

3	IPC 447, 325, 427, 506, 34 (criminal trespass, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, criminal intimidation, common intention)	Trespassing, assault attempt to murder
4	IPC 302 (murder)	Name calling (<i>dayan</i>), trespassing kidnapping, murder
5	IPC 302, 34 (murder, common intention)	Name calling (<i>dayan</i>) , trespassing assault, murder
6	IPC 120(B), 448, 302 (criminal conspiracy, house trespass, murder)	Forced disrobing in public , trespassing assault , murder
7	IPC 302 (murder)	assault murder
8	IPC 120(B), 147, 148, 149, 447, 325, 307 (criminal conspiracy, rioting, rioting with deadly weapon, unlawful assembly, criminal trespass, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, attempt to murder)	Name calling (<i>dayan</i>), trespassing assault
9	IPC 147, 448, 325, 270, 427, 506 (rioting, house trespass, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, malignant act likely to spread infection or disease, mischief causing damage amounting to Rs. 50, criminal intimidation)	Name calling (<i>dayan</i>), trespassing assault forcible consumption of human excreta
10	IPC 143, 448, 325, 379, 506 (unlawful assembly, house trespass, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, theft, criminal intimidation)	Trespassing assault theft
11	IPC 120(B), 341, 342, 324, 307, 506 (criminal conspiracy, wrongful restraint, wrongful confinement, causing hurt by dangerous weapon or means, attempt to murder, criminal intimidation)	Name calling (<i>dayan</i>) parading trespassing assault forcible consumption of human excreta
12	IPC 302 (murder)	Trespassing 2 murders (of husband and wife)

Table 6.4. Provisions of law/offences invoked and types of violence in FIR for 12 cases

Of the 12 cases, seven invoke the offence of murder; two cases involve attempt to murder; while nine cases involve varying degrees of assault, including the public humiliation of two victims through forced consumption of human excreta,³⁴ and one victim through forced disrobing in public. Most of these cases involve trespass into the property of the victim, showing that the accused forcibly broke into the homes of the victim to carry out the attack. Only in one case³⁵ was there no grievous physical violence; here, the victim was dragged out of her house and threatened with dire consequences.

It is telling that in the five cases where the FIR notes that the victim was called a *dayan*, only two have registered the provision of criminal intimidation, under Sec. 506. Yet, intimidation other than name calling is likely to have been present even in cases where the victim was not labelled a '*dayan*', as in three other cases where the term *dayan* was apparently not used, Sec. 506 has been invoked. While forcible consumption of excreta is mentioned in the complaint in two cases, only one of these two cases has invoked Sec. 270 on a malignant act likely to spread infection of disease dangerous to life, along with Sec. 325 on grievous hurt, to acknowledge this. Notably, the offence of forced disrobing and stripping in public in Case No. 6, a gendered form of humiliation, has been omitted. Even though the case resulted in murder, the omission to mention Sec. 354 on outraging the modesty of woman (the sole provision available in the IPC prior to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013) has the effect of erasing the gendered dimension of the attack in legal records.

There are two inferences that arise from these sets of examples. The first is that despite the relevant provisions existing in the IPC, the FIR and the legal discourse thereafter erase the particularity of

specific kinds of crimes that highlight the targeted, gendered and brutal nature of the offence. Secondly, it appears that the police tend to register the more serious crimes, while ignoring the lesser offences, rendering invisible the nature and spectrum of violence in legal discourse. In a few cases, where trespass and murder are noted in the facts of the case, only murder is registered. In converting all injuries into one-time violations categorized as grievous attempts to murder and murder; the legal discourse does not capture the targeted nature of violence or respond to the continuing and long-term consequences of this kind of victimization.

In nine out of 12 cases, there is more than one perpetrator, with provisions relating to rioting, unlawful assembly, criminal conspiracy and common intention invoked. With the exception of Case No. 10, all cases involve grave forms of violence, attempt to murder and murder. This indicates that unless grave or fatal violence occurs, nearly always by a group of individuals, the police is unlikely to register a case or prosecute. The background circumstances of Case No. 10 are not available so one can only speculate about the existence of special reasons that compelled registration of this case. It can be inferred that the violence escalates because pre-emptive action is not taken by the police at an earlier stage, when lesser forms of victimization, such as harassment, taunts, abuses and simple violence, occur.

In five of the cases, the police records do not provide any information on whether the accused was arrested or not. In the seven cases where information was available, it appears that the accused were arrested in all seven cases, with the accused being on bail in one case.

³⁴ Case No. 9. In Case No. 11, although the facts reveal that the victim was forced to consume human excreta, relevant sections were not added to the FIR.

³⁵ Case No. 10.

V. Who is the complainant

Victim	Third Person ³⁶	Police
4	8	0

Table 6.5. The complainants

Who exactly initiates the complaint assumes some significance in view of the serious nature of offences reported. In four of the 12 cases, it appears that the victims themselves filed the

VI. Conclusion

Apart from the information on the legal aspects relating to the facts of the cases, such as offences invoked, the data from the police records is not adequate for drawing conclusive findings on the social dimensions of the case. Nonetheless, some trends do emerge and these tend to validate and enrich the findings from the case studies. The following findings are significant for understanding the social as well as legal dimensions of witch hunting.

The police records show that both men and women are targeted as witches, but women are more likely targets. The 16 case studies on which the rest of this study is based pertain to women victims exclusively, as they constitute the majority of the victims. While men are also targeted as witches, as evident from police records, women are the primary and most likely targets. The police records mention that persons close to the victim or supportive of the victim are also attacked and victimized as part of witch hunting. All primary victims are in the 50-60 year category. Most accused are known to and proximate to the victim. Most cases of witch

complaint, while in the remaining eight cases, the complaint was filed by a third person. It is relevant to recall here that seven cases involved murder (of eight persons). It is likely, although not certain, that the third person is a family member of the victim, as that is not evident from the name, which is all that is mentioned in the FIR. In none of the cases was the complaint initiated by the police.

hunting involve the coming together of more than one person; sharing common intention, conspiring and acting in concert help amplify the attack and the intensity of violence, and ensure that the community and neighbours generally are compelled into being silent observers.

A criminal complaint is likely to be registered only when a high threshold of violence occurs, given that seven of the 12 cases were of murder, registered under Sec. 302 IPC, while two cases involved attempt to murder, registered under Sec. 307 IPC. The penal provisions registered in the FIR are most likely to pertain to the higher offences, to the neglect of the lower offences. A compelling inference is that the failure to take preventive action by the police, at the time of smaller threats and intimidation, creates conditions for the escalation of violence. The attack carried out by a group of persons is intended to humiliate the victim, apart from causing hurt and injury. In none of the cases did the police initiate the complaint, as they were all registered on the complaint of the victim or a third person.

³⁶ The term 'third person' here is used to mean any person who is aware of the offence committed on the victim.

CONCLUSION

Through this study, we have sought to understand the varied dimensions of witch hunting practices in Assam, to draw attention to the need for policy solutions to be rooted in evidence. The data from 16 case studies and 12 cases registered with the police constitutes the basis for this report and its findings. Although far from substantial in quantitative terms, the study nonetheless highlights some significant trends that must inform policy discourses. Even as the findings are specific to the data at hand, they provide some new insights and understandings that advance the established narratives on witch hunting.

The findings show that women are the majority targets, although a few men have been accused as witches too. Women above 30 years, and more specifically, in the 40-60 age bracket, are the most vulnerable to being targeted as witches. Since the large majority of the victims of this study were married, we know that marriage and the unstinting support of nuclear family, especially the husband, offers little immunity against targeting; rather, it is more likely than not for the targeting to result in victimization of the whole family. The circle of victims is thus rarely limited to the person accused of being a witch, and as this study shows, more than twice the number of persons close to the victim are likely to get victimized. Being politically marginalized like the

adivasis, who constitute the TGL, or being indigenous with an ST status, in itself does not appear to shape vulnerability in a direct way. The economic condition of the victims also does not appear to have a significant bearing on the vulnerability to being targeted, as the economic status of their households vary along the scale of adequate to marginal, some with land and some without land; what appears to have a more decisive bearing on vulnerability is the development status of the regions where witch hunting is reported. The areas where the fieldwork was carried out suffer from acute neglect and dismal administration that has manifested in poor health care, sanitation and education, with large sections of the population being BPL. The linkage of near lack of formal education of the victims or high casualty on account of routine illnesses to blaming of illnesses and deaths on witchcraft appear to be a consequence of the regional poverty and governance failure.

The instigators in our data are persons who are proximate to the victim, reinforcing plausibility of conflicts, tensions and jealousies between them, as is evident through the data tabulated on motives. While the *ojha* appears in 12 out of 16 case studies, the tensions and conflicts in many cases exist prior to the entry of the *ojha*, suggesting that they tend to confirm rather than

initiate the accusation. Many of the motivations that result in 'witch' accusations may appear trivial but assume alarming proportions in contexts of structural neglect, deprivations and impunity that enable accusations to result in victimization, without fear of consequences. Illness, deaths and tragedies that cannot be explained, particularly in the context where education, health facilities, and sanitation are lacking, tend to get rationalized through explanations of witchery. Inter-personal jealousies, conflicts and tensions also tend to get resolved through accusations, which in one stroke dehumanize the victim in the eyes of others and allow extreme humiliation and violence to be perpetrated without protest. Likewise, differences in religion, rituals or extent of religiosity, in a context of close proximity, also invoke suspicion of witchcraft. This data predominantly pertains to intra-community targeting, with the instigators comprising both men and women. In our data, there is evidence of women *ojhas* too.

There is a wide spectrum of victimization evident – beginning with verbal taunts and slurs, through local terms denoting 'witch' as well as other abuses aimed at demonizing and isolating the victim and her family, often accompanied by minor to grave physical violence, with a small fraction of cases resulting in murder. There is also the exceptional case where slurs may not invoke any references to the term 'witch', although the import and consequences are the same. The long-term consequences are equally, if not more serious – with half the victims, eight out of 16, facing forced displacement/ expulsion from their homes and villages, and those who stay on facing isolation, and limited or no access to common resources of the village. Regardless of where the victims may be, in their village or displaced, they become impoverished and live in fear. The consequences upon the family are equally grim, with entire nuclear families being affected by the

dislocation, isolation and loss of property and livelihood. Impoverishment is certain.

With regard to the responses of institutions and actors closest to the site of victimization, our data shows that the nuclear family is most protective, and as a result also victimized. The responses of the extended family vary, with many of them being the primary instigators themselves; in some cases, however, where the victim was expelled from the village, members of the extended family sheltered them until the point at which their hospitality began to evoke hostility from their community towards them. The neighbours appear to be hostile, either as instigators themselves, or as supportive of instigators, and as passive onlookers in a few cases. The apathy in many cases is on account of fear of reprisal from vested interest groups.

The local authorities – a heterogeneous group of autonomous women's bodies, local leaders and eminent persons – played the most effective role. The women's bodies particularly stand out as the main lifeline for the victims' protection, redress and restoration of dignity. They deploy dialogue, negotiation and legal action, drawing in multiple actors to address the ostracism, expulsion and victimization, to safeguard the victims' interests. The police, despite being the sole agency fully mandated by law to take pre-emptive action and provide redress, demonstrate neither initiative nor diligence in protecting the victims; some cases indicate that the police intervened only after they were pulled in by local authorities.

The data from 12 cases registered with the police in Goalpara, when read with the data from the 16 case studies, reveals a lot about the law. The data from the case studies show that four out of 16 cases involved murder, and two involved grievous injury/ attempt to murder, that is to say, less than half of the total case studies. The overwhelming majority of cases involve verbal abuse/ taunts (13 cases) and minor violence (10 cases), and a

smaller number involve public humiliation (five cases) – although these are overlapping forms of victimization. In contrast, the majority of the police cases, a total of nine out of 12 cases, pertain to murder and attempt to murder (seven of murder and two of attempt to murder). The inference that the police are not likely to take pre-emptive action or offer redress for what are perceived as lesser forms of victimization is a compelling one. Police intervention is apparent only in cases involving high thresholds of violence and murder. Lesser offences, where pre-emptive action and prosecution would help dispel impunity for witch hunting, is strikingly absent. This attitude of the police in fact creates impunity for continued victimization, in some cases leading to fatal consequences. It is precisely this approach of the law enforcement machinery that should make us sceptical of greater reliance upon the criminal justice system – and indeed of special laws that depend on police intervention.

The comparative reading of the data from case studies and police records also reveals protection gaps in the legal framework. Table 4.2 in chapter four, on consequences faced by victims of witch hunting, includes stigma, isolation, loss of livelihood, loss of property, payment of fines and oaths by the victim, and dislocation from home and village. Even as each of these are lasting consequences that impoverish and devastate victims and their families, none appear in police records as offences or circumstances for which redress is offered. While it is possible to innovate remedies within the law to respond to some of these, this points to a serious legislative and policy vacuum. Justice in the context of victimization and stigma from the community requires the law to respond to the devastating consequences of stigma and targeted violence by the community.

In this context, it is useful to remind ourselves that targeted stigma, boycott, social exclusion and

violence by the community occur not just from 'witch' accusations, but also for moral and sexual transgressions, as well as inter-caste marriage. Law and policy must necessarily respond to these uniformly, through reparative remedies that involve community dialogue, protection, livelihood support, shelter, compensation, promise of non-recurrence of violence and, where necessary, relocation. Responses that are specific to witch hunting alone will be counter-productive as they will exclude from legal protection those who are similarly victimized for different reasons.

The policy frameworks on witch hunting must respond to all the aspects and trends highlighted through this study; it is equally necessary that such frameworks endorse the need for continuing investment in fieldwork to document evidence and track trends comprehensively, across time and regions. The responses must address structural deprivations and injustice that enable witch hunting, while also responding to cases through preventive action, protection and criminal redress; they must tackle long-term consequences through social processes and interventions that restore livelihoods, home, land and dignity within the community, and provide protection against future attacks, or rehabilitate the victim and her family in an alternative location with support to rebuild their lives, economically and socially. Some of the significant aspects that must inform policy responses are highlighted below.

- In view of the complex factors that trigger accusations, and additionally, the underlying structural conditions that enable victimization with impunity, it is necessary to frame witch hunting in terms that are not limited to superstition, *ojhas* and witchcraft. Preventive responses too cannot be limited to demystifying superstitions but must go beyond that to correct underlying

deprivation and pin accountability for structural failures and lapses. The capacity to transcend one's belief systems is possible not just through awareness and information, but calls for parallel material changes that bring about accessible and quality education, health care, sanitation, drinking water and an accountable administration.

- It is necessary that legislative frameworks are not exclusive to witchcraft practices, to ensure that the legal recourse is inclusive of and available to all who are victimized similarly. Legal remedies need to address all kinds of victimization witnessed in witch hunting (and other kinds of community targeting) regardless of the motives – that is to say, such remedies should not hinge upon evidence of accusations of witchcraft – to ensure that whatever be the motive, the law is able to protect against the continuing spiral of victimization; that impunity is not indirectly sanctioned when similar victimization occurs without the element of 'witch' accusations.
- Criminal redress for prevention and protection can only be one part of a broader policy. The data from police records from Goalpara shows that the police intervention under the Indian Penal Code (1860) occurs only for serious crimes, most likely for murder and attempt to murder. These findings are reinforced by PLD's study, *Contemporary Practices of Witch Hunting: A Report on Social Trends and the Interface with Law*, which draws upon a larger sample size of cases to show there was little evidence of preventive action by the police, even under the special laws on witch hunting in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. In these states too, the police appears to act only when high thresholds of violence occur, involving offences under the Indian Penal Code (1860). Exclusive reliance on the police or the criminal

law remedies will not transform the existing apathy or neglect towards witch hunting. Such remedies can only be one part of the policy responses to witch hunting – not only because the police are the weakest agency for prevention and protection (despite being explicitly mandated to do so), but also because criminal law remedies cannot adequately or comprehensively offer reparative remedies to redress lasting consequences.

- The responses must offer reparative justice to address the continuum of victimization, including that of the secondary victims. In addition to the police, other agencies at the community level need to be involved. The value of social processes, particularly those led by women's groups, are significant. The various women's bodies like Mahila Samakhya, Mahila Mandals and self-help groups must be mandated and mobilized to play a role. The local Panchayat can be mobilized as well, through a combination of rewards and penalties that hold them accountable for witch hunting in their jurisdiction. Schemes and programmes that place responsibility upon the local administration and governing bodies for restoring the victim's socio-economic status in her village, including through compensation, are vital parts of redress. Where necessary, victims must be assisted with relocation and support to rebuild their life and livelihood elsewhere. The lasting consequences of witch hunting, including the impoverishment, must be an integral part of justice.

Only through a critical probing of different dimensions of every case of witch hunting do the limitations of certain assumptions become evident and new solutions possible. Amongst the aspects that stand out in the Assam cases are the

multiple narratives explaining the motives of targeting. Despite a shared belief in witchcraft, the victim, her family and her supporters unrelated to her but from the same context (occasional neighbours and local authorities who intercede on her behalf) reject superstition and belief in witches to highlight interpersonal animosity underpinning the targeting. These counter-narratives ask us to frame witch hunting differently, in ways that are not subsumed under superstition. The continuum of victimization too

compels us to pay attention to harm that lasts long after the episodes of physical violence and brutal killings subside. The systemic apathy of the law enforcement machinery, also evident through these cases, compels us to mandate those who demonstrate exemplary courage and perseverance in helping victims and their families recover. This evidence must not go in vain, for it cautions us against assumptions that are inadequate, and compels us to reframe more effective responses.

ANNEXURES

Case 1 [Code ASMI]

Victim: The victim was a married woman in the 50-60 age group, with four sons and three daughters. She belonged to the Rongdani Rabha (ST) community and was from Goalpara district. She had completed primary schooling and was an active member of self-help groups like the Village Mahila Samiti and Rabha Mahila Parishad.

Her family practised agriculture as their main occupation and was also involved in weaving for supplementary income. They owned 9 bigha of cultivable land and 2.5 bigha of homestead land. They also had four mud plastered houses and a compound with various fruit bearing trees, as well as two cows, two bullocks, and a weaving loom. The victim did not own any property herself but she could access the family property.

Instigator: The instigator and his wife were relatives of the victim's marital family.

Victimization: The victim's and the perpetrator's families had a very amicable relationship. The perpetrator's wife was ill for a while and she would often say that she used to see the victim in her dreams. This made the perpetrator and his wife suspect that the victim was a witch and that she was responsible for the disease. The perpetrator consulted an *ojha* about the issue and the *ojha* backed up their suspicion.

After the perpetrator's wife passed away, the perpetrator made arrangements to kidnap and kill the victim. One night, three men clad in army uniform went to the victim's house, claimed they were looking for ULFA cadres and charged the

victim and her husband with hiding them. After they conducted a search and did not find anyone, they asked the victim and her husband to show them the way up to the river. The victim's husband had night blindness so the victim accompanied them. As they were walking towards the river, the men told the couple that they were themselves ULFA cadres. The couple then tried to return home but the men said only the husband could go back. They told him that his wife was a witch and they would teach her a lesson. Unable to defend himself or his wife, the victim's husband returned home. The next morning, the victim's dead body was found with brutal wounds on it.

Later the villagers came to know about the perpetrator's suspicions and how he had orchestrated the murder. The perpetrator then surrendered at the police outpost.

A respondent informed us that the victim did not follow the strict rules of Vaishnavism and continued having non-vegetarian food even after converting into the cult. The villagers found these eating habits very inauspicious and this was one reason why they started to suspect the victim of practising witchcraft.

Violations : The victim was brutally murdered. Her dead body was found by the villagers in the river.

Effects of the branding on her and her family: The victim's daughters have not received any offers for marriage from the community.

Role of family and neighbours: While the victim's husband supported her, he was not strong enough to defend and protect his wife. The neighbours were shocked by the murder and advised the victim's husband to inform the police and file an FIR at the police outpost. The instigator and the killers were also among the group of sympathizers and no one suspected them till they surrendered.

Role of the authorities : The police intervened on receiving a complaint from the victim's husband. They held a meeting with the

community and urged the people involved with the murder to surrender. The main instigator surrendered and the police arrested him on the basis of his confession. He was imprisoned for three months and released on bail. Neither the victim's family nor anyone in the community knew if the matter had reached the court.

The expectation of the victim's family was that the offenders would be punished. However, the release of the perpetrator after only three months in prison disappointed the family.

Case 2 [Code ASMII]

Victim: The victim was a married woman from the Boro (ST) community of Goalpara district belonging to the 50-60 age group, with one son and five daughters. She had received no formal education; at the time of her victimization she was a member of a self-help group called Latapara Birbar Sangha.

Instigators: The instigators consisted of one close relative and one distant relative from the victim's marital family; some of them were also neighbours.

Victimization: The incident occurred when the village celebrating Bihu. A marriage ceremony was being held in the neighbourhood; the groom was related to the victim. As the ceremony progressed, the bride lost consciousness and the guests attributed this to the evil powers of some witch. The main instigator, a distant relative who was also known to be a fortune reader, took advantage of the situation and blamed it on the victim, accusing her of practising witchcraft. Then

he sprinkled some water onto the body of the bride and coincidentally she revived. In this way the instigator gained the confidence of the people present at the wedding ceremony, and they had no difficulty believing that the instigator's claim was correct. The victim and her family were not present at the wedding and so they had no clue about this branding.

After a few days the newly-wed bride again lost consciousness and that very morning the victim visited their house to give them a bamboo basket. As soon as she entered the house, the second instigator (the bride's father-in-law, who was the victim's husband's cousin) rebuked her. He called her a witch and threw a chair at her. She immediately returned home and informed her husband. When her husband went to his cousin's house to ask why such an attack was made on his wife, the cousin and his son denied the charge and claimed that the story was just made up by the victim. The following evening an *ojha* was called and a public meeting was held. The *ojha*

claimed, after performing some rituals and uttering some mantras, that she could see the face of the witch on her thumbnail. The soothsayer declared the victim to be the witch responsible for the misfortunes of the newly-wed bride. The villagers then clamoured for the victim to confess that she was involved in witchcraft. By this time, fearing for her life, she had already fled, which infuriated the villagers and confirmed the accusation in their minds. Some of the villagers wanted to burn down her house, which was prevented; it was, however, declared that she would not be allowed to come back to the village.

According to the victim she was a victim of conspiracy. Her son was very hard-working and was becoming prosperous and popular among the villagers. The main instigator was jealous of this success and was looking for an opportunity to destroy this image. People in the village already had very strong beliefs in witchcraft and so it was very easy to manipulate the villagers against the victim.

Violations: The victim was physically and mentally abused. She was called names like *dainagorh* and people also tried to burn her house down. The villagers also forbade the victim's family to allow her back into the village and her house.

Through an unfair compromise she has now been allowed to return to her village but she and her family cannot visit the market and village shops or have any communication with anyone.

Effects of the branding on her and her family: The victim's relationship with the neighbours and the community broke down. She was evicted from the village and now is not allowed to visit anyone in the village. She is still scared of being killed by the villagers.

Her family also had to bear the brunt of the

victimization. They were threatened by the villagers and ordered to keep the victim outside the village. Her family is barred from the society, the village shops and the community areas. Two of her unmarried daughters have still not received any proposals for marriage due to the stigma after the branding.

Role of family and neighbours: Her husband and children were very supportive of the victim. Her son approached the All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and AMSS for help. The victim's married daughters also provided her shelter during her exile.

The neighbours on the other hand participated in the violations targeting the victim. The hostile majority in the village threatened some people who attempted to help her, saying that they too would be banished from the village if they helped the victim. Later, when ABWWF, AMSS and the police tried to negotiate the matter, the community still did not allow her entry in the village.

Role of the authorities: The police was informed about the victimization but they did nothing. AMSS and ABWWF took the initiative when the victim's son registered a complaint. However, these authorities suggested peaceful negotiations among the two parties, while also requesting the higher ranks in the police for intervention in the case. The police warned the villagers and asked the victim's family to inform the police in case of any mishap. The case was not taken to the court.

Due to this intervention the victim was allowed to return and stay in the village on the condition that she would not communicate with anyone from the village. Since no police action has been forthcoming, the victim has accepted the settlement.

Case 3 [Code ASMIII]

Victim: The victim was a married woman in the 40-50 age group, with two sons and two daughters. She belonged to the Rajbongshi (OBC) community of Goalpara district. She had received no formal education but was an active member of the Mahila Sangha in her village formed by AMSS.

The victim's family was involved in cultivation and casual labour. They owned 7 bigha of land, a 1-hectare rubber farm, two *kutchra* houses and one cycle. The victim did not have any property in her name but she had complete access to her family property and the common property.

Instigators: The perpetrators were neighbours and village residents.

Victimization: The victim belonged to Rajbongshi caste and followed Hinduism. She has a *pucca* temple in her house and she worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses. Her neighbours, who were Rabhas, were animists, and they found her religious practices suspicious.

When a neighbour's daughter fell ill everyone suspected the victim of bringing the illness on the young girl. The victim was warned by the villagers and she also received death threats. One day the young girl had a high fever and she murmured that the victim was eating her up. This confirmed the suspicions of the neighbours. Every time the girl uttered the victim's name her father snatched up his machete to kill the victim. Attempts were also made by the young girl's brothers to kill the victim. However, the victim escaped all the attacks by hiding in another house in the

village.

The victim called for a meeting to discuss the unfair branding but no one from the village could provide any solution or initiate a negotiation. After a few days the young girl's family called a *deodhani* to heal the young girl; she declared that the victim was a witch and had caused the suffering of the young girl. Thereafter, the young girl's family began to mentally abuse and threaten the victim.

According to the victim, the young girl made up the story because she often asked the girl to keep her compound clean, saying that people avoided going to her house because it was dirty. This embarrassed the young girl and so she wanted to take revenge. The victim's differences in ritual observations were another reason for suspicion among the villagers.

Violations: There were various attempts made by the young girl's family to kill the victim. She was also called various names like *daini*, *bateloga*, *tikker*, *ramini* and was verbally abused. The victim and her family were compelled to stay away from home for a while.

Effects of the branding on the victim's family: The victim's daughters had to be sent to Guwahati for safety. She and her family were compelled to stay away from home for some time when the neighbours were threatening the victim.

After the labelling the victim became very weak and frail and she was in need of medical attention. Considerable expenses were incurred by her

family for her treatment. The victim and her family were embarrassed by the branding and found it difficult to adjust with friends and neighbours after this.

Role of family and neighbours: The victim's family supported her but other relatives could not help her because of fear of the village community. The neighbours contributed to the targeting. Some villagers in the meeting also accused her of dropping talismans in the community well and going to the crematorium at night for rituals

related to witchcraft. The villagers continued looking at her with suspicion even after some time had passed after the branding.

Role of the authorities: The victim approached AMSS and with the organization's help she approached the Superintendent of Police, Goalpara. On the Superintendent's direction, the police was sent to the village along with AMSS workers to discuss the issue with the villagers, and in the course of these negotiations, the villagers agreed to not trouble the victim or her family.

Case 4 [Code ASMIV]

Victim: The victim was a woman in the 40-50 age group, who had married a widower to become his second wife, and had one son and one daughter with him. She was victimized by her stepdaughter. During the course of victimization, she lost her husband and is presently widowed. She was from the Maitori Rabha (ST) group of West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya, adjacent to Goalpara district, Assam. She had completed primary school at her natal home.

Her family was involved in cultivation and selling of betel nuts and mustard seeds. They owned 12 bigha of agricultural land and 2 bigha of homestead land with two *pucca* houses. They also owned one betel nut garden, and had two cows and one cycle. The victim had bought two carts and some livestock with her savings.

Instigators: The instigators were her stepdaughter and her husband's nephew.

Victimization: The victim married a widower, who had two children from his first marriage. The older daughter had eloped to get married much before her father remarried, but upon hearing of his second marriage she left her in-laws' house to stay at her father's house (after his remarriage). The victim and the stepdaughter had a very tense relationship, as the father had indicated his intention of leaving his property to the new wife (the victim). This infuriated the stepdaughter as she wanted to claim her father's property.

The victim gave birth to five children through this marriage, of whom only two survived – a son and a daughter. This became a cause of severe depression so she joined an ashram, following Vaishnavism and the cult of Shri Chaitanya to seek solace. This made her stand out against the rest of her community, the Rabhas, on account of the different religious rituals and diet. She began to be viewed with suspicion and hostility, as she

would not partake of meat and rice beer when asked by the villagers – giving rise to tensions, threats and demands for fines. On one occasion, when she developed rough matted hair due to some fungal infection, rumours that her body contained something evil began to spread.

On one occasion, the victim's husband's nephew accused the victim of stealing paddy from his granary. The villagers checked her granary but found nothing, except for an earthen pot filled with ripe paddy and straw. When questioned about the earthen pot, the victim explained as a manifestation of Goddess Laxmi, an object of prayer. The villagers started suspecting her of practising witchcraft.

When the victim's third child died her stepson went to the graveyard for the cremation. On the way back his foot was injured and people claimed that they saw blood and ashes oozing from the injury. The victim took him to her religious teacher for treatment. Although he recovered, the victim's stepdaughter started spreading the rumour that the victim cured the injury with her magical powers and she accused the victim of 'eating up' her own children.

The villagers called a meeting where the victim was interrogated and pressurized through torture to confess she was a witch, after which they decided to expel her from the village. A fine was also imposed; the victim's husband was compelled to beat her. Some young men forced her to give her thumb impression on a paper saying she would never come back to the village.

The victim stayed with her brother in Goalpara for a while but even there the villagers accused her of being a witch, after which she was again evicted. The victim then went to her religious teacher and befriended a fellow disciple who sexually abused and abandoned her. The victim tried to take refuge at her brother's house again but her sister-

in-law refused to help, which finally led her to seek help from a lady at AMSS, who provided support to victims like herself.

Violations: The villagers branded her a witch and called her *tikker, daini*, Christian (due to different religious observations) and *masujhari* (mad). She was physically abused, forced to confess and repeatedly evicted from the village. The villagers even forced her husband to beat her up. She lost the support of her family and her brother's family, and access to her village and common property.

Effects of the branding on her and her family: She lost all contact with her family members, both natal and marital, as they were threatened and forced to stay away from her. Her husband died in the course of the events, and the villagers and her stepchildren did not allow her to see the body.

Her two biological children are afraid to meet her as they have been told that their mother is a witch. She has been traumatized due to the violations and often suffers from hysteria.

Role of family and neighbours: The victimization was initiated by her marital family and her husband unwillingly participated in the violation. Her children have been separated from the victim and they believe that their mother is a witch. Her brother tried to help her but could not do much due to the suspicion of the community members. The neighbours participated in the violations and forced her to confess and leave the village.

Role of the authorities: The victim had informed the police but no action was taken to support her. Finally, with the help of members of the Family Counselling Centre of AMSS, the victim met a doctor who has been taking care of her. Although she hopes to go back to her village to resume a life of dignity, she realizes that is impossible. At present she just wants to get her two children back.

Case 5 [Code ASMV]

Victim: The victim was a widow belonging to the 50-60 year age group, with four daughters. She belonged to the Maitory Rabha (ST) group of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, which is adjacent to Goalpara district, Assam. She had no formal education and owned a small tea shop. She was also involved in selling of seasonal fruits for supplementary income.

She owned 1 bigha of housing land with three *kutch* cottages, a *pucca* well, and two goats and 15 hens. She did not own any property but after the death of her husband she inherited his land. She had full access to the common resources in the village.

Instigator: The instigator, a pharmacist at the government hospital, was a neighbour.

Victimization: After the victim's husband's death she started a small tea shop for her livelihood. Her neighbour's mother, an *ojha*, fell ill, and claimed that the victim was responsible for her illness. The victim's young daughter informed the victim that someone in the neighbourhood had been identified as a witch. When the victim went to inquire, she was taken aback to discover the person singled out as a witch was none other than herself: the sick woman kept repeating that the victim was a witch, demanding that she confess. The villagers then labelled her as a witch.

The next day the villagers broke into the victim's shop, threw her belongings out of her house and asked her to leave the village. She filed a case in the police station but according to her, the police were bribed by the instigator and hence no action

was taken to protect her. After a week the villagers destroyed her house, cut down all the trees and plants in her backyard, and summoned the victim to a meeting where she was forced to undergo various forms of physical torture to test whether she was a witch. Although the victim passed all tests establishing her innocence, the villagers remained convinced that she was a witch, beat her mercilessly and evicted her. They offered her a plot of land near the crematorium to live in, which she refused. There were also attempts at murder, which were prevented by some villagers.

She began staying with her sister, but after a few months the sister's village imposed a fine of Rs. 2000 on the sister for giving shelter to a witch. In the meantime her land was taken over and a school was established there. According to the victim, the attacks happened because the instigator wanted to occupy her land. The main instigator had plans to grab the victim's land for setting up a clinic there, due to its prime location. He wanted patients to come to him instead of going to the health sub-centre. With this intention, he tried to evict the victim from the place. This attempt failed and after a few days the entire victimization was orchestrated to evict her.

Violations: She was branded *tikker* and *daini*. Her shop and property were destroyed, and she was physically abused and evicted from her village.

Effect of the branding on her and her family: She has been mentally and physically tortured, and lives in fear of being attacked. She lost her property, regular source of income

and social status. She has also lost access to common property and resources. Her daughters had to be married off early due to financial hardship after labelling and eviction of their family. Her natal family members had to pay a fine of Rs.2000 in their village for giving her shelter.

Role of family and neighbours: Due to the fear of the community the victim's family was unable to support her during victimization, but subsequently, when she was ostracized and faced social boycott, the family supported her, giving shelter to her and her children. Her neighbours contributed in the branding and torture. They destroyed her property and evicted her from the village. Only one Garo woman, who was an

Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, spoke in her favour when the authorities intervened.

Role of the authorities: The police did not intervene because the perpetrator had bribed them. One year after the event, the victim learnt of AMSS and sought their intervention. The AMSS initiated a dialogue with the villagers requesting them to return the victim's land, but the villagers were insistent that she could only occupy the land next to the cremation ground. Since the negotiation did not work out, AMSS sought the help of the police and the case went to the court of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya. With the case still pending in the court, the victim has received no justice so far.

Case 6 [Code ASMVI]

Victim: The victim was a widowed woman in the 40-50 years age group, with one son and three daughters. She belonged to the Rongdani Rabha (ST) group of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. She had received no formal education. Her main occupation was cultivation and the family was also involved in contract work. They owned 5 bigha of land, three *kutcha* houses and one cycle. They also had one fishery, two cows and four poultry. Although the victim did not hold title to the family property, she enjoyed access to it.

Instigators: The main instigator was related to the victim by marriage. The other perpetrators were distant marital relatives or neighbours or community members.

Victimization: The victim's husband's nephew had a seven-year-old daughter who often used to suffer from stomach aches. He suspected that the victim was responsible for his daughter's illness. He therefore called a meeting to punish her for the suffering she had brought on his daughter, with the victim completely unaware of these plans. On the day of the meeting, the victim went fishing with her husband's brother's wife. Her husband's nephew had tried to prevent them from going, telling them that some guests were expected to arrive, when, in fact, he had called a meeting in the house to accuse the victim of practising witchcraft.

The victim's youngest daughter, an *aganwadi* worker, learnt of the impending meeting and informed her mother and other family members.

Consequently, the victim along with her children came to the main instigator's house, where the meeting was to be held. Here, the community members accused the victim of witchcraft, imposed a fine of Rs. 5,000 and also threatened her with dire consequences if she did not pay the fine. Fearing further trouble, the victim and her son agreed to pay the fine. After reaching home, her son decided against paying the fine as his mother was wrongly blamed.

When the village community learnt that the victim would not pay the fine, another meeting was called where the main instigator intentionally served alcohol to avoid productive discussion. The next day, yet another meeting was called in which the main instigator furiously blamed the victim for the deteriorating health of his daughter. After failing to convince the community of her innocence, and under unrelenting pressure from them, the victim was forced to finally 'confess'.

The villagers consulted with three *deodhonis* and all declared the victim a witch. The villagers were furious and determined to kill the victim; the main instigator hit the victim with an iron rod and other villagers also joined in the assault. The victim lost consciousness and her brother and cousin carried her back to her house.

The villagers believed that the daughters of a woman practising witchcraft would also acquire the craft with time, so the victim's younger daughter was also accused of being a witch, following which it was decided that both mother and daughter should be banished. The villagers also tortured the younger daughter, but she escaped and informed the police, asking for protection. The police admitted her in the hospital, but after she recovered, the villagers did not let the victim and her daughter return to the village. The victim's family stayed outside the village for ten months with a distant relative.

The victim's married elder daughter pleaded for a peaceful negotiation with the main instigator but he threatened to get her declared a witch as well. This terrified her into committing suicide. The victim's marital relatives took the advantage of her absence from the village and mortgaged her land and sold her livestock. The villagers raided all the fish from her fishery.

During exile, the victim requested AMSS functionaries to intervene in the matter. After much effort, AMSS members brought the victim and her family back to the village, although complete social ostracism continued. Having faced cruelty, rejection and stigma, the victim and her family decided to convert to Christianity and live an isolated life.

According to the victim, her husband, during his lifetime, had planted five big trees along the boundary line of his nephew's homestead land, which the nephew objected to. The husband promised to relocate the saplings to another place when they grew, and the issue essentially remained unresolved. Subsequently, the nephew forcefully uprooted the trees, resulting in the victim having a verbal fight with him, in which she cursed him. When his daughter fell ill, he accused the victim of causing the misfortune. Moreover, before the labelling, the victim's son had acquired a contract from which he earned Rs. 25,000, of which 50% was demanded by the village committee, but he gave only Rs. 5,000. Already disgruntled with the victim's family, the villagers, joined the nephew when the opportunity arose to take revenge.

Violations: She was abused and called names like *daini*, *tikker* and *sikkhal*. A group of ten people assaulted her with iron rods. She was beaten brutally, lost consciousness and had to be admitted to the hospital. The villagers did not allow her to enter the village when she came back

from a relative's house after ten years of exile, even threatening to kill her. She lost her property and access to public resources.

Effects of the branding on her and her family:

She was evicted from the village, asked to pay a fine of Rs. 5,000, which her family refused to pay, after which the fine was increased to Rs. 25,000, with the threat that non-payment would mean eviction from the village and absolute social boycott. When she was in exile, her family's land was mortgaged by the nephew and livestock sold; her fisheries were plundered. After she returned from the exile, she was compelled to sell a cow and 1 bigha of land to meet the debts. She is still scared to venture out. One of her daughters committed suicide.

Role of family and neighbours: Her family members supported her and sought to protect her. Her two brothers-in-law pleaded with the

community members on her behalf for a peaceful negotiation.

The villagers participated in the victimization. Some community members from another village came forward to help her in the meeting but the villagers of the victim's village did not allow them to participate in the meeting. The victim's well-wishers helped her access medical treatment and informed the police.

Role of the authorities: In the Gram Sabha/ Panchayat meeting all the male members had consumed alcohol, and were unwilling to respond to the victim's pleas. She approached AMSS, who along with the police intervened for a peaceful negotiation.

The intervention helped her regain access to the family property. The police arrested the ten people who were involved in the assault and harassment, and warned the villagers against further harassment of the victim or her family

Case 7 [Code ASMVII]

Victim: The victim was a married woman in the age group of 40-50 years, with three sons and one daughter. She had received no formal education and was a member of the Jekdoba Mahila Got. She belonged to the Rongdoni Rabha Community of North Garo Hills.

The family of the victim was involved in cultivation of paddy and also worked as daily wage labour. The victim's family had three *kutch* cottages, one well and one *saal* orchard, as well as a small set of livestock consisting of one cows, one pig and three ducks. The victim had also inherited 3 bigha of agricultural land and 2 bigha of

homestead land in her natal village from her father.

Instigators: The perpetrators were neighbours.

Victimization: The victim fell out of favour with the main instigator and the villagers for several reasons. For one, she inherited a total of 5 bigha of land from her mother which many villages disapproved of, as women rarely own land. In the meantime the instigator, her neighbour, received a plot of land adjoining hers from the ex-headman of the village, on which her husband grew vegetables without permission since it was

unused. This caused them to fall out with the instigator, who sought to destroy the vegetable crop as soon as he learnt of their cultivation. The victim tried to placate him, offering to pay a rent for the use of the land, but was stabbed on the forehead by him.

To take action against this assault, the victim's husband called a village meeting, asking for compensation for the injury caused to the victim. The villagers supported him, and were served rice beer by the victim's family. The instigator's wife also drank the rice beer at the meeting. After three days, the instigator's wife went for a picnic with other village women, where she consumed pork and rice beer, following which she had a severe attack of stomach ache and died. This caused the instigator to spread rumours that his wife passed away due to the consumption of rice beer in the victim's house, and that the victim had some evil powers.

A year passed by and a newly-wed bride, known to be a soothsayer, came to the village from Sonitpur district. The villagers built a temple for her. The main instigator and the village headman, both relatively wealthy, also donated money for this. An annual Gram Puja was organized to which the soothsayer was invited, and here, in the presence of everyone, she declared that the victim was a witch, blaming her for the death of children and cattle in the village.

After a few days, when the victim's husband turned violent against her in a drunken state, she ran to the main instigator's house, neighbouring hers, to take refuge. As someone was ill in his house at that time, the main instigator accused the victim of causing the illness. A public meeting was called the next day where the victim and her husband were called and told by the villagers to leave the village. The victim pleaded her innocence but in vain; everyone believed the

main instigator and the soothsayer. The victim was asked to hold a lamp from the soothsayer's temple to prove her innocence but at her wits' end she refused to do so. Her refusal confirmed to the villagers that she was a witch, and they forced her to sign a document and chased her out into the village cremation ground. They also physically assaulted her, causing the loss of her front teeth.

The victim's family tried to help her. Her husband and sons opposed the orders and were severely beaten up by the villagers. The victim's husband turned deaf due to the severe blows he received. Threatened by the villagers, the family returned to the village without her.

After regaining consciousness the victim fled to a distant relative's house and stayed there for a while. She also tried to go to her natal village to settle on the land she had inherited from her mother, but that village also refused to allow her to do so. The victim believed she was victimized because she had inherited landed property which caused jealousy amongst others.

Violations: She was labelled and called names like *tikker*, *sikkhal* and *daini*. The villagers beat her up with iron rods and showered blows on her face. She lost a few teeth in the assault, and still has deep scars on her forehead. She was evicted from the village and she has also lost access to her inherited property.

Effects of the branding on her and her family:

The community members chased her out of the village and she has lost her family and livelihood, and access to her parental property. Her family used to make a living from paddy cultivation but after the labelling they lost their livelihood. As she was banished from the village, her husband too followed her. They now live in a rented property in Goalpara, and work as daily wage labour. Her

children continue to live in their house in the village, living off the products of the land their mother had inherited in another village, where the maternal uncle lives.

Role of family and neighbours: The victim's husband and children tried to protect her from the assault. Her husband even followed her and lives in exile with her. The victim's neighbours contributed in the targeting. They supported the instigators in assaulting the victim and banishing her from the village.

Role of the authorities: The police intervened

on receiving a complaint from the victim, but could not take action or initiate a negotiation with the villagers. It is also believed that the villagers had bribed the police and prevented them from arresting anyone in the village.

On the other hand, AMSS went to negotiate the matter with the villagers, despite no positive response from the community. They then raised the matter with the district administration. AMSS is still trying to restore her in the village with no results so far.

Case 8 [Code ASMVIII]

Victim: The victim was a married woman in the 20-30 age group, although news reports claimed she was 36 years. She had one daughter aged 15.

She had received no formal education and worked as permanent labour in a tea garden and also sold straw for supplementary income. Her husband worked both as a permanent and casual worker in the tea garden. She belonged to the adivasi Gourh Hindu (TGL) community, which has been categorized as OBC in Assam. She was from Sonitpur district.

The victim's family had approximately 1 katha (5 katha=1 bigha) of encroached land and a very small *kutch*a house. They also had a yard where they grew straw for sale. The victim did not own any property but had access to her family property.

Instigators: The instigators were co-workers and drinking partners of the victim.

Victimization: The victim's marriage was not

accepted by her husband's community members because she belonged to a different adivasi group. The Gourh community of her husband were originally blacksmiths and they enjoyed a higher status than the Moora community to which the victim originally belonged.

While her husband was in prison for a few years, the victim lived with her daughter in her husband's village. She worked as permanent labour in the tea garden. Actively involved in the community circles of the tea plantation labourers, she often used to drink with the community. Sometimes a few men from the group would tease her, asking for sexual favours which she always turned down. While her husband was serving this long imprisonment, she also got marriage offers. She was often called *randi* (slang for women with multiple sexual partners). In fact terms like this are sometimes used for women in such communities who indulge in drinking.

The community also had problems with the victim's way of worship and rituals and suspected

her of inviting evil forces to the village. Her husband's prowess in hunting mongoose was also attributed to the victim's powers and the village community started isolating the victim. She was not invited to participate in community religious functions.

The victim used to spend a lot of time in her sister's house. One of the victim's drinking partners, who was also a co-worker, worked as an *ojha* and he accused the victim and her sister of bringing tuberculosis on his son. He also tried to force himself sexually on the victim on one occasion, and was injured by her in her bid to escape. In one of the village rituals, as he was performing the rituals as an *ojha*, he declared that he was possessed by a *deo* (spirit) and claimed that the victim was responsible for all the illnesses in the village. He announced that the victim was a *daini*. Accompanied by other villagers, he went to the victim's house and destroyed the *tulsisthan* (basil plant on a raised platform, which is a place of worship) in her courtyard. However, the victim did not pay any heed to his actions as she did not believe in witchcraft or any such superstition.

The same day a group of men came to the victim's house and threatened her; they asked her to go with them but she resisted. The daughter sensed imminent danger but when she asked a relative for shelter she was turned down. The same day the victim and her husband went to drink at a place near her sister's residence. The victim was drunk so her sister came to drop her off at her house. Everyone then went off to sleep. At midnight a group of men entered the victim's house and forcefully dragged out the victim, her husband, daughter and a girl staying with them.

The next day the victim's sister discovered that the victim and her family were missing. After a thorough search, the plantation workers found the victim's dead body in the tea garden. The tea garden authority informed the police and after

search operations were carried out by the police, the other three bodies were located in the drains in a very mutilated condition. The paraphernalia used in the murder was also recovered.

Violations: The main instigator along with other community members threatened the victim and her daughter and damaged their worship place. The victim, her daughter and husband were tied to a tree in a jungle; they were brutally beaten with rods and raped. The husband was hit on the head and a rod was inserted into his anus. The victim's daughter was gang-raped and a rod was inserted into her vagina. Acid (from 24 volt batteries) was thrown on their faces and private parts.

Role of family and neighbours: The victim's husband always supported her but he was mentally unstable and so no one took him seriously. The night the instigators attacked her, the husband could not do much because he was absolutely unprepared and the attack was so sudden. The victim's sister was always concerned about their well-being and had advised them to shift residence.

Effects of the branding on her and her family: The victim's sister is still scared to visit the village and she is following up on the case. The other sister, who lives in the same village, feels under threat and that she too is suspected as a witch. She did lodge a complaint with the police and a few individuals were rounded up.

Role of the authorities: The tea garden company lodged a complaint with the police after the bodies were discovered. The company gave Rs. 2000 to the victim's sister for post-mortem of the bodies. She also received help from the local Mahila Samiti, including a loan of Rs.7000, to pursue the case. All the accused arrested for the murder are presently out on bail after only six months' imprisonment.

Case 9 [Code ASMIX]

Victim: The victim was a married woman in the 50-60 age group with three sons and three daughters. She had received no formal education and belonged to the adivasi Santhal Hindu community (MOBC) of Sonitpur district.

The victim's family were primarily agriculturalists, and were also involved in selling firewood and working as casual labour for supplementary income. The family was using 4 bigha of encroached land and had one *kutch*a cottage and one cycle. They also owned two cows, one pig and six hens. The victim did not own any property of her own but had complete access to her husband's property.

Instigators: The instigators were neighbours of the victim.

Victimization: The victim's paternal uncle was a local *ojha* who treated people with mantras and her husband sometimes accompanied him in these activities. One of the victim's neighbours, also from the Santhal community, was very worried about his sick daughter who was one and half month old. There were many attempts to heal the child. Finally the victim and her husband were called to perform a ritual to treat the child, and soon after a session of *jhar-phuk* (traditional way of curing disease with chants) the child died. The neighbour thought that the victim had caused the child's death.

There was another *ojha* in the village who encouraged the instigator's doubts, and together they spread rumours that the victim was a *daini* and had eaten up the child (as the common belief

regarding a witch amongst adivasis is that a witch eats small children). The victim and her family, however, were unaware of these rumours. After a few days, when the victim's husband and her uncle were in the forest collecting firewood, a group of people came to bring them back to the village on the pretext that some officers had come for a certain survey. On reaching the village, they found there was no officer for any survey; instead it was an assault planned by the instigator and his group, who compelled the victim's husband and uncle to crawl on their knees into their house. The victim, who was fishing with her elder daughter at the time of attack, was beaten up by the mob. The victim's daughter escaped the assault.

According to the victim and her husband, the instigator was a local hooligan who had always been ignored by the victim and her husband. The victim had very hard-working sons who were doing well financially; the instigator asked them to work for him on a contractual basis, which they declined. The instigator was an alcoholic and idle by nature. Due to all these reasons, the neighbour always had a repressed anger towards the victim and her family so he manipulated the situation to take revenge. The victim stated that, moreover, the instigator always had an eye on their property. The victim claimed she had more property than the instigator when she was victimized.

Violations: The victim was called names such as *daini*, *dahini*, *boxi*, *zara fukak kara manuh*. The villagers, who were carrying daggers with them, beat up the victim and her husband and uncle with bamboo sticks. They threatened her family

and forced them to leave their house.

Effects of the branding on her and her family:

She was forcibly evicted from her house along with her family. They spent a few days in a neighbour's house and after a while, due to the initiative taken by that neighbour and some other enlightened people of the village, they could go back to their house. They managed to rebuild their house and acquire a couple of other assets.

The husband was also labelled a witch. The victim and her family are leading a very isolated life in the village. The victim has been depressed after the targeting. She is not afraid but the memories of the episode re-traumatize her. Her daughters have also stopped going out in the neighbourhood or to any social function. The victim's family recently converted into Christianity and now they are further prohibited from participating in the rites and rituals of the Santhal society.

Role of family and neighbours: The family members tried to protect and save the victim and her elder son wanted to kill the instigator but he was prevented from doing so. The sons and daughters of the victim continued to protect her after the incident.

The entire Santhal community of the village contributed to the targeting of the victim as a witch. Some of them also participated in the physical assault on the victim and her family members. The Santhal community organized a public meeting where they took a decision to

permanently cast out the victim and her family from the village.

Besides the Santhal community there was a sizeable population of Nepalese and a few people belonging to the Rajbonsi community living in the area. They tried to protect the victim and her family. Some of them also extended their support after they were evicted and provided shelter for a while. The Santhal people, however, warned them from interfering in the affairs of their community. The victim's brother occasionally visited her.

Role of the authorities: A community meeting was conducted but the community members did not want to listen to anything from the victim's end and her supporters. Some people from the Nepalese community tried to support her but to no avail. Finally, some members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) intervened to solve the problem. A meeting was arranged and the community members were convinced that the victim was not a witch and witchcraft is only a superstitious belief. She was given the assurance that she could return to the village. The CPI (M) helped the victim and her family to resettle in their original plot.

The victim and her family did not approach the police as they were poor and illiterate, and also because they wanted to enter into a compromise with their community, not alienate them completely.

Case 10 [Code ASMX]

Victim: The victim was a married woman with one son and belonged to the 40-50 age group. She belonged to the adivasi Munda community (OBC) and followed Hinduism. She had not received any formal education.

The victim's family was involved in wage and casual labour and also did some cultivation for supplementary income. The family had 6 bigha of land, one cycle and some silver jewellery from her wedding. They lived in a *kutcha* house and had a small set of livestock consisting of three cows and five or six hens. The victim did not own any property but she had access to her husband's property. The victim herself was a *phaltu* (casual labour). Her father-in-law's post of permanent labour in the same tea garden was transferred to her after his retirement.

Instigator: The instigator was related to the victim by marriage and they were also co-workers.

Victimization: The victim worked as labour in the tea garden and she continued working after her marriage. Three of her children died when they were very young and only her fourth son survived. After her father-in-law retired from his permanent job in the tea garden, the tea garden authorities offered the family one job, which she took up, as her husband was not hard-working and her brothers-in-laws too were unwilling to work. A financially resourceful person, she used her father-in-law's retirement money to buy a sugarcane farm, something that was appreciated by the family.

The instigator, also a permanent worker in the tea garden, was a female relative – the wife of a cousin of the victim's husband. The victim and the instigator were co-workers and seemed to have cordial relations with one another within the same family. But the instigator was jealous of the hard work and resourcefulness of the victim through which her family prospered. The fact that the victim was highly admired in her matrimonial home and enjoyed happy marital relations with her husband were additional causes for the instigator's jealousy. The instigator could not manage her finances well nor was known to be hard-working, and was far less economically stable in comparison. She also blamed the victim for the increasing mental instability of her (the instigator's) husband.

The instigator often teased the victim about her romantic marital relationship in front of everyone in the tea garden, which embarrassed the victim. One day when the instigator was drunk, she began abusing the victim, calling her *randi* (a colloquial term for women with multiple sex partners) and *daini*. She accused the victim of eating the three sons who had died. She also claimed that the victim had bewitched her own husband with her evil powers, which also helped her appear prosperous with little money, while causing economic difficulties for the instigator.

There was growing animosity towards the victim in the community. Since the victim's elder sister had been labelled a witch in the past and killed, the villagers joined the instigator in accusing the victim of belonging to a family of witches. Led by

the instigator, the villagers demanded that the victim leave the village to avoid endangering the villagers. The victim complained to a higher official in the garden about these attacks by the instigator, and was supported by the higher official, after which the instigator led everyone to believe that the victim was having an illicit relationship with the official. The victim was threatened with physical violence by the instigator but she ignored the threat.

After a few days, while the victim was taking a bath, the instigator and her aunt called her out. As she came out, both of them held her by the neck and beat her up. The victim's husband did not dare use physical force against his cousin's wife so pleaded them to leave his wife alone. The victim also pleaded with them, managing finally to escape, after which she went to a relative's residence for the night. The next day she moved to her brother's house, a simple hut, with her son, where her husband also joined her after a few months. In a few years the victim (with her husband and son) bought her uncle's land in instalments, built a small house and are now living there. On the few occasions when the victim tried to return to her in-laws' house to take some of her belongings, she was not allowed to do so.

Violations: The victim was branded a witch or daini, and was also called a *randi* and *bajimaiki* (childless woman). The instigator and her aunt caught her by the neck and assaulted her. She was often verbally abused by her husband's cousin, the perpetrator's husband. He also took away some money from the victim, to buy luxurious items for his household. The victim and her family were evicted from their home and village for good.

Effects of the branding on her and her family : The immediate result of the branding as a witch was that the victim was forced to leave her

matrimonial home. She continues to work as a permanent worker in the tea garden, apart from contributing to her husband's field. The victim now lives with her natal family and cannot claim any rights in her marital home.

She shares normal relations with the neighbours, natal family members and other kith and kin, and participates in social ceremonies, marriages etc. She keeps a distance from the main instigator and though they work in the same tea garden they do not communicate.

Role of family and neighbours : The victim's husband has been very protective of the victim. She has good relations with her husband and son, and they live together. She lived with her brother's family for nearly a year after being declared a witch. Her husband joined her after six months.

The marital family members turned against her; although some of them did not believe that she was a witch, they kept quiet, thus indirectly supporting the perpetrators. The neighbours were suspicious of her. When the victim was being assaulted they did not speak up or protect her. They also made no attempt to help her when she was evicted from her home and had to leave for her natal house. When the victim approached the villagers for a meeting, they did not agree. On the contrary they said: *Rotowar maiki rotowat loi ja, amak dahin nalage* (send the lady to her natal house, we do not need a witch).

Role of the authorities: The victim went to the village authorities twice asking for justice but the instigator was drunk on the first day so the meeting was aborted, as was the next one with the perpetrator claiming she could not discuss the matter due to the absence of her husband.

The victim wanted to go to the police to register a FIR, but did not do so as she was threatened with dire consequences by the instigator.

Case 11 [Code ASMXI]

Victim: The victim was a married woman belonging to the 20-30 age group, with one son and two daughters. She was from the Orang community (MOBC) and followed Hinduism. The victim had no formal education.

The victim and her husband worked as contractual caretakers for a nursery in Dikal forest in Sonitpur. They also practiced *adhikheti* or contract farming in which they shared half the yield with the landowner. The victim and her husband lived in a quarter provided in the nursery they worked in and had one goat and one cow. They owned no land but had a cycle.

Instigator: The main instigator was the manager of the nursery where the victim worked. Members of his family, including his wife, and villagers were also involved.

Victimization : After getting married, the victim and her husband left their previous occupation of assisting a mahout and started working as daily wage labour. The victim's husband maintained good relations with his previous employer, who introduced them to the manager of a nursery. As the manager was in need of two labourers to take care of the nursery, he asked the victim's husband if he and his wife would take up the job. The victim and her husband started working there for a monthly salary of Rs.3000, and free accommodation in the forest camp.

The victim and her husband used to travel about 30 km to the manager's house to collect their salary. Initially there was no problem with this arrangement; but after a few months the

manager stopped paying them a regular salary citing some problems. In lieu of the salary, the manager arranged for the victim and her husband to get monthly rations on credit from a shop near the camp, which the manager would clear with the shopkeeper at the end of the month. However, when the manager failed to keep his word, the shopkeeper stopped giving rations in credit to the victim.

During Durga puja, the manager asked the victim to come to his house to take her salary. The victim expected to get Rs. 9000 but received only Rs. 1000. The victim wanted to buy new clothes for her children and husband for the festival for which she needed more money; she demanded her due but was refused.

The victim went once again to the manager's house to ask for the amount due to her, but the manager and his wife were not home. She waited for them to return, asking their daughter to give her something to eat as she had not eaten the entire day. The manager's daughter served her cold tea without sugar, so the victim rebuked her. When the manager's wife returned home, she was informed by her daughter about the rebuke by the victim. The manager's wife got into a heated argument with the victim over this, and refused to give her the remaining salary, after which the victim cursed her, saying, 'You will get worms in your mouth.'

Soon after, the manager's daughter got injured. According to the manager's wife it looked as though small white worms were oozing out of the

wound. This reminded her of the victim's curse, so she blamed the victim for the mishap. Next morning, the manager's elder son came to the victim's ex-employer's house where the victim was staying and asked her to come with him to their house. In the manager's house, the victim was tied up to a pillar, caught by her hair and beaten. Some young boys brought knives and threatened to cut her up. The villagers who had gathered had brought kerosene along with them, threatening to burn her alive. The manager's wife prevented the village community from doing anything extreme. The villagers left the victim tied to the pillar at night and went away but at midnight the manager's wife freed her and allowed her to sleep inside.

Meanwhile a young boy from the village had informed the victim's husband about the ordeal his wife was being subjected to. The next day the victim's husband arrived at the manager's house and asked him to free his wife. The manager and his wife made the victim swear in the name of God that she would not practise witchcraft. The victim did everything as asked. However, the manager fired the victim and her husband from their job. The villagers warned them not to return to the village. They lost their livelihood and shelter, and have been living with the stigma ever since.

According to the victim and her husband, the manager and his wife victimized them to avoid paying Rs. 9000, the wages due to them.

Violations: The victim was called names like *daini, dahini, jadu jana*. She was tied to a pillar and assaulted. The manager grabbed her hair, the villagers threatened to burn her alive and some wanted to kill her with knives. She had to take an oath that she would not practise witchcraft to save herself from being further assaulted, and warned with death threats not to enter the manager's village.

She was also chased out of her shelter in the nursery camp and now she lives with her husband and children in a makeshift shed in a very deplorable condition. They lost their jobs. She cannot buy anything from community markets because people look at her with suspicion so she has to shop in faraway markets and villages where she is not known. They cannot enter the main instigator's village.

Effects of the branding on her and her family:

Her family lost their accommodation and livelihood. They now live outside the forest camp in a shed which lacks the facilities of their previous accommodation. There is no potable water and they have to drink water from a river that flows near their new home.

Their financial situation has also been drastically affected. The victim has been suffering from a back pain and due to their financial condition she is unable to go to the doctor for treatment. After the labelling, the husband and wife have been working as bonded labourers. The victim is still very scared of the instigator.

Role of family and neighbours: In her family, the only adult member was her husband and he came to rescue her as soon as he was informed about the targeting and assault. He protected and supported his wife but her children were too young to react or understand. Her relationship with her natal and marital families has not changed.

The manager's wife, an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), was very popular in the village, so she could convince all the villagers of the guilt of the victim (who in any case was not even an inhabitant of that village). Only one young boy protested against the treatment and saved her by informing her husband.

Role of the authorities: The victim did not approach any authority for help.

Case 12 [Code ASMXII]

Victim: The victim was a married woman with one son and three daughters and belonged to the age group of 30-40 years. She followed Hinduism and was from the Munda community (MOBC) that constituted the TGL in Sonitpur district. The victim had not received any formal education.

The victim worked as a tea garden employee and was involved in casual labour. Her husband and daughters were also involved as employees in the same tea garden. The family also sold seasonal vegetables and had some livestock – one cow and three ducks – for supplementary income. No one else in the neighbourhood had any livestock. They used 3 katha of encroached land and lived in a small kutcha cottage. They had one cycle.

Instigators: The perpetrators were neighbours of the victim.

Victimization: The entire community was celebrating Magh Bihu and was busy feasting. While the victim and her husband were drinking *lao pani* (a local brew) as part of the celebrations, suddenly they realized that one of their ducks was missing. The victim and her husband did not know who had stolen the duck but she started abusing the thief, saying they would face severe consequences. The next day they learnt that a neighbour had stolen and eaten it. They cursed him, saying that God would punish him.

After a few months, the neighbour's wife was in the throes of childbirth but was not being able to deliver the child. The neighbour's father-in-law, who was an *ojha*, tried to solve the problem with traditional healing methods, using spells, potions

and mantras. However, despite his efforts a stillborn child was delivered. The neighbour was infuriated and began to rebuke his wife but the *ojha* suggested that the victim was responsible for the misfortune. He said the victim had used some magical powers and applied a *baan* (a force which restrains a person from completing a task) on the neighbour's wife. The victim was labelled a witch by the *ojha*. The neighbour went to the victim's house with his two brothers and asked her to come out. When the victim came out, they pulled her by the hair, slapped and beat her; the neighbour's brothers took out a knife to cut her throat, but the victim's husband and child intervened and saved her from being killed.

The next daya public meeting was arranged by the neighbour where the victim and her husband were called, and the victim was accused of being responsible for the death of the neighbour's child. The perpetrator recounted the incident from the previous month about victim cursing the unknown thief when her duck was stolen, admitting that he had stolen the duck and thereafter borne the brunt of the victim's curse with his child being a stillborn. He claimed that the victim practised witchcraft. The victim was asked by the villagers to immediately leave the village to escape violence and killing; her family was also threatened with death. So they left the village and settled 2 km away.

The victim followed different religious rituals and used to perform Sordowa puja.¹ This difference in religious rituals also generated suspicion in the minds of the villagers against her.

According to the victim, the perpetrator was ashamed when she abused and cursed the thief who stole the duck and he was looking for an opportunity to take revenge. He used the birth of the stillborn baby to punish her. She also stated that since the perpetrator was a neighbour, they had ongoing verbal fights and arguments over petty matters; all of this had culminated in the victimization.

Violations: The victim was branded and called names like *daini, dahin, jadu jana manuh*. She was also physically abused by the instigators. The perpetrator's brothers were ready to kill her with a knife, but she was saved by her family. She received death threats from the village community. She was also forced to leave the village.

Effects of the branding on her and her family : She was forcibly evicted from her residence and the villagers asked them to leave the village. Her family too had to leave the village along with her. The victim and her family lost their dwelling and their secondary source of income. Their previous residence was located in a healthy environment, was closer to the main road and had accessible water supply. There was a primary school near their house. They had a cottage, an animal shed and a temple. The new dwelling is

situated in an unhygienic environment, where the water supply is very poor and there is no connection with the main road. Now they have encroached on 2 katha of land and have built a small house to stay. She is scared to visit her village and still feels that someone might kill her. Their entire income source is from the tea garden. The victim is a *phaltu* (casual labour) and her husband is *aparmet* (permanent worker). Their second daughter too works as a *phaltu* in the same garden.

Role of family and neighbours: Her husband, three children and mother-in-law supported her and came forward to help. Other members of her family were unaware about the incident. The neighbours always suspected her due to the different religious rituals she practised, believing her to be inauspicious. When the *ojha* declared her a witch the villagers, who had faith in the main instigator because of his age and profession, supported him, and evicted her and her family from the village.

Role of the authorities: The incident was not reported to the police. The victim and her family were extremely scared of the village community and so they avoided approaching any law enforcement authority for fear of more punishment.

¹ Sordowa puja is a kind of tree worship. On the day of the puja, the head of the family fasts. The puja is usually performed on *amabaishya* (moonless night). Women are not allowed in the worship place. A group of men (about three or four) goes to the jungle in the midnight of *amabaishya* to perform the puja, for which they sacrifice a cock. The family is also expected to offer boiled rice, egg etc which should be stolen from other families. If in the process of worship, the priest makes a mistake, or if the puja is missed by a generation, it is believed that the family will suffer great hardship, so the puja is taken very seriously. The main motive of *Sordowa* puja is to become wealthy.

Case 13 [Code ASMXIII]

Victim: The victim was an unmarried girl in the age group of 10-20 years. She belonged to the adivasi Munda (MOBC) group of Sonitpur and followed Christianity. She was attending school, and was scheduled to appear for the tenth standard examination when she was victimized.

Her parents work in the tea garden and her brothers work as security guards in Bangalore. One of her sisters works as casual labour in the tea garden. They lived in company quarters in the tea garden and did not own any property except 3 cycles. She had access to all common resources when she was victimised.

Instigators: The instigators were neighbours of the victim.

Victimization: The victim had three friends from the neighbourhood and these girls would often stay over at her house to drink, although she herself always refused to drink despite much coaxing. One day one of her friends' cousin brother fell sick and an *ojha* claimed that a young girl was responsible for his illness. The boy had high fever; at night in a state of convulsion, he claimed that he had fallen sick after consuming an apple given by the victim. No one considered that the real reason behind his illness was due to his addiction to liquor and *gutka* (tobacco).

The neighbours then confronted the victim and started verbally abusing her and also brought out bamboo sticks and daggers to beat her up. They called her a *randi* (a loose woman) and a witch, threatening to kill her. The boy seemed to recover while the victim was subjected to such

accusations, which convinced the boy's family and the neighbours that the victim was indeed a witch. They decided to kill her but she was saved by her uncles. Her father was bedridden at that time, so was unable to intervene.

The young boy was eventually taken to a doctor but died, after which a village meeting was called and the victim was accused of killing the boy with witchcraft. The neighbours also decided to attack her that very night but most of the community members did not turn up. Instead, some community members asked the victim and her family to report the attacks to the police. Accompanied by her father and uncles, the victim went to the police and registered an FIR. The police intervened and talked to the main instigators and the people involved in attacking the victim, ordering them to ask for forgiveness from the victim and her family. From then onwards the victim or her family has not been harassed by anyone. The victim has severed all connections with her friends from the neighbourhood who instigated the targeting and victimization.

According to the victim, she had received a proposal for marriage. The prospective groom visited her village on the day she was labelled as a witch and attacked. She had mentioned to her friends that she shared a good relationship with this boy, which she thought made them jealous as they themselves had troubled personal lives related to love and relationships. She claims her friends were possibly also infatuated with the boy

from whom she had received a proposal, and they targeted her to prevent her relationship from progressing to marriage. After she was branded as a witch, the boy's parents did not pursue the discussion about marriage; although the boy sometimes contacts her, he too has stopped talking about the marriage.

The victim also stated that for some unknown reasons, her grandmother was labelled as a witch in the past and the villagers also called her mother and uncle's wife witches.

Violations: The victim was verbally abused and attempts were made to physically assault her. The perpetrators also threatened to kill her.

Effects of the branding on her and her family: After the harassment the victim has been suffering from depression and nightmares. Although she is safe with her family, she is still traumatized by the incident and is scared to go out freely. She used to go to the market and to collect water but now she hesitates to go out alone. She maintains normal relations with the community members, participates in social functions, but avoids the instigators and their families.

There were some discussions about her marriage but after the branding the family who had approached her for marriage has discontinued the discussions.

Role of family and neighbours: The victim's family members protected her. Her uncles saved her from being killed by the mob. Later all of them accompanied her to the police station and filed a complaint against the perpetrators.

Some of the neighbours contributed to the targeting and attempted physical assault. However, some of them advised them to go to the police and file a complaint.

Role of the authorities: On receiving a complaint from the victim and her family, the police came and arrested the perpetrators. The police helped in negotiating compromise and asked the perpetrators to ask for forgiveness from the victim and her family. They warned the people that if they continued harassing the victim and her family, strict action would be taken against them. The tension eased when the mob requested the victim and her family to pardon them.

Case 14 [Code ASMXIV]

Victim: The victim was a widow belonging to the age group of 50-60 years. She had one adopted son. She belonged to the adivasi Munda (MOBC) group of Sonitpur district and followed Hinduism. She had not received any formal education.

The victim received a widow's pension from the government and she also had livestock which she

hired out to others on the *adhi* system (a bond where the half of cost price is shared with the caretaker of produce). She also worked as a *dai* (traditional female birth attendant) in her village and neighbouring villages, and earned enough for her subsistence. At times she also worked as a daily wage labourer in a potato farm and her adopted son worked in a stationery shop.

They used 1 katha of encroached land, lived in a *kutchra* house and owned a pig. She had right of access to common property and resources.

Instigator: The main instigator was the victim's neighbour. He was accompanied by his brother and relative in accusing and murdering the victim.

Victimization: Within a period of seven days the victim was declared a witch and murdered. The respondents who were interviewed could not give much information about the victim's natal relatives as they were distant relatives from the victim's informal second marriage. The victim's second husband worked as a caretaker in a farm but he died of some disease in 2012. After her husband's death she faced a financial crisis and began to work as a *dai* in her village to make ends meet. She also started receiving a widow's pension (one-time financial help amounting to Rs. 10,000 under the Central Family Welfare Scheme for the widows).

The victim adopted her brother-in-law's son as his mother had died and his father was physically handicapped. She had a good relationship with her adopted son and brother-in-law, and cordial relations with everyone in the village. She was also known to be very efficient as a *dai* and was very popular among the village residents.

The victim had lent one of her pigs to her neighbour on *adhi* sometime in 2012. She had no idea that the neighbour had sold the pig without informing her or giving her a share of the profit. When the victim came to know about this, she had a confrontation with her neighbour and demanded her share of profit. Despite threats by her neighbour, she still sent her adopted son to ask for her due. In return her neighbour gave a paltry amount of Rs. 500 and threatened the victim against asking for more.

In fact, the pig had been sold to a distant relative

of the neighbour who had killed and eaten it, after which the daughters of the relative fell ill. The neighbour used this as an opportunity to take revenge by instigating his relative against the victim. He claimed that the victim was a witch and that was why her pig had caused the family's illness.

The same night the neighbour, his younger brother and relative accompanied by eight others came with axes and machetes and tried to kill the victim. They were prevented by a senior citizen of the village but the anger and frustration of the main instigator continued to fester. After a week, the victim was kidnapped from her house at night, and murdered in front of the primary school by a gang of people. A neighbour who was a witness to the killing tried to stop them but he was also threatened with dire consequences and death.

Notably, the main instigator and the victim shared the same boundary and the field investigators claim that seizing of the victim's plot of land was another reason behind the targeting and murder. The main instigator was also believed to be jealous of the victim's multiple sources of income.

Violations : The victim was verbally abused and declared a *daini*. She was kidnapped from her house at night, and murdered by a group of eight men.

Role of family and neighbours: When the victim was accused by the main instigator, her family members did not believe in the accusations. Her adopted son and other relatives supported her and tried to negotiate peace. No one thought that the main instigator would murder her. The victim's adopted son was not around when she was victimized and killed.

The main instigators were neighbours of the victim and were involved in her murder. However,

some neighbours and community members tried to prevent the murder but in vain. When another man who did not belong to the same community tried to stop the killing, he received death threats.

Role of the authorities: The police intervened

on receiving a complaint from the victim's adopted son. The accused were arrested and served six months' imprisonment and they are out on bail now. According to the respondents crimes of this nature should not be bailable.

Case 15 [Code ASMXV]

Victim: The victim was a married woman of 50-60 years, with one son. She belonged to Orang Hindu adivasi community (MOBC-TGL) of Sonitpur district. She had not received any formal education.

The victim's husband was a cultivator and they were also involved in the cutting and selling of firewood in the local markets. Her son worked as casual labour in the village. Her family was using 4 bigha of encroached land and lived in a *kutcha* cottage. They had a small set of livestock consisting of two cows, four pigs and six hens. She had complete access to her husband's property and common resources of the village.

Instigator: The main instigator was the victim's neighbour.

Victimization: The victim's older sister was suspected to be a witch and was blamed for the death of livestock in the village. She was raped and murdered by a group of village men. The perpetrators were arrested but in a few months, they were released on bail. The victim called a meeting of village elders including Panchayat leaders and Village Defence Party (VDP) members and other conscious villagers, to discuss the status of the murderers (of her sister) in the village. She strongly believed that a few months'

imprisonment was not enough punishment compared to the gravity of the crime. She was of the opinion that the offenders should be given a serious punishment or they would continue violating other community members.

After a week, the victim's neighbour's 10-month-old daughter started suffering from diarrhoea and the neighbour was advised by the main instigator to call an *ojha* to treat the child. The main instigator was the main accused in the rape and murder of the victim's sister and the *ojha* had also been involved in identifying the victim's sister as a witch. When the *ojha* came to treat the baby girl, he held the victim responsible for the suffering of the child. The *ojha* was able to convince the neighbour that the victim, like her sister, practised witchcraft.

Unfortunately, the baby girl died after two days due to lack of proper treatment. After this, the father of the child, along with the main instigator and a few other villagers, made plans to kill the victim. One morning when the victim was going to fetch water from the public well, the main instigator tried to kill her with a machete but she somehow managed to escape and hide in a village resident's house. The owner of the house was an educated man and he prevented the main instigator and his companions from killing the

victim. The victim's family members called a public meeting in which VDP members were present, and protested against the rumours going around in the village regarding the victim. The VDP members warned everyone against accusations of witchcraft and held discussions to persuade the villagers that there is no such practice. From that day onwards, no one has tried to harm the victim.

According to the victim, the main reason behind her targeting was her articulate nature and her demands for justice for her sister's murder.

Violations: The perpetrators started verbally abusing her in public places and prevented her from taking part in any religious activity in the village and neighbouring villages. The main instigator and his company started spreading rumours about the victim practising black magic. The main instigator and his group also tried to kill her but she managed to escape.

Effects of the branding on the victim and her family: After the VDP warned the villagers no attacks have been attempted on the victim. She can go to all public places but villagers taunt her and abuse her verbally and she feels extremely distressed. After she was declared a witch, she faced ostracism by the villagers. She was excluded from participating in any social or religious activity in the village.

Till date she is traumatized when accidents,

illnesses and deaths occur in the village and feels that she will be blamed for any unfortunate event in the village.

Role of family and neighbours: The victim's family protested against the accusations against her; they called a VDP meeting to protest against the rumours about her. The meeting helped in prevention of any further harassment.

The victim's neighbours were suspicious of her and were convinced by the claims made by the *ojha* and the main instigator. The neighbours did not contribute in assaulting her but were indifferent when she was being branded and targeted by the perpetrators.

However, some educated people in the community supported the victim. A community member prevented the main instigator from murdering her and the members of the VDP held a discussion with the villagers to convince them that witchcraft is superstition, not reality. They also warned the villagers against harassing the victim any further.

Role of the authorities: The Village Defence Party (VDP), a community wing under the local police station, intervened on receiving a complaint from the victim and her family. The perpetrators were warned against harassing the victim and threatened with severe punishments if any attacks were made on the victim.

Case 16 [Code ASMXVI]

Victim: The victim was a married woman of 50-60 years with two sons and one daughter. She had completed her education till the fourth standard, was an active member of Ma Manasa Mahila Sangha (a women's collective formed and facilitated by AMSS) of Mongrai and had received district level training on legal literacy from AMSS at Goalpara. She belonged to the Rongdoni Rabha (ST) community of Goalpara district.

Her family was primarily involved in cultivation but also worked as casual labour and as priests/*ojhas* for supplementary income. They owned 18 bigha of landed property and four houses. They also had a well, a pond and a hen. They had one cycle and the victim herself had some gold jewellery.

Instigators : The main instigator was not known but the perpetrators were all community members.

Victimization: The victim had a verbal fight with a neighbour, in the course of which she cursed the neighbour, saying her husband would die. Coincidentally, after a few days the husband of the neighbour died in an accident and people began to suspect the victim of being a witch.

After a year, a young boy died of malaria and jaundice in the village. He was the son of the victim's marital relatives, who were also neighbours of the victim. As an *ojha*, the victim's husband had tried to treat the young boy and even helped the family in getting the boy medically treated. He took the young boy to Goalpara town and later Guwahati for treatment

but the young boy did not recover and passed away.

After the death of the boy, four leading people of the village came to the victim's house at around midnight, and asked the victim and her husband to come out. The victim was then accused of killing the young boy with witchcraft. Her husband too was accused of harming the boy while his treatment was going on in Guwahati. As the argument went on, three drunken young men of the neighbourhood entered the fray and killed the victim and her husband.

The entire incident was narrated by the daughter-in-law of the deceased couple. She was sleeping in the same courtyard, and although she had heard everything, she was too scared to intervene and fled to the neighbour's house. The next morning, accompanied by other neighbours, she went back home where they saw the murdered bodies of the victim and her husband. According to the respondent, the victim couple was socially active and protested if someone tried to misguide the villagers. This popularity was not liked by certain people in the village.

The victim's husband was a priest cum *ojha*. As a priest he was expected to slaughter sacrificial animals in *Pahar puja* – a community puja of the Rabhas. Whenever a priest fails to slaughter the animal with one blow, he is supposed to treat the community members with rice beer to redeem the wrong. The victim's husband had once failed to comply with this penalty which offended the community and everyone was waiting for an

opportunity to punish him.

Violations: She was labelled *daini*, *tikker* and *hawa khawa*. The victim and her husband lost their lives. After the death of the victim and her husband, her sons and daughters-in-law have had to face social isolation and emotional trauma.

The community members pressurized the family members of the victim to leave the village as they wanted to grab the homestead land to construct a youth club. The family is also being pressurized to withdraw the case from the court.

Role of family and neighbours: The incident took place so suddenly that the family members did not get any chance to help.

According to the respondent (the couple's daughter-in-law), when the group of people attacked them, the victims shouted but no one from the neighbourhood came to help them. Later she came to know that the community had planned to kill her parents-in-law in a meeting after the young boy's death. The community members instigated the three boys to kill the victim and her husband. They offered local liquor to the killers to drink before committing the crime.

Role of the authorities : The daughter-in-law of

the accused had described the incident to the village headman and wanted the killers to be punished, but the village headman forbade her from taking any action. The victim's sons approached the police to complain about the matter but the police demanded money from them to provide security.

The victim's family approached AMSS in Goalpara and the AMSS staff approached the Superintendent of Police, Goalpara, for intervention. It was then that the police intervened in the case; they got the village headman's account and threatened the villagers with mass arrest if they failed to identify the killers. The villagers identified the killers and all of them were arrested. The villagers were warned against harassing any of the victim's family members.

The perpetrators were out on bail in three months; in fact, the villagers paid the bail. The case is pending before the Court of Session Judge, Goalpara, and the victim's family is still awaiting justice. The villagers, however, are pressurizing the family members of the deceased to come to a compromise and withdraw the case if they want to live peacefully in the village.

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