

Witchcraft, Resolution, and Witch-hunt: A Study among the Misings of Assam, India

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Submitted by

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CERTIFICATE



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This is to certify that this dissertation titled 'Witchcraft, Resolution, and Witch-hunt: A study among the Misings of Assam, India' submitted by Dinesh Mishong bearing registration number 19SAPH01 in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of 'Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology' is a record of bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision.

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Declaration

I **Dinesh Mishong**, hereby declare that this dissertation titled '**Witchcraft, Resolution, and Witch-hunt: A study among the Misings of Assam, India**' is submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. Apparao Thamminaina**. I also declare that this work has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my dissertation can be deposited in SHODHGANGA/ INFLIBNET.

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Abbreviations

ABSU	All Assam Bodo Student Union
AMSS	Assam Mahila Samata Society
CID	Crime Investigation Department
IPC	Indian Penal Code
NCRB	National Crime Records Bureau
PLD	Partners for Law in Development
PMAY	Prime Minister Awas Yojana
TMPK	Takam Mising Porin Kebang

Chapter I

Introduction

Background

Throughout the last decades, scholars have witnessed unprecedented enthusiasm around the practice of witch-hunt. Attempts have been made by anthropologists, historians, and sociologists to comprehend the reasons behind this dramatic event. The witch-hunt phenomenon examines how people create, experience, and think about the “occult.” It brings together anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and historians from various social and cultural backgrounds to engage with the metaphysical aspects of “witchcraft” and “sorcery” and to look into how they manifest in people’s lived experiences. Witchcraft has proven invaluable in the anthropological effort, particularly among British social anthropologists working in Africa. The witchcraft belief and the search for meaning within a particular belief system have been the primary concerns of African-based anthropologists who examine “witchcraft” as a pertinent subject of investigation. The explanations of modern scholars of witchcraft in Africa depart significantly from those of their predecessors. Contemporary scholars emphasize witch-hunts and the meaning attached to witchcraft while discussing the “modernity of witchcraft.” They argue that the understanding of witchcraft encompasses the context of witchcraft charges, the socio-economic structure, and the hierarchical positions of the individuals within the specific community.

The witch has five distinguishing characteristics, according to English historian Ronald Hutton. To begin, a witch is someone who appears to use supernatural powers to cause misfortune or harm to others. Second, rather than unknown people, a witch hunts recognised members of a group, such as neighbours or relatives. Third, the witch is evil and deliberately commits evil acts. Fourth, the witch is not an isolated individual since they adhere to a tradition, which allows them to learn from others. Fifth, by using countermagic, other individuals can eliminate or overpower witches (Hutton, 2002, p. 19). Witchcraft is usually

understood as the practise of using or calling upon purported supernatural powers to manipulate others or external circumstances. Witchcraft has frequently been perceived, particularly in the West, as the work of crones who meet in secret at night, participate in cannibalism and orgiastic rites with the Devil, or Satan, and practice black magic, despite definitions varying in different historical and cultural settings (Levack, 2006).

A witch-hunt is defined as a situation in which a person is accused of witchcraft and blamed for the misfortune, illness, or death of others through supernatural means. Historically, witch-hunts have started with an accusation: someone accuses a neighbour of being a witch, claiming that he or she inflicted harm, slaughtered livestock, damaged crops, or created family strife via supernatural means. For Chaudhuri (2014) the term “witch-hunt” has two meanings, firstly a witch-hunt is the search for and persecution of people accused of witchcraft; second, a witch-hunt is the search for and deliberate harassment of those with unpopular views (such as political opponents) (Chaudhuri, 2014). While witchcraft and witch-hunting can benefit each other, witch-hunting is not always necessary in areas with a strong belief in witchcraft. Witch-hunts have recently been observed in several locations that do not have a strong belief in witchcraft (Mullick, 2000; PLD, 2012c). Witch hunting is a relatively new practise in some areas where there has long been a belief in witchcraft (Momsen, 2001). It is an intricate rite of transition, at once removing the individual from his ordinary place in society and transferring him to a particular deviant position is attributed to factors such as globalisation’s demands and the strain it has placed on resources (Momsen, 2001). As a result, it is critical to situate witch-hunting within a specific political economy because various factors greatly influence the shape that witch-hunting would take. Place, economic elements, psychosocial motivations, and gender-power relations are among these factors (Schnoebelen, 2009). Anthropologists have discussed witchcraft and witch-hunts as a practise based on a community’s belief system. According to Evan Pritchard, witchcraft on a social level involves interpersonal relationships within communities and offers people an “explanation to explain things or incidents that occurred in any community” (Pritchard, 1976). According to Turner (1996), witchcraft accusations stem from conflicts over land and power. Marwick (1958) argued

that witches and their growing influence in Africa have long been associated with changes in consumption, production, and political control. The “functionalist” paradigm was significant in analyzing witchcraft in literature, focusing on social processes and maintaining social order within a specific social structure.

The feminist perspective of witchcraft and witch-hunting has critically analyzed the phenomenon. Numerous researchers have provided a wide range of justifications for the “witch-craze,” with one of the more controversial interpretations focused on the link between gender and witch-hunting. Ehrenreich and English (1973) discussed the politics of Church and State behind early witch trials. While considering the role of Church and state in early witch-hunt, the authors argued that the primary goal of these trials was to give male professionals who had received training from the State and Church authority over the institutional medical system. They made an effort to address the issue of how men have institutionalised and dominated the medical field. It looked that science had exceeded ignorance and superstition. It also addresses the power disparity between the state, the Church, female healers, and male professionals (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). *Women and the Practice of Medical Care in Early Modern-Europe, 1400-1800*, by Whaley (2011), discusses how women’s healing roles were stigmatised through accusations of witchcraft against women healers, as well as how a conscious effort was made to shift medical profession from the hands of women to men in order to establish superior male authority. In her book *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly (1978:23) argues that “witches were women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere”. Dworkin (1974) described the European witch-hunt as “genocide” and “slaughter” of women, arguing that it was a calculated patriarchal assault on women (Dworkin, 1974). In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a Global Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor*, Mies (1986:69) stated that “witch-hunting is the reaction of the male domination classes against the rebellion of women.” Miguel (2005) through the income shock theory explained why old women were primarily targeted for witch hunting in rural Tanzania. According to the author, economic growth, crime, and income shock are interconnected. Because of their low

income, older women are considered a burden to the family and the community, and they are forced to starve to death or are killed violently by their own families and kin in an act of social cleansing. Modern scholars regard the witch as essentially a female. They have ignored male witches as legitimate subjects of equal importance to female witches, which leads to the exclusion of male witches from witchcraft studies. In witchcraft literature, male witches are underrepresented. Even if male witches were identified, they were regarded as secondary witches because most male victims were “related to women who had already been convicted of sorcery and thus were not regarded as the originators of witchcraft” (Macfarlane, 1976, p. 169). According to Apps and Gow (2003:28), studies on male witches provide an alternative interpretation to the more simplistic notion of “witch hunting as women hunting.” According to them, rigorous gender analysis of male witches must be developed in order to comprehend why males are also at risk of being socially constructed as witches (ibid). Midelfort’s fascinating studies in south-western Germany’s border region reveal that men were occasionally accused of witchcraft, but only when a witch-hunt descended into widespread panic and the conventional view of the female witch broke down (Midelfort, 1972, pp. 182-183).

Similar interpretations of the relationship between witch-hunting and gender can be found in Indian literature on witch-hunts. Even though they are aware of the existence of male witches, it appears that Indian scholars are attempting to construct a model based on the European line. According to Talukdar (2011), 60 of the 116 witch-hunting deaths in Assam over the last decade have been female, while 56 have been male. The number of males and females accused and killed is nearly equal. However, by emphasising the feminist position, she neglected to examine the social causes of men who may also be witches. She feminises the male witch by incorporating her idea that “many of the males killed include their wives and children to eliminate any threat of retaliation by any living member of the ‘witch’s family” (Talukdar, 2011, pp. 26-27). The Indian treatise on witchcraft and witch-hunt finds a hesitant attitude toward male witches because they believe male witches are not as interesting or important as female witches and are not ‘proper’ witches. Their primary focus is “an expression of male hegemony with attacks on female cults, midwives, and women healers”

(Chaudhuri, 2008, p. 5). Roy (2005:82) asserts that feminist research has shown not only the “connection between this vicious attack on women, particularly healers, and midwives, and the danger of modern medicine, which has since come to be exclusively practised by men, but also that not only modern medicine, but modern physics and mechanics, as well as the new scientific relationship to nature, were born out of the fire of the witches”. Witch hunting, according to Kandaswamy (2008), is an “explicit tie-up between patriarchal oppression and casteist subjugation.” Furthermore, she stated that “women are left to live, they are considered inauspicious and malevolent, socially ostracised, and forced to forego their livelihood” in the practise of witch hunting. They are programmed to lose their mental equilibrium if they do not lose their lives. Powerful castes and classes have utilised witch-hunting as a weapon against marginalised people who have sometimes directly or indirectly contested the authoritative hegemony in diverse locations (ibid). According to Nathan and Kelker (1993), labelling women and men as witches and witch hunters was a crucial step in strengthening men’s dominance. The authors linked women’s land rights and witch-hunting, arguing that witch-hunt typically occurs in situations “where the women possess a comparatively higher economic status, which becomes a threat to the male-dominated society”. Further, the authors claimed that “witch-hunt provides a convenient opportunity for men of dominant lineage to eliminate any woman who is politically opposed to them” (Nathan & Kelkar, 1993, p. 117). In order to explain the increasing number of cases of daughters and widows in Jharkhand demanding their property rights, Sinha quoted Archer (1974) that “there has been a progressive increase in cases of daughters and widows asserting property, not only among Santhals but also among the Hos and Mundas” (Sinha, 2012, p. 222). According to him, the assertion of property rights threatens the patriarchal social order. Similar arguments have been found among the Misings of Assam that relate to land, disease, patriarchy, gender, identity, and the hegemonic power structure that transformed the practise of witch-hunt into a form of violence. According to Kuli (2014), the Mising society’s witch-hunt practise is related to disease, illness, and accident. When someone dies unexpectedly or is afflicted by an unknown ailment, the witch is said to be responsible for these deeds. The practise is a crucial instrument in resolving family conflicts involving property,

money, and jealousy. When someone cannot face reality, they are believed to be turned to practice witchcraft for prestige and power as well as social retribution (Kuli, 2014, pp. 83-84; Mishong, 2019).

In Assam, a “witch” is referred to as a “daini,” which is a male or female suspected of possessing evil magical powers that can harm the community. Misfortunes such as sickness, death, livestock loss, and crop failure, are thought to be brought to the community by spirits and witches. In Mising language, a witch is known as *marune-tani*, and the malevolent exercise, particularly evil ones involving the use of skills such as magic and sorcery to harm others, is known as *marunaam*. The word *marune-tani* does not have a gender, unlike the English word witch, derived from Wicca and means wise woman. Hence, men and women are equally suspected and become victims. For Kagyung (1989), the primary victims of witch-hunts are men who are landless poor peasants. They rely on agriculture and live in areas prone to flooding and soil erosion. Mising society refers to witchcraft as *butu onaam*. The local Mising people use the words *marunaam* and *butu onaam* interchangeably, but they have slightly different meanings. While *marunaam* is a malevolent exercise that can cause harm with their evil gaze, *butu onaam* refers to a person raising evil power (invisible soul) to harm his opponent for personal gain (Kuli, 2014). *Butu onaam* is a combination of two words: *butu*, which means malevolent soul, and *onam*, which means a person who can rear an evil soul to harm another person using magical powers. The words *marunaam* and *butu onaam* are widely used among Assamese Misings. The Mising belief system emphasizes performing rituals for malevolent spirits, primarily male spirits, to shield oneself from their evil gaze. According to Kuli (2014), the cause of *marunaam* among Misings is unknown, although it is assumed that the notion that a *urom* (soul) exists after death is a contributing factor. He claims that Mising people believe in the *urom*, a spirit that remains in the physical world after dying and continues to experience hunger and thirst in the locations where they once resided. It is thought that those who are suspected of practising witchcraft are breeding *urom*, which can be used to harm enemies by offering human and animal blood. Therefore, when family members pass away accidentally or from unidentified

diseases, people tend to blame the witch who has the power to transform souls into spirits and use them to hurt others (Mishong, 2019).

The notion of witchcraft accusation

Studies on witch-hunting explored regional parallels and contrasts, changes over time, and the socio-economic status of the accused and accuser. The literature emphasized understanding the “socio-political,” “socio-cultural”, and “economic” facets of witch hunting. The emphasis on witch as mostly feminine is tied to the conceptions of gender, patriarchy, caste, class, identity, and power. Apps and Gow (2003) examine the literature on witch-hunts from historical and sociological perspectives. The authors chastised the oversimplified interpretation of witch hunting as women hunting (Apps & Gow, 2003, p. 26). Ethnographic research has placed a greater emphasis on community members’ lived narratives.

In anthropological literature, magic, sorcery, shamanism, oracles, mystery, and belief systems are widely studied. E.E. Evans-Pritchard discussed the Azande people’s practise of witchcraft. The communal belief system used the phenomenon of witches and witchcraft to identify various regular activities that they could not rationally explain (Pritchard, 1976 [1937]). The main focus of Evans-Pritchard discusses how ambiguities and disparities in meaning could be allowed because they were always dealt with in particular circumstances impacting individuals in their lives. This made it easier for the locals to describe and explain strange happenings that seemed to have no reason. For instance, a person can claim that a witch was to blame for an accident that occurred at a particular time or location. They could not understand why it occurred to them and not to the other people. According to Douglas, witchcraft is associated with a dialectical relationship between marginality and power, where social pressure and a desire for individual autonomy are in conflict. In both cases, the infraction of social order and ritual results in the form of witch-hunt (Douglas, 1970).

Gendering witchcraft: men versus women

Witch hunting has been influenced by gender construction, patriarchy, and the patriarchal power structure. According to PLD (2013:52), “ideas of masculinity and femininity, fears of female sexuality, gender systems, and the state of gender relations in a community have a significant influence on how a society reacts to witchcraft accusations”. According to Nathan and Kelkar (1993:117), witch hunts serve two purposes in a patriarchal social structure: “first, witch hunts provide a convenient opportunity for the men of dominant lineage to get rid of any woman who opposes them politically, and second, it helps avoid social scandals, i.e., to get rid of unwanted females” (widows, women who have become pregnant outside of marriage). In their discussions on witchcraft accusations in Jharkhand’s Adivasi community, Nathan and Kelkar (1993) argue that land-related disputes are a vital concern. In “Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Struggle to Change Gender Relations,” Nathan et al. (1998) investigated how gender roles led to the establishment of patriarchy. The authors tried to illustrate how the struggle between men and women resulted from the rise of male supremacy.

The arrangement of land ownership in tribal societies is said to cause significant issues that women experience, such as witchcraft accusations. Xaxa (2014) observed that widows, aged women, are vulnerable, especially if they “have a share in their husband’s property” (Xaxa, 2014, p. 113). Xaxa continued by stating that “the life interest of a widow in her husband’s land restricts the property rights of the deceased’s male agnates, for whom the use of the land for accumulation or consumption must wait until after the widow’s death” (Xaxa, 2014). Arya & Rao (2006), claim that the ambition to capture women’s land might occasionally manifest itself in dreadful ways like witch hunts. “The traditional practises of land inheritance, land accruing to the deceased’s male agnates, incidences of women being classified as witches and hunted down, occasionally even killed, are not without cause” (Arya & Rao, 2006, p. 166). According to Agarwal (1994), “a Santhal myth roots the beginnings of witch hunts to a growing male anxiety long ago that women were no longer obeying or respecting their power” (Agarwal, 1994, p. 274). The male community members

felt that if women were granted land rights, they would be unable to be ruled over by men (ibid). According to Mishra (2003), women who openly demand their right to land experience stigmatisation as dains, harassment, and even murder. In the context of migrant Adivasi tea plantation labourers in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, Chaudhuri observes witchcraft charges as “a periodic reaction of the Adivasi labour community against the plantation management” (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 5). According to Puja Roy (1998:136), the practise of “witchcraft and witch-hunts come within the parameters of social sanction of the community, thus such practises cannot be denounced as violent”. These are “culturally acceptable and are part of the community’s traditional values and beliefs” (Roy, 1998, p. 136). However, we must examine the politics underlying these widespread traditional views. Who are those who adhere to these views? Do some community members have a hidden motive to embrace particular beliefs as tacit norms?

Witchcraft beliefs in the Assamese Bodo community were investigated by Konwar and Swargiary (2015). They found that the use of “magical power” by someone suspected of practising witchcraft is frequently seen to cause harm to the community (Konwar & Swargiary, 2015, p. 133). The best strategy the residents of the area have used to resolve this is to kill the witch or subject her to severe punishment. According to Barman (2002:13) witch-hunting is a “form of persecution against women, especially widows, who face a state of marginality that results in complete isolation from society”. Her research supports the assertions made in her earlier works, based on a case study of the Malda district in West Bengal. These earlier works suggested that property disputes involving widows and relatives of the diseased were the main causes of witch-hunting in India.

Men as witches

The examination of the witch-hunt has been driven by the challenging question of why women made up the bulk of those facing witchcraft trials. Of course, this is true to some extent: The proportion of women who were found guilty of witchcraft in early modern Europe ranged from 75 to 80 percent, and in some

regions, it was even higher, reaching 90 percent or higher in places like Hungary, the Bishopric of Basel, the County of Namur, the English county of Essex, and the Wielkopolska region of Poland (Apps & Gow, 2003). Witch hunting, according to scholars, was a tactic used to identify and eliminate women who were seen as a threat to the patriarchal order in society, whether due to their sexuality, single status, precarious economic situation, or purported “illicit” medical knowledge as midwives or “wise-women”.

According to the literature, the majority of the accused in various regions were women, and it is obvious that the preponderance of women as witch victims has created a space for a complex debate over its significance. Despite the number of men accused of witchcraft, male witches are rarely discussed in academic papers and accounts of witch-hunts. According to Chaudhuri (2008:17), “there is a tendency among scholars to view the victims of witch hunts as women, even in contexts where some witches are men.” The scholars have also classified the subject as violence against women. Willem de Blecourt, a historical anthropologist, claims that “male witches were of a different type, less malevolent and hardly susceptible to prosecution” (cited Apps & Gow, 2003, p. 35). Barstow, like Willem de Blecourt, believes that witches were exclusively female, despite the fact that “thousands of men were accused and executed for witchcraft during Europe’s witch-craze”. She defends her position by claiming that most of the accused male witches were related to women who were the originators of witchcraft. These people were “feminised” men who overly embodied negative aspects of masculinity, leading to their classification as witches. The attempt to “feminise” the male witch is problematic because it suggests that a person who is inappropriately masculine is unquestioningly viewed as a feminine subject (Kent, 2005). Raewyn Connell (1987) contends that men may be marginalised due to their social, economic, and cultural circumstances rather than the version of manhood in which they participate and act. In some contexts, male members are marginalised and experience high social exclusion. Monter’s (1997) study of Normandy claims that most individuals accused of witchcraft were men. He claimed that those most susceptible to allegations of witchcraft were shepherds, blacksmiths, and clerics positioned at the bottom of the power structure.

According to Kagyung (1989), most of the victims of the witch-hunts among the Mising community are male members and victims primarily come from landless peasants who experience regular flooding and soil erosion (Kagyung, 1989). Regular flash floods and soil erosion impact Mising villages, forcing the villagers to move from one place to another, where they encounter problems adjusting to new communities and other villagers. It is frequently discovered that some families cannot fully integrate into newly established villages, resulting in conflict with other villagers. The *Mibo*, who is regarded as a spiritual protector in the traditional Mising *Don:yi-Po:lo* religious belief system, performs all religious rites and duties and, as a result, holds exceptional cultural and economic privileges. Since *mibo* is thought to actively participate in rescuing people from evil spirits with the aid of unique knowledge or abilities, the Mising community views him as a significant religious, political, and social figure. He plays a vital role in addressing the conflicts in Mising society. With widespread public support, these masculine figures can continue to define and punish individuals who are seen as inferior. According to Kagyung (1989), *mibo* exploits the marginalised status of the landless poor, who are already disadvantaged due to the region's extreme isolation, low literacy rate, and lack of access to modern medical facilities, and he frequently uses the false notion of witchcraft to target people who disagree with *mibo*. A *mibo* can declare that they are possessed and have divine abilities that allow them to find witches and determine their punishment. He targets those groups who are primarily men and openly criticises and opposes his work and that of other individuals whose careers directly or indirectly jeopardise *mibo*'s reputation and career. *Mibo* can reclaim his macho image and maintain a solid reputation in society by accusing someone of being a witch and punishing the male witches (ibid).

It will be fascinating to comprehend the motivations behind accusing men of witchcraft, an aspect that has received little attention in previous works on the subject. The primary reason may have been the prevalence of the phenomenon among women in the Indian context. It is because there may have been gender power relations at play.

The statement of the problem

The study focuses on the institutional practises around witchcraft accusations in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam. It attempts to comprehend cases of witch-hunts by exploring the plight of victims and accusers who claim that certain misfortunes befell them or the community owing to the magical attacks caused by the former. In popular discourse, concepts such as “witchcraft practice” and “witch-hunt” are frequently identified as gendered. Thus, the studies emphasizing witchcraft accusations on male members are inadequate compared to their female counterparts. Furthermore, this research documents the folklore of witches and witchcraft and explores the meanings people assign to such narratives in the contemporary context. It also investigates how these stories, which have been transmitted across generations, contribute to the construction of the ‘witch’ stereotype and how this stereotype has been used as a means of social control by the privileged class of people. The witchcraft accusation and the actors in its entanglements with socio-political and economic complexities are significant to understanding the dynamics. The trauma or traumatic experiences of witch-hunting constitute a significant research component. The narratives of the accused and the accusers offer insights into the intimate space of fear, anxiety, and victimisation. The use of violent action in witchcraft accusations as a strategic tool to bring about resolution and order produces ruptures and disorder in society. Furthermore, the research seeks to understand the negotiation and strategies in the aftermath of witch hunts and trauma.

Objectives

1. To document folktales and songs associated with witch, witchcraft, and witch-hunt in the Mising community.
2. To explore the causes of witchcraft accusations among Misings of Assam.
3. To examine the resolution process and witch-hunt in the Mising community.
4. To analyse the coping strategies of victims of witch-hunts.

Methodology

This research aims to investigate the witch-hunt phenomenon in Sikari Gaon, a village selected after exploring several possible sites. The researcher conducted a one-month pilot study and identified 53 cases of witch-hunt victims, including males and females. The fieldwork was conducted for nine months during the year 2021. The total number of male victims are forty-seven, and female victims are six. The present research considered all the male victims for the detailed empirical study. The researcher is mindful of not offending any religious sentiments and used pseudonyms to conceal the identity of the participants. The researcher followed ethical guidelines and assured the anonymity of all the respondents.

Tools and techniques of data collection

This study relied on data from both “primary” and “secondary” sources for in-depth analysis. Primary sources are qualitative. The qualitative interviewing method was used to elicit information from the respondents for detailed analysis. The traumatic experiences of the witch-hunt victims and survivors were examined in detail through interviews. The key informant interviews were conducted to collect the data from the village headman, priest, and village council members. The group discussions were conducted with the victims and their relatives to gain a deeper insight into the victim’s social position, their relationship with the accusers, the causes and consequences of witch hunting, and the reactions of the family, community, and state to this form of violence. The researcher explored participant’s experiences with witch-hunts through narratives and case studies. Interviews with social activists revealed their experiences with the case in greater detail from a different perspective. The household schedule was administered to collect the demographic data. In addition, observations are made during the entire fieldwork using an observation schedule for an intense understanding.

This study also relied on secondary data from available literature, such as books, journals, articles, newspapers, and websites. It also used police records,

newspaper reports, organisational and personal documents. The archival data helped triangulate the data from primary and secondary sources.

The conceptual and theoretical framework

Concepts: The following concepts are used to understand and analyse the research questions.

Social control

Gibbs' (1981) three-party model of social control is significant in the context of witch-hunts. Gibb's explanation of social control (referential) involves three parties instead of the two parties involved in the direct social control (proximate) explanation. One party strives to influence a second party's behavior with a third party's help (Jensen 2007, p. 19). Thus, only responses to deviance that involve influencing one party's behaviour through another can be categorised as social control in this context (19). As an illustration of referential social control, Jensen cites a curse as an example: "A curse by the rebuked (the first party) is an attempt to alter the charitable behaviour of the person requested (the second party) by evoking the threat of involvement by a third party (e.g., God or Satan)" (Jensen, 2007, pp. 19-20).

Persecution

Persecution is significant in this study, especially when contrasting Indian and Western witch-hunts. Persecution is the purposeful and calculated actions taken by powerful dominating groups in society to harass and abuse people they consider to be a danger to them (Jensen 2007, pp. 36-37, 44-52). "The victims of ritual violence in prosecution serve as a symbol of actual victims, that is, they represent a class or group that actually threatens the prosecutors" (Jensen, 2007, p. 53). The planned attack on the threat group is not stopped with a single attack, which is another characteristic of persecution. The threat group is instead the target of a number of calculated strikes.

Violence

Violence, according to Riches (1986), is the “intentional rendering of physical hurt on another human being, deemed legitimate by the performer but illegitimate by (some) witnesses.” His definition includes the invisibly enacted physical pain of a mystical attack, even if the performance must be deduced from the outcome: misfortune, injury, or death. There is an apparent paradox here: the term “violence” is used by victims of specific physical actions or by those who witness them, not by those who commit them. Victims and witnesses perceive the witch accusation as a violent performance. Invoking the concept of violence acknowledges not only the performance of physical harm but also its illegitimacy. According to Bowman (2001), using the Oxford English Dictionary, violence has the same meaning as the term violate, from which it is etymologically derived: “to break, infringe, or transgress unjustifiably; to vitiate, corrupt, or spoil, especially in respect of physical qualities; to desecrate, dishonour, profane, or defile.” We can think of two types of violence that emerge in social space by encompassing the meanings of both terms: deviant and violative (the magical attack) and normative and defensive (the witch accusation). Individuals and groups are motivated to engage in defensive violence by perceiving deviant and violative violence (ibid).

Dual deviance

Deviance that occurs on two different levels is referred to as dual deviance. Level one consists of two groups: “deviant group” and the “moral entrepreneur group,” also known as “labelling group.” Because the deviant group’s behaviour is thought to threaten the moral order of the community or society, the labelling or moral entrepreneur group designates the deviant group as such to uphold the moral order of society. Howard Becker coined the term “moral entrepreneur” in *Outsiders* (1963). Moral entrepreneurs fall into roughly two categories, “rule creators” and “rule enforcers”. The rule creators can be viewed as moral crusaders primarily concerned with successfully persuading others but unconcerned with the means by which this persuasion is accomplished. The upper social strata claim to be a moral entrepreneur group. They compete in a

political space to reform society based on what they believe is moral (Becker, 1963).

As deviants in the second level of dual deviance, moral entrepreneurs are viewed by a third group that is distinct from the deviant and labelling groups in the first level. Although this third group does not belong to the community, it is a part of the wider community comprising first-level groups. On the second level, this third group operates as moral entrepreneurs. Level one sees the labelling group taking on the role of the deviant group while the real deviant group takes on the role of the victim. The alleged witches are the community's outcasts, harming the tribal villages. The accusers, the local priest, and the village headman play the role of moral entrepreneurs who perceive witches as a threat to peace. The witch's terrible spell has claimed its victims at level one. The state, the police, and members of the tribal community are among the moral entrepreneurs at level two who believe that the accusers are deviants since they think the witch-hunt victims are innocent people who have been falsely accused of being witches.

Scapegoat theory

Scholars have studied the practise of witch hunts using several theories. The most well-known are "functional theory" and "scapegoat theory". While the functional approach (Erickson, 1962) regards "deviance as the normal response to abnormal social conditions", scapegoating "refers to the punitive or negative treatment of individuals or groups who are blamed or held accountable for crises or problems that they did not cause" (Jensen, 2007, p. 53). Despite being widely used in explaining witchcraft practises and persecutions throughout history, the concept of scapegoating has received little attention from anthropologists. According to Jensen, the target of scapegoating accepts responsibility for the crisis that threatens the group "as an intentional diversionary tactic or as a cathartic displacement of anger and frustration" (Jensen, 2007, p. 53).

Scapegoating has been used by elites throughout history as an excuse to persecute a minority group (for example, Jews, witches, and lepers) in order to "avert blame for problems they could not solve..." (Jensen, 2007, p. 53). In

relation to witch-hunts in India, a significant question is, who are the accusers and the accused? How are individuals scapegoated in identifying a convincing cause for the misfortunes of other individuals or the community or the natural calamities?

One manifestation of deviance is likely to arouse or reinforce suspicions about other deviant characteristics. For example, a specific type of mark, physical deformities such as partial blindness, a deformed face may make them more vulnerable. To understand the contemporary Indian witch-hunts applying this logic, it can be stated that witches are viewed as deviants, and social control mechanisms punish them for restoring order. Identification of “witches” is based on a person’s identity and status. Individual identity becomes social when a community imposes sanctions against one of its members. It is a complex transitional rite that moves the individual from his usual place in society to a deviant position where he is later punished. The social stigma theory can be applied to explain the phenomenon.

Social stigma theory

According to Goffman (1963), social stigma is the rejection or discrimination of an individual or group based on perceivable social characteristics that distinguish them from other members of a society. Social stigmas are frequently connected to culture, gender, race, financial status, age, sexual orientation, body image, intelligence (or lack thereof), and health. Goffman (1963), in his classic *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, defines stigma as a “deeply discrediting attribute” in the formulation, and the stigmatised individual becomes a tainted, discounted individual from normal individual. He says, “stigma is a special kind of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype” and embedded in a “language of relationships” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). According to Goffman, “stigma” results from a discrepancy between a person’s “true social identity” and their “virtual social identity,” this is how society views them (the attributes possessed by a person). Jones et al. (1984) defined the stigmatising process as relational, meaning that the social environment defines what is deviant and provides the context in which devaluing evaluations are expressed. They listed

body deformities, ugly face, long nail, and big nose with long hair to identify a deviant condition recognised by society (Jones et al., 1984). However, the paradigm has been criticised for exclusively focusing on forces within the individual instead of the plethora of systemic causes that determine exclusion from social life (Yang et al., 2006). Following these criticisms, Link and Phelan (2001) proposed a sociological definition of stigma as a broad umbrella concept that connects interrelated stigma components. According to Link and Phelan (2001), the stigma process depends on using social, economic, and political power. They viewed stigma as a process created by “structural power”. According to Das et al. (2001), the State apparatus frequently harbours the power issue, and its agents and agencies have the potential to stigmatise entire groups.

The study area

The ethnographic work was conducted in Majuli, the world’s largest river island primarily inhabited by the Mising community. The Misings are the second largest tribe of Assam, and a major ethnic group in northeast India, with a population of 6,80,424 according to the 2011 census. The Misings are primarily found on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and are scattered throughout Assam’s districts of Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Majuli, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Golaghat, Biswanath, and Tezpur. The Misings are known as “river people” because their name is derived from two words: mi, which means man, and sing, which means water. Saint Mahapurush Srimanta Shakardev introduced the Neo-Vaishnava culture in Majuli, which resulted in cultural syncretism. The prevalence of witch-hunt cases is high in Assam. The newspaper reports and secondary data reveal that the island district, Majuli, is one of the significant sites of violence based on witch accusations. The accusations and violence are most prevalent in Sikari Gaon, with fifty-three cases recorded between 2010-2021. Hence, the village was chosen for in-depth research. This research was primarily focused on witchcraft accusations and witch-hunts among the Mising of this particular village.

Significance of the study

Most anthropological research focuses on interpreting the meaning associated with witchcraft, particularly in the context of African witch-hunt cases. The deviant approach, which has the potential to explain the phenomenon, receives less attention. Besides, the gravity, brutality, and frequently murderous nature of the witch-hunts received less attention in anthropological literature. The nature and practice of witch-hunts reveal the social and political dynamics of the community. Hence, the current research adds a potential dimension to understanding society from the lens of accusations, resolution, and witch-hunt.

Limitation of the field

The research on witchcraft is sensitive in any context. Hence, the researcher suffered a few limitations. For instance, initially, the respondents were reluctant to participate in research because of the fear of social ostracism and retaliation. However, an attempt is made to minimize the impact of all the possible limitations. Privacy was challenging during the interviews, as skeptics and curious locals often surrounded the researcher and the participants. This made it hard to maintain anonymity and collect data without interference. Nevertheless, it was ensured to maintain the anonymity of the respondents outside the research context. Initially, a few villagers were skeptical about the researcher's intentions and the impact of research outcomes. Hence, they have resisted the collection of the data from the village. However, they were convinced with the help of a voluntary association, Brothers, which works under the ambit of an NGO named Partner for Law in Development (PLD). The researcher's intentions and the possible research outcomes were gradually conveyed to village elders and convinced them. They were assured to present the research findings with complete anonymity.

Chapterisation

This study is divided into seven chapters. The primary concern of this research is to examine the practice of witch-hunting as a form of violence that disrupts the

social fabric of the Mising community in Assam. It explores witchcraft-related folklore and its significance for understanding the Mising perspective on witch-hunts. It also analyses the causes and consequences of witch-hunts, emphasizing the witch-hunt impact on victims and their families.

The first chapter, *Introduction*, explores literature about witchcraft and witch-hunt and offers a theoretical explanation. The chapter presents the debates about understanding the concept of ‘witch’ using literature and how previous studies on witch-hunts have focused on female witches and their accusers, with little attention paid to male witches. The concepts of witch, witchcraft, and witch-hunt are explained in detail. This chapter contains the study’s research objectives, methodology, significance, and limitations.

The second chapter, *Socio-cultural Profile of the Misings* describes the socio-cultural aspects of the Misings, such as their history, migration, social structure, clan organisation, family, marriage, traditional dispute resolution system, religious beliefs and practices, land and economy, housing pattern, food habits, indigenous medical practices, and festivals. It also describes the field site.

The third chapter, *Witchcraft: Perspectives from Folklore and Contemporary Practices*, documents the folklore of witches and witchcraft and the meanings people attach to them. It explores the significance of folklore for understanding the contemporary beliefs on witch-hunts, as they have influenced the cultural memory over time.

The fourth chapter, *Causes of Witchcraft Accusations and Status of Accuser and Accused*, examines the causes of witch-hunt. The chapter discusses the accuser and accused social position, the causes of accusations, and the vulnerable conditions of the accused, which pave the way for the accuser to float accusations in the village council.

The fifth chapter, *Kebang and its Role in Dispute Resolution* discusses the structure and functions of the Kebang, the traditional village council of the Misings. The chapter emphasized its role in resolving conflicts within the

community, especially those related to witchcraft accusations. Besides, the chapter discusses the accuser and accused role in the resolution process.

The sixth chapter, *Witch-hunt, Violence, and Coping Strategies*, discusses outcomes of the resolution process, emphasizing witch-hunt and violence. It also documents the traumatic experience and coping strategies of witch-hunt victims.

The seventh chapter, *Summary and Conclusion*, summarizes the findings of the study.

Chapter II

Socio-cultural profile of the Misings

Background

In this chapter, the researcher introduces the socio-cultural profile of the Mising as well as the site of the fieldwork. This has been done to facilitate a better understanding of the community and lay the foundation for the following chapters. The introduction to the field village and the empirical data collected and presented are crucial to understanding the present research vis-à-vis the validity and reliability of the findings. The history and changes in social organisation, social-cultural practices, and the community's economic life have been crucial to understanding the social relations within and beyond their locality, which comprise the bulk of this chapter. While tracing their history, it became essential to understand the shifting social practices, the construction of different social identities in the community, and its close association with such practices as witch-hunting. Staying in the village helped the researcher to get a closer look at the daily life of people in the village, their social structure, culture, the importance of rituals and of individuals who hold power (social, religious or economic) in the community. In addition, it did provide some clues on what “causes” witch hunts.

Location

Majuli district in the Northeastern state of Assam was earlier a part of Jorhat district. It became the country's first island district when the government of Assam declared it on 8 September 2016. The island is situated between 26°-25/ and 27°-12/ North Latitude and 93°-39/ and 94°-35/ East Longitude. Situated at 85 meters above the mean sea level, on the north of this island district flows the old stream of the Brahmaputra- the *Luit* or the *Luhit Suti* with sparsely located reservoirs of water here and there, creating numerous *chaporis* (hamlets) in its course. Its eastern part is called *Kherkatiya Suti*, and the western part

is *Subansiri*, named after the river Subansiri, a tributary of the Brahmaputra (Luhit), which, flowing down from the northern hills, falls into the great river almost at the middle point of the island. On the south of the island flows the Brahmaputra proper, once the course of Dihing and Dikhow combined. Thus, the two extreme ends of the island- east and west- are marked by the bifurcation and unification of the two channels of the same great river.

Topography

Majuli, the world's largest human-inhabited river island, is known as the 'Land of the Satra' (Vaishnava monastery). It is located 20 kilometres away from Jorhat, a nearby town. The scenic atmosphere has a pollution-free ambience; the island had a total area of about 1250 sq. kilometers, but owing to recurring floods and erosion, the area is reduced to approximately 352 sq. kilometres. Thus, today, Majuli is known as the 'disappearing island'. The vanishing landmass and sustaining social practices offers a significant context for the study.

An 'old-world air' pervaded the island, indicating no sense of modernism until the end of the 19th century (Allen et al., 1979, p. 159). Being an island, Majuli's inhabitants hardly had any contact with the people of the mainland in the olden days. Most of the older respondents state that they were born and brought up on the island and did not even cross the Brahmaputra to see the other banks of the great river. Crossing the large river in boats before the introduction of the steamer services during British rule was extremely difficult and unfavourable; only a few people dared to cross the river for reasons unavoidable. In such cases, they offer pujas or prayer and give a feast to the neighbours before starting their journey, treating it as their farewell function. They were uncertain about their safe return to the island. Even today, hardly any village woman or man of the old generation dares to cross the great river without offering a prayer and some amount of dakshina (offering in cash or kind) to it in case of ill health and the need for treatment in the city. As a result, traditional beliefs and practices prevail in the region.

Climate

Majuli is a Brahmaputra River island with a moderate climate with four distinct seasons: winter, spring, summer, and autumn. Winter lasts from November to February and is characterised by cold weather with a minimum temperature of 10°-12° Celsius. Spring lasts from March to April and is pleasant, with a maximum temperature of 30°-35° Celsius. Summer lasts from May to mid-September and is hot and humid with heavy rainfall, averaging 200-250 inches annually. Autumn lasts from mid-September to October and is mild and dry with a cool breeze. The people of Majuli have traditionally divided the year into six seasons based on the lunar calendar and the agricultural cycle. These are Bohag (mid-April to mid-May), Grishma (mid-May to mid-July), Barsha (mid-July to mid-September), Sharat (mid-September to mid-November), Hemanta (mid-November to mid-January), and Shishir (mid-January to mid-March). Each season has its festivals, rituals, and cultural activities that reflect the diversity and richness of Majuli's heritage.

Flora

Majuli is known for its fertile soil and diverse flora and fauna. The network of tributaries and land formations, such as wetlands, *chapories* (low lying flood-prone riverbanks), and swamps, contribute to developing its hydrological system. Annual flooding brings fine silt and clay-like sediments, which enhance soil fertility. Majuli's high rainfall, the moisture content in the soil, and flat plains favour the growth of evergreen and deciduous trees, grasses, marsh vegetation, bamboo, and cane. The island boasts various trees, shrubs, creepers, palms, bamboo, ferns, aquatic plants, grasses, cacti, and other species. The local population utilises these diverse plant species for various purposes, including food and medicinal requirements. As stated, Majuli was once a land of forests and jungles, and even today, the trees are exceedingly tall, thick and strong. Large boats capable of bearing loads of enormous quantity and size could be built from a single trunk. Stretches of green grass and forests and large *chaporis* (hamlets) provided pastures for rearing herds of cattle and sustained wild animals. Some of the essential and valuable flora are Urium (*Bischofia*

trifoliata), Autenga (*Dillenia indica*), Simalu (*Bombacaceae*), Azar (*lagaerstoemia*) and Koroi (*Albizia Proocera*). Bamboo is abundant in this area, growing up to 60 to 100 feet in height. The bamboo canopy is thick and spread over large areas, especially near villages. The locals use bamboo for diverse purposes, including food, construction and maintenance of homes, and to make traditional baskets and nets. Bamboo used to be central to the lifestyle of the Mising and still is to a large extent.

Fauna

Like its flora, Majuli, with its fertile floodplains and ecologically diverse wetlands, forms the ideal habitat for various birds and animals. It attracts a large number of migratory birds, including some uncommon species. More than 250 species of birds are found on the island, including many endangered species. Some crucial birds are the Brahminy duck, Large Whistling Teal, Spotbill duck, Red Crested, and Black-winged Kite. On the island are more than 20 reptiles, such as species of snakes, lizards, turtles and tortoises and more than 20 species of mammals, nearly ten species of amphibians, thousands of insects and more than 100 types of fish. As the island has been an ecological sanctuary, it provides shelter to species of wild animals such as elephants, deer, elk, nilgau, tigers, rhinoceros and others. This was why, during the Middle Ages, Ahom rulers used this region as a hunting ground (Bhuyan, 1964, p. 93).

Population distribution

According to the 2011 census report, the total population of Assam is 31,205,576, of which the male population is 15,205,576, and the female population is 15,266,133. Assam is inhabited by several groups, from tribes to caste groups. According to the report, the scheduled groups are divided into 15 hills tribes, 14 plain tribes and 16 scheduled caste communities. Other communities and groups in the state are Brahmin, Kalita, Koch, Ahom, Keots, Bengali, Bihari and Muslim. The total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of Assam is 38,84,543. Out of which the Mising population is 6,80,424 (34,57,86 male and 33,4,638 female), which is 2.18 per cent in the total population of

Assam. The following table presents the demographic structure of the major tribal groups of Assam.

Table 2.1: Population of the major tribal communities of Assam

Sl. No.	Name of the tribe	Population
1.	Bodo Kachari	1361735
2.	Mising	680424
3.	Sonowal Kachari	253344
4.	Tiwa	200915
5.	Mech Kachari	9883
6.	Karbi	430452
7.	Deori	443750
8.	Rabha	296189
9.	Dimasa Kachari	262413

Source: 2011 census

The Bodo tribe has the highest population followed by the Mising community. The Mising are mostly found in upper Assam, mostly along the North bank of the Brahmaputra valley. The following table shows the district wise Mising population of Assam.

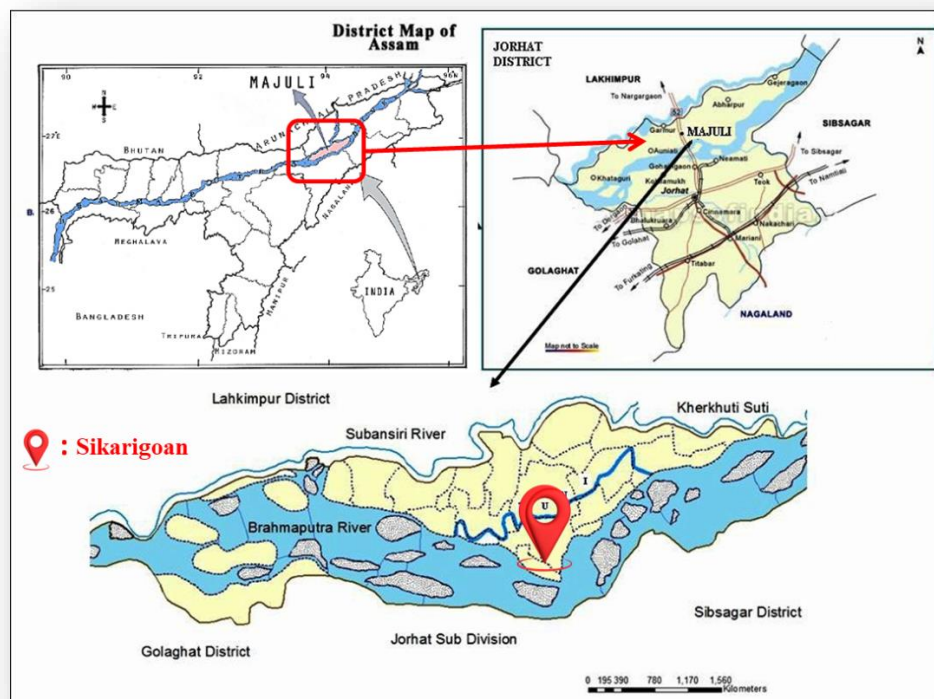
Table 2.2: District-wise Mising population of Assam

Sl. No.	Name of the district	Population (%)	Tribal population (%)	Mising population (%)
1.	Tinsukia	1316948 (13.71)	82066 (6.34)	19145 (2.81)
2.	Dhemaji	686133 (7.14)	325560 (25.18)	238031 (34.99)
3.	Dibrugarh	1327748 (13.82)	102871 (7.95)	10809 (1.59)
4.	Sivasagar	1150253 (11.97)	49093 (3.79)	29991 (4.40)
5.	Jorhat	1091295 (11.36)	139979 (10.82)	102130 (15)
6.	Lakhimpur	1040644 (10.83)	249426 (19.29)	196010 (28.8)
7.	Sonitpur	1924110 (20.03)	232207 (17.95)	51028 (7.5)
8.	Golaghat	1066888 (11.10)	111765 (8.64)	33280 (4.99)
	Total	9604019 (100)	1292967 (100)	680424 (100)

Source: 2011 census

As noted earlier, the Misings have occupied the Eastern half of Assam and spread over its 11 districts, namely Darang, Tezpur, Biswanath, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivassagar, Jorhat, Majuli and Galaghat. The areas inhabited by the Mising people have been shown on the map. They are accustomed to living by the riverside, and until the last few decades or so, they mainly settled along the river courses, especially the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. However, after the devastating earthquake of 1950, which had a magnitude of 8.6 on the Richter scale and destroyed many Mising villages, they were forced to move to other parts of the respective districts (Pegu, 1998).

Map 2.1: Map of Assam with the district of Majuli.



Source: researchgate

Majuli: The demography of the island

The island presents a diversified complex, from tribes to the highly acculturated Brahmans and Kayasthas. Among the tribes, the most numerous are the Mising. According to the 2011 census report, they form 43 per cent of the island's total population. Other tribes include the Deoris and the Kacharis, who together 10 per cent of the total population, while the Scheduled Caste population forms about 15 per cent. According to the census of 1901, the population density on the island was 24 per sq. km., which was 300 in 2011. According to the 2011 census report, it has a population of 1,67,304 persons consisting of 85,566 males and 81,738 females, with a female-to-male ratio of 955:1000. Majuli has a better literacy rate than the rest of Assam. In 2011, the literacy rate of Majuli was 78.56 per cent compared to 72.19 per cent in Assam. Male literacy stood at 74.76 per cent, while female literacy was 61.34 per cent. The island is composed of various linguistic and religious groups. The linguistic groups include Assamese, Bengali, Marwari, Bihari (Deswali), and Nepali. The religious groups are Hindu and Muslim, with a few local practices often identified as Hindu. A critical aspect of the island is that despite all differences, all the residents identify them as *Majulial*-simplicity in behaviour and spirituality in living.

A brief history of the Misings

The Misings call themselves *Miri*, which means “go between” or “middleman”. The term *Miri* was given to them by the people of the plains as originally they came down from the hills in the Himalayan region and settled down permanently in Brahmaputra valley (Gait, 1907). The colonial administrators used the word *Miri*. The community members currently prefer the term Mising, although they are officially recognised as *Miri* in the list of Scheduled Tribes of India under the Constitution Order 1950. However, Mising and *Miri* are now accepted as official names for this ethnic group. The *Miris* are known as calm, peace-loving and straightforward people. Edward Gait (1963) observes that the *Miris* are found both in the plains, where they were peaceable British subjects and in hills to the north, where they were quiet and easy-going. Racially, this tribe is identified as Mongoloid and ethnically traces their lineage to the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh,

belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The Adis, Apatanis, Hill-Miris, Lobos, Mising, Nishis, Puroiks and Tagins living in Arunachal Pradesh and in some parts of Assam and Tibet belong to the great Tani group of the Tibeto-Chinese family of Mongoloid stock and universally accept the belief that they have originated from the same ancestor called Abotani, the father of human race (Lego, 2005, p. 1). Due to lack of their written history, the community has no record left to produce information regarding their origin. However, according to their oral narratives, Mibo *Ah:bang*, *Se:di Me:lo* has created the universe. The universe has one earth and two other ethereal planets in its constellation. The heaven is called *Rega-Regam* or the Kingdom of Gods, the earth '*Dong-Among*', and the purgatory or *Ui-Among* is known as the abode of Spirits. In Mising cosmology, *Rega-Regam*, *Dong-Among* and *Ui-Among*, together, form the celestial constellation of *Keyum*, the earliest stage of the creation of the universe.

When *Pundolondo*, the supreme God, created the early stage of the universe, it was a great emptiness before creation started, beyond vision, knowledge, infinite, and unspeakable (Padun, 2005). The traditional folklore began based on this form of *Keyum*, and *Adi Mising* have taken it as a source of their religion and literature. The Supreme god created heaven called '*Kihling Kanggey*', bringing forth five generations in steady succession of the divine family in *Kihling Kanggey* to rule, administer and proclaim the kingdom of Gods in heaven. They were called *Kasi*, *Siyang*, *Angbo*, *Bomug* and *Mukseng*, *Kasi* being the earliest. The sixth and the final generation- *Sedi*, with his female consort *Melo*, came down to the earth in person with body and soul from heaven with the help of an *Awin-cobang* (golden ladder) and began human inhabitations on *Dong-Among* or Earth. Man on earth is the progeny of *Sedi Babu* (father) and *Melo Nanne* (mother).

The Misings, originally hill people from northwest China, eventually descended to Arunachal Pradesh before settling in Assam centuries ago. Before moving to Assam, where they established their villages in and around the undivided districts of Lakhimpur, Darrang, and Sivasagar, they occupied a chain of lofty mountains extending within the Subansiri, Siang, and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency)

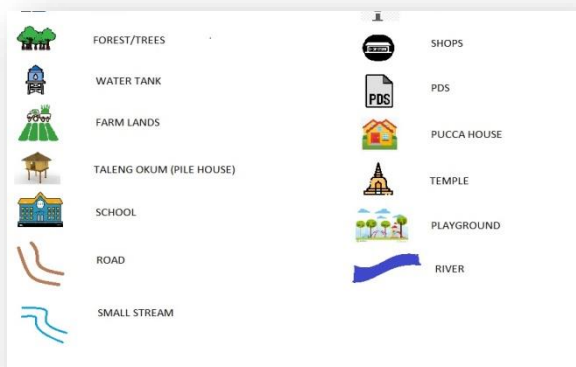
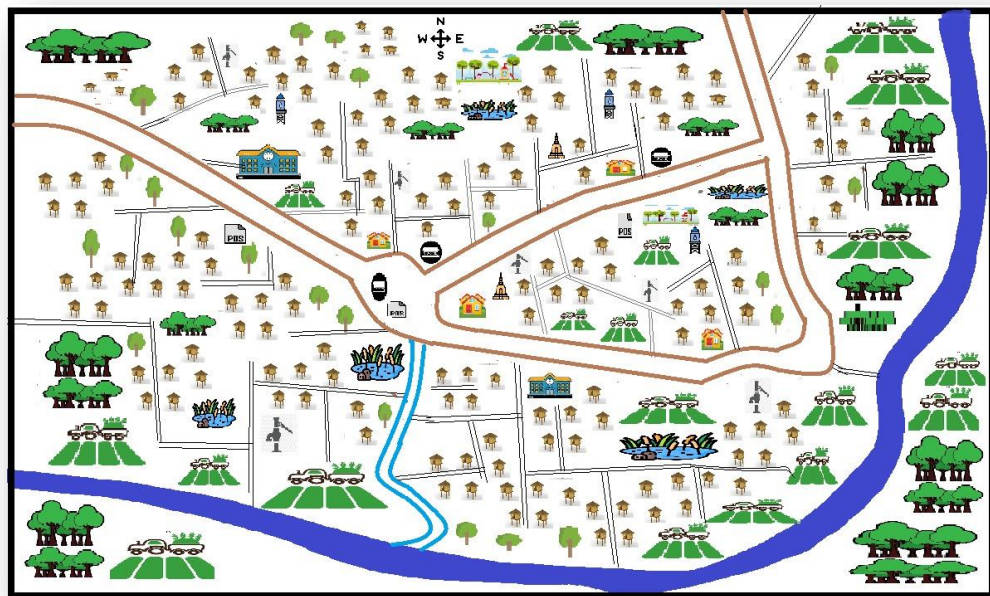
(Pegu, 2019). These mountainous ranges were previously called the hills of Aka, Dafla, Abor, Miri, and Mishmi (abbreviated as ADAMM Hills). Early historians referred to the overall population of these hills as the country of “Miri-Mishimis”, according to N.C. Pegu (1998), another group of Miri origin, entered the Assam Valley through Kachim Hills by crossing the Irrawaddy River in Burmese territory. This theory of Tani people entering Assam from the southern hills has been mentioned in historical studies by some authors. Sachin Roy (1960) wrote that “there have been migrations from the south of the Brahmaputra to the Adi hills. The Brahmaputra valley was not a barrier to movements from north to south and vice versa. Such movements stopped only with the establishment of strong states in the valley” (Roy, 1960, p. 262). Pegu (2000:36) cited Chatterjee (1951) in his “Kirata-Jana –Kriti” to trace the original abode of the Indo-Chinese races of Assam. The tribes in Eastern India called Kirata were known for their expertness in archery and hunting. These tribes were found to be a conglomeration of several small clans, including the Mising, who originally hailed from Northwest China at a different point in time. He estimated that “the time of migration of ADAMM conglomeration from Northwest China to the Arunachal valley was two thousand years before the Christian era” (Pegu, 1998, p. 34). Based on legend, allegory, Mibo Ahbangs, and existing folklores, Pegu has drawn a probable route of the migration, considering accessibility and topographical conditions existing during the period in the region. Thus, the author speculated that the cultural affinity of the Mising community with that of ancient Chinese tradition. During the mass migration, clashes among the various groups must have occurred, and the most adventurous groups had to re-establish themselves by moving downwards. Those who could finally place their feet on the plains of Assam in search of fertile cultivable land, constituted the main bulk of the present Mising tribe (Pegu, 2019, p. 31).

An introduction to the field site

Sikari Gaon is a border village in the easternmost part of Majuli. The village is situated near the temple town of Sivasagar, which lies on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra river. The proximity of Sivasagar provides the villagers with opportunities to trade their agricultural products and livestock, such as mustard

seed, black gram, and peas, and to buy material goods from the market areas. The village is far from the administrative and business hubs of Majuli, Garamur and Kamalabari, which are about 21 and 30 kilometres away. Therefore, the villagers depend more on Sivasagar for their economic and social needs.

Map 2.2: Village map of Sikari Gaon



Source: Author's representation of study village

Sikari Gaon falls under Luit Poria Anchalik Gaon Panchayat of the Ujani Majuli development block of Majuli district. Majuli is administratively divided into two blocks. One is the Majuli Block, and the other is Ujani Majuli Development

Block. The village headman reported that the village covers an area of approximately 219 hectares. However, this area has decreased from about 350 hectares over the years due to the perennial erosion caused by the Brahmaputra river, which has destroyed their land. The village is quite huge and overpopulated compared to its neighbouring villages. It is one of the oldest villages in the area. According to village headman, the place where the village is situated was once abandoned land. There was no agricultural activity in this area. As the headman claims, his forefathers had established a village in the 1870s called Muttum Gongrak, which was fertile at the bank of Brahmaputra. It is around 25 to 30 Kilometers away from the current location. However, after the disastrous earthquake of 1950, the river bank of Brahmaputra was heavily eroded, and the Muttum Gongrak area was submerged under the river. Hence, people shifted their settlement to the present location.

Some locals moved to other places and settled there. According to the residents, the Nongong and Panging brothers established the village and were the first families to settle there. Sikari Gaon has experienced significant population growth since the official survey in the 1980s. At that time, the village had only 15 households and 58 people. Currently, the village has 349 households and a population of 1,952 members, with 987 males and 965 females. The main reason for this growth is the migration of people from nearby areas affected by erosion. The following table shows the age groups and male-female percentage of the population.

Table 2.3: The age-sex structure of the village

S.No.	Age Group	Male		Female	
		Nos.	%	Nos.	%
1.	0-10	141	9.15	130	12.54
2.	11-20	109	7.33	119	11.43
3.	21-30	89	10.14	97	13.40
4.	31-40	351	34.87	289	33.45
5.	41-50	116	17.39	143	15.00
6.	51-60	103	13.60	89	7.50
7.	61-70 above	78	7.50	98	6.64
	Total	987	100	965	100

Clan organisation

Sikari Gaon is entirely a Mising village. The Mising community is clan-based and divided into several clans (*opin*), each with a distinct surname and a common ancestor. A clan is an exogamous group, i.e., marriage within the same clan is prohibited. One's clan members are considered to be brothers and sisters as they are believed to have descended from the same ancestors. The Misings are patrilineal; a girl, after marriage, accepts her husband's clan. Cross-cousin marriage is practised among the people as it does not violate the norm of clan exogamy.

There are forty clans among the Misings, namely; Bori, Basing, Chintey, Chungkurang, Darik, Dang, Dawo, Doley, Kardong, Kagyung, Kumbang, Kuli, Lagasu, Loing, Medok, Mili, Mipun, Mirang, Modi, Morang, Norah, Ngate, Padi, Pait, Pamse, Panging, Pangyeng, Payeng, Patir, Pawo, Pegu, Perme, Pertin, Pogag, Saro, Taid, Takoe, Taye, Tayung and Yein (Mipun, 2000). The surnames of the Misings are clan-specific, so one cannot adopt a clan surname to which he does not belong by birth. However, a few more surnames among the people are the sub-titles adopted by some families, e.g., Gupit, Patgiri and Chandi belong to the Pegu clan; the Patiri, Misong, and Gajera belong to the Doley clan. In this particular village, Panging is a dominant clan. Other clans include Mili (8 families), Taye (9 families) and Yein (7 families). Only twenty-four families belong to these clans. The following table shows the total number of members of these clan groups.

Table 2.4: Clan groups and their population in the Sikari Gaon

Sl. No.	Name of the Clan	Nos.	%
1.	Panging	1843	94.41
2.	Mili	33	1.69
3.	Yein	35	1.79
4.	Taye	41	2.1
	Total	1952	100

The Panging clan, the dominant clan in Sikari Gaon, has two sub-clans: Chiru and Koktak. The Chiru sub-clan has 689 members, while the Koktak sub-clan has 1154 members. According to the oral tradition, Chiru and Koktak were brothers with different family roles. Chiru means well in Mising. He got the name because of his duty to safeguard the family's well. Koktak means cook. As the name indicates, he is the family's cook. One day, they quarrelled when Koktak failed to cook for Chiru after he returned from work. They exchanged harsh words and decided to part ways. Since then, their descendants have formed separate sub-clans. Nongong Panging brothers, who first settled in the newly established village, belong to the Chiru Panging clan. They do not welcome other clan members except Chiru sub-clans. However, in 1993, a devastating flood in Majuli destroyed several villages near the Brahmaputra river, and many people were displaced. Some of them moved to Sikari Gaon and sought refuge there. Most of these people were from the Koktak Panging sub-clan, which was not welcomed by the original settlers. The Koktak clan members asked the Chiru clan members to let them stay for a few months, but they did not leave after that. In the meantime, more people migrated to Sikari Gaon, and the population increased. This led to conflicts over land and other resources between the two sub-clans.

Sikari gaon can be divided into two parts: the western and the eastern. In the village, the Chiru clan resides in the western part, which has fertile land and is closer to the Brahmaputra, making it more vulnerable to flooding during the monsoon season. On the other hand, Koktak and other migratory clans such as yein and Mili reside in the eastern area with sandy soil and are less affected by floods. The western area of Sikari gaon is situated at a lower elevation compared to the eastern area. This topographical difference makes the western area more susceptible to flooding during the monsoon season. Due to this, Chiru clan members are affected mainly by flood water, disease and death compared to other clans who reside in less affected areas of the village.

Family

The Mising are patrilocal and patrilineal by tradition. The families are generally monogamous, but polygamous (especially polygynous) families are not uncommon. Both nuclear and extended types of families are found among the people. The father heads a Mising family. The eldest son heads a family in the absence of the father. When the sons are minor, the widowed mother act as the head of the family. A joint or extended family is managed and controlled by the eldest member, even though the sons or the brothers may be adults. If one of the sons or brothers decides to live separately, he may do so and may claim his share of the paternal property. Usually, two or more nuclear families live in a common house. Extended families live in a single household with separate kitchens.

Table 2.5: Family types in Sikari Gaon

S.Nos.	Family type	Sikari Gaon	
		Nos.	%
1.	Nuclear	293	83.95
2.	Joint/Extended	56	16.04
Total		349	100

The above table shows that more than 83 per cent of Sikari village is nuclear families due to the disorganisation of joint families and fragmentation of family landholdings. The Mising community has a patriarchal system of inheritance, where the property is passed on through the male line and daughters do not have any claim to the paternal property. However, there are some exceptions to this rule. In some cases, married daughters live in their fathers' house with their husbands and children, and these daughters are generally provided a part of their father's property. One possible reason for this arrangement is the lack of economic opportunities and resources for the daughters and their spouses due to recurrent floods, erosion, displacement, and poverty. These factors affect their livelihoods, education, health, and social security. As a result, some married daughters may be unable to afford to live independently or find suitable employment elsewhere. Therefore, they may stay with their parents and share

their property and resources. If a man has no son, his daughters may share the paternal property. In the absence of children, the nearest agnates (male relatives) of the deceased person inherit the property.

Marriage

Generally, two forms of marriage are found among the Mising. One is known as *Dugla-lanam* (i.e., marriage by elopement) and the other as *Midang* (i.e., negotiated or arranged marriage). *Dugla-lanam* is the most common and popular form of marriage among the people. Generally, a boy and a girl develop affection and intimate relations during the celebration of community festivals (especially during *bihu* and *ali-aye-ligang*) where they dance and sing together. When the courtship results in mutual understanding, the boy takes away the girl with the help of his friends. In such cases, the boy's family accepts the girl without formal ceremony. However, within a few days, the boy's parents and relatives visit the girl's parents with jars of rice beer and betel nuts for the marriage settlement. The parties with a few close relatives sit together, and the *hat-toola*, a village priest, plays an active role in this process. He blesses the newly married couple and mediates any conflicts between the two parties. If he cannot resolve the issues, he refers them to the traditional village council, which completes the process. Following it, the girl's parents visit the boy's house with rice beer and betel nut and a similar function is observed. A community feast with pork and rice beer may be held if the boy's family desires it. The marriage function in the village is an extension of such marriage where the consent of the bride and bridegroom's family is required.

The other kind of marriage, called *Midang* is an expensive affair, planned and arranged by the parents and the relatives of the boy and girl. If the proposal is agreeable, both parties sit together and negotiate formally. The *hat-toola* (priest of the village) acts as the mediator. Then, on the appointed day, the groom goes to the bride's house with a small delegation who carries a few jars of rice beer (*apong*) and betel nut. A feast is offered to the groom's party as well as the relatives and guests. Pork fry and rice beer are the essential items; rice and pork curry made with elephant apple (*sompa*) are served. Some rituals are performed

with the help of the *hat-toola* of both sides. Then, the groom's party returns, taking the bride with them. They conduct rituals and offer feasts upon their return.

Apart from these two kinds of marriages, another form of marriage is popular among the Misings nowadays called *burhi-biya*. In this form of marriage, the girl elopes with the boy, and upon the agreement of such relation by both the families, the girl's family hosts a reception party where the family members and the relatives of the girl bless the couple and give them gifts like motorcycle, refrigerator, furniture, television, even car. So, this form of marriage is an amalgamation of the two marriages discussed above.

Table 2.6: Marital status of the people of Sikari Gaon

Age Group	Male				Female			
	Married	Unmarried	Widower	Divorced	Married	Unmarried	Widower	Divorced
0-10	0	49	0	0	0	46	0	0
10-20	42	28	0	0	44	19	0	0
20-30	29	7	1	0	45	2	1	0
30-40	21	2	2	0	3	2	3	0
40-50	7	1	2	0	0	1	2	1
50-60	2	0	4	0	0	0	5	0
Total	101	87	9	0	92	70	11	1
	197				174			

The Misings get married at an early age. The average age at the time of marriage is 15-18 years for girls and 17-21 years for boys. Usually, girls get married immediately after attaining puberty. However, this is changing due to the influence of contact with outsiders and formal education.

Among the Mising, divorce cases are sporadic. They do not live alone even after divorce. They prefer to find a companion even before divorce. It is difficult for a woman to get a husband after she turns 35. A widower of any age quickly gets a partner. The researcher found four polygynous alliances in Sikari Gaon, where each male has two female partners. Also, cross-cousin marriage is prevalent in this village, with twenty-two such cases. Marriage with a sister's daughter is also practised with seven cases identified by the researcher.

Religious life

The present religion of the Misings synthesises animism and Hinduism, known as *Kewalia*. Despite the mixture, they are worshippers of *uyu* or spirits-malevolent and benevolent and local deities are given utmost priority. In this context, the *mibo* (priest) plays a significant role. The Misings believe that the *mibo* is knowledgeable about identifying the *uyu* responsible for all the evil happenings. The *mibo* usually offers chickens in the name of *Dopum-Dorum* (an imaginary spirit having three heads) and performs a ritual before suggesting a remedy for the sufferer. Later, according to the direction of the *mibo*, the family of the patient offers pig, fowl, apong (wine) etc. to the spirit. The *mibo* are assisted by younger boys who work as apprentices under their guidance. These boys are called *Mi:ros*.

The Mising believe that the universe was created by a mystical power defined as *Sedi*. According to their mythology, *Sedi* appeared out of *Pudolondo* and created *Melo*- a female being, the universe with everything in it, including the sun and the Moon, which emerged from the union of *Sedi* and *Melo*. The Misings, therefore, regard the sun and the Moon, which they call *Do:nyi* and *Po:lo* respectively, as their progenitors. The name of *Don:yi-Po:lo* (the sun and the Moon) is recited during every ritual and festival.

Vaishnavite tradition

Majuli is renowned for its Vaishnavite culture, nurtured and practised in the area for centuries. The island is a land of the religious preachers and their monasteries

called Satras. It was Sankardeva (1449-1568), the chief Vaishnava preacher and social reformer of Assam, who first established a Satra in Majuli, in a place called Belaguri Dhuwahat and proselytised Madhav Deva (1498-1596), chief among his disciples, in the first quarter of 16th century. Since then, many of the monasteries had been established either through the kings who ruled the region or through the personal endeavour of the preachers. According to Nath (2009), there were about a hundred such Satras in Majuli. Over time, Majuli became a place of the Vaishnava monasteries and Vaishnava gurus and became a pilgrim's place, popularly known as the 'Vatican of Hinduism' (Neog, 2018; Nath, 2009). From this fact, the island came to be called '*Etaka Mahantar Than*' (Nath, 2009, p. 3). *Etaka Mahantar Than* roughly translates to 'the place of the Vaishnava priests'.

The Satras were, and still are, the most influential socio-cultural organisations of the land, and every person-old or young, belongs to one or the other of the Satras. The Satra culture influences the members from non-Hindu and tribal families of Majuli. The Vaishnava monasteries are the centres of all sorts of arts and crafts, music and dance, and other performing arts, such as theatrical performances called *Bhaona*. Dances performed in the satras are called Satriya Nritya, one of the classical Assamese dance forms. Similarly, songs performed in the satras, known as *Bargeet*, composed by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva, form the most distinguished class of Assamese classical songs.

The Misings have adopted Vaishnavite Hinduism under the influence of the great scholar, philosopher and Saint Srimanta Sankardeva. However, they continue to practice their original faith system that involves propitiating spirits and deities in places such as Ai-than and Dangaria-than. Thus, they have both Nam-ghar (vaishnavite prayer hall) and Satra (Neo Vaishnavite institute) and their traditional religious sites in their villages. This dual faith system has also given rise to two distinct priestly traditions among the Misings: Saraniya and Kesa (Misong & Thamminaina, 2023, p. 144). These priests are different from *mibo* and *mi:ro*, the traditional religious leaders of the Misings and have superhuman abilities.

One of these priestly traditions is *Saraniya*, also known as *Mangolik*. *Saraniya* priests follow the Neo Vaishnavite teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva and have to seek the blessing of *Satradhikar*, the head of *Satra*, before performing any religious rites or purity rituals. They cannot conduct any ceremonies without the approval of *Satradhikar*. Following rules and regulations, they participate in various religious activities such as *urom possum*, *dodgang*, and *nojaniya ui*. Their rituals are supervised by *Mibo*, who are the custodians of Mising culture and religion. *Saraniya* priests are invited to all religious occasions by the community. They often sing devotional songs called *Nam-Kirtan* from *Kirtan Ghosha*, a collection of poetical works composed by Srimanta Shankardev, which depict the *Leela* (divine play) of Sri Krishna. They sing these songs in the *Namghar*. On the other hand, *Kesa* priests practice animal sacrifice and perform *yumrang ui* (a ritual of worshipping nature in the woods). *Kesa* priests do not need to seek the blessing of *Satradhikar* and do not follow any guidelines when participating in religious activities. They are not allowed to be present when *mibo* performs their rituals. *Kesa* priests are also barred from performing purity rituals and entering the *namghar*. Both males and females can become priests, but women are not allowed to receive the blessing of *Satradhikar*. Therefore, they usually avoid becoming priests. However, some women can be found as *kesa* priests as they do not require the blessing of *Satradhikar*.

Moreover, this group provides specialised care using medicinal plants from the forest to treat diseases and eradicate epidemics. Their primary services include treating urinary disorders, abdominal pains, back pains, and other physical discomforts. They also prepare talismans for infertile couples and those seeking prosperity.

At present, in Sikari Gaon, there are two *namghar*. The first *namghar* was established in 1974 by the members of the Chiru sub-clan. The second *namghar* was built in 1991 by the members of the Koktak sub-clan, who wanted to have a separate *namghar*. In 1996, some locals discontinued this hybrid form of *Don:yi-Po:lo* and Neo-vaishnavism religious practices and became entirely vegetarian. They became full-time members of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, the largest

socio-religious organisation in Assam. The Sangha follows universal rules and regulations, and there are 53 branches throughout Assam and more than 30 lakh enrolled members in India. Its constitution incorporates ideas of peace, equality, non-violence and universal brotherhood. In every Sangha Namghar, every Friday the devotees recite Naam Kirtan (*Kirtan Ghosa*) which describes the manifold qualities of Lord Krishna, composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and teaches *Borgeet* (a form of devotional song composed by Sankardeva and his student Madhav Deva), *Satriya Nritya* (a classical dance form originally introduced by Sankardeva) and debates on ideology of Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaisnavism.

Economic organisation

For the Mising community, Land is an essential part of their lives because they traditionally depend on agriculture. Cultivable and non-cultivable Land have two prominent land holding patterns: private and community holdings owned mainly by men. Unmarried women and widows, who are often marginalised and discriminated against in society, are provided with decent means of family income with smaller parcels of Land, either agricultural Land or smaller houses rented out. The rent is generally collected by the head of the family, who has the authority and control over the property. Sikari Gaon is situated very close to the Brahmaputra, and soil erosion has severely affected the village's agricultural land. Due to this, most of the residents became landless labourers. They migrated to cities like Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Guwahati of Assam and outside Assam to states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana in search of job opportunities in the form of labour. During the summer floods, the Brahmaputra River deposits lots of valuable wood on its banks. Collecting wood has become a seasonal job for the landless locals.

Table 2.7: Land holding pattern of the village

S.Nos.	Land	Land size	
		Nos.	%
1.	Landless	239	68.43
2.	0-2 acre	77	22.06
3.	Above 3 acre	33	9.45
Total		349	100

Most people of Sikari Gaon own less or no land. Only a few have small land holdings, and part of it is infertile, as reported by people. Such conditions resulted in stressful economic conditions, but exploitation often led to bondage. Those with arable Land spend most of their time cultivating paddy of different varieties, some of which they sow in spring and harvest during summer; other varieties are transplanted during the rainy season and harvested in autumn. *Ahu*, a dry variety of paddy, is cultivated in high lands, while two wet varieties of paddy, *Amdang* and *Bau*, are popular and considered necessary among Misings. They cultivate these varieties in the lowlands or wet fields. *Amdang* is transplanted, and the *Bau* variety is sown using traditional broadcasting techniques. They solely depend on the seasonal rainwater. The lowlands get a high volume of water during the rainy season, where *Amdang* paddy is sown. They also plant mustard, black gram, jute, sweet potato, and banana. They are cultivating vegetables, fruits, pulses and cereals as subsidiary crops. There is a significant gender-based division of labour in agricultural activities. The Mising women play a very active role in agriculture. Activities like ploughing, sowing, manuring and carrying the harvest from the field to the granary are men's tasks, while transplantation, weeding, harvesting, thrashing, winnowing and husking of the paddy are activities carried out by women. As the tribe practices agriculture, most festivals, rituals and ceremonies are associated with different activities and occasions of cultivation. Thus, significant festivals like *Ali-aye ligang*, *Porag*, *Dobur Puja*, *Sarag Puja*, and *Kuber Puja* are associated with different phases of the agricultural cycle.

Apart from agricultural activities, most cultivators are involved in contractual or odd jobs during the lean season, often outside the district or state. Some women and men hold government jobs, such as officials in the government, medical personnel, school teachers, and persons employed in the armed forces. A few are working in private companies and hospitals. Besides, there are contractors, shopkeepers, shop helpers, drivers, security guards, tailors, electricians, construction workers, plumbers, masons, woodcutters, cattle rearers, and livestock sellers.

Table 2.8: Types of occupation in Sikari Gaon

Occupation	Male	Female	Total
Agriculture	254	176	430
Agriculture and seasonal work	102	43	145
Government job	23	7	30
Private Job	76	4	80
Non-Government Organisation worker	2	0	2
Odd jobs and seasonal labour work	21	3	24
Total	478	233	711

Fishing is the sole livelihood for some families, especially the Koktak Panging members in Sikari Gaon, who sell their catch in a nearby marketplace. Every village has a few communal fisheries which are used by families and clans of the village. The best months for fishing are from November to March when the water level is low, and fish can be caught easily. Community fishing is prevalent among the Mising. Generally, they fix a day in advance, and the party proceeds early in the morning to the fishing spot. Both males and females can participate in the fishing party. They use implements such as *chalon* (net basket), *zurki* (plung basket), *assap* (drawing net) and *kali* (spear). They also use traps made of bamboo stilts such as *dingora*, *porang* and *turji* to catch fish in the natural ditches (*beel*). Apart from communal fisheries, nowadays, some families have a small private fish pond beyond their backyards where fish species preferred by the family are reared.

Formerly, they were fishing for household consumption and festive occasions, but nowadays, they sell in the market to earn cash. Added to this, the communal

fisheries, which were open to the people of the village free of charge, now are given on tender to individuals of the village, applied during the monsoon season for three quarters of a year. The individual who wins the tender is responsible for maintaining the pond, which includes regular cleaning, installing wooden stakes in the deepest parts as shelters for the fish, and managing the floating weeds. These tasks are similar to those performed by the owners of private ponds. Sikari Gaon has eight natural fisheries, namely Nepali Silik, Rupoi Patang, Ali Kanta, Linger Patang, Nolduwar, Dighali Pukhuri, Guriko and Kandul Kanta. Yearly income from these fisheries ranges from 2 to 5 lakhs, becoming a part of the Village Development Fund under the control of the *Kebang* (village council). The money has been used to develop roadways and other infrastructure. Nowadays, man-made fisheries are maintained under the Mission Amrit Sarovar in many Mising villages, which began at the end of 2022.

The Misings traditionally domesticated animals like pigs, chickens, goats, and ducks only for consumption and ceremonial needs and had no economic use for such livestock. However, from around 1970-80, they started adapting to the market economy due to economic pressure. They earn a livelihood by selling pigs, as the popularity of pork has increased over the years. Generally, women are involved in rearing pigs. They also domesticate buffalo and cows for milk. The buffalos and bullocks are used as draught animals in their agricultural fields.

The Mising women are expert weavers and handloom designers. They produce clothing for their use. They make various traditional handloom products like *Ege Gasor* (Mekhela Chador), shawls, Ercock (Mising Scarf), Gadu (Blanket), *Mibo Galuk* (traditional men's wear). Mising Gadu is a unique product: a heavy cotton rug for the family to use in winter. Today Mising *ege*, *ribi*, *gaseng*, and *mibo galuk* have a good market demand for their colourful designs and quality. The state and central government organise handloom textile exhibitions to promote local products.

Public distribution system

The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a scheme implemented by the government of India to provide food security to poor and impoverished households in the country. Under this scheme, the government distributes cereals, pulses, cooking oil, sugar, and kerosene at low cost to families living below the poverty line. The rations are distributed once every month at a government-funded shop run by an employed family. These shops are called PDS stores and are located in different areas of the country. In Sikari Gaon, there are two PDS stores.

There are two PDS stores in Sikari Gaon. The PDS scheme issues two types of ration cards to eligible households: yellow and red. These cards enable the cardholders to buy food grains at subsidised prices from the PDS stores. Yellow cards are given to households below the poverty line (BPL), meaning they have a low income and cannot afford basic necessities. Yellow card holders can get up to 5 kg of rice per month at Rs.1 per kg and 1 litre of kerosene for the same price. They can also get wheat and sugar at low prices, but the quantity and rate vary from state to state.

Red cards are given to households that are the poorest of the poor, which means they have no income or assets and are in extreme distress. Red card holders can get 35 kg of food grains per month at a highly subsidised rate of Rs.3 per kg for rice, Rs.2 per kg for wheat and Rs.1 per kg for coarse grains. They can also get sugar and kerosene at low prices, but the quantity and rate vary from state to state.

The main difference between yellow and red cards is that red card holders have additional benefits regarding the quantity and price of food grains they can get from the PDS stores. However, both cards require an application with proof of residence and financial status to be issued by the government authorities. All the eligible members of Sikari Gaon are currently enjoying the benefits of the PDS scheme.

Electricity

Despite having a sizable hydroelectric project nearby, such as the lower Subansiri power project, many Mising hamlets still need electricity infrastructure. By using alternative energy sources like solar energy, the government has attempted to electrify these hamlets. The Saubhagya scheme, which was launched on 25 September 2017, aimed to achieve universal household electricity, reaching every village and every district in the nation. Sikari Gaon received access to power beginning in January 2018. Even though the locals can access energy, they frequently have power outages. When the researcher was in the village, practically none of the street lights were functioning. Several light poles have permanent bulbs or tubes. However, they are faulty, the fuses are loose, and maintenance needs to be consistent. The nearby settlements share the infrastructure that is given and the regular power outages. The Panchayat and the Block administration are responsible for providing electric poles and street lights, and it is known that they sporadically heed petitions signed by the locals calling for infrastructure upgrades.

Water sources

These consist of bore wells, manually operated water pumps known as *Domkal* locally, and wells. *Domkals* are public water sources that were set up by the Panchayat. With the availability of electricity connections, some affluent households installed water pumps for convenience and attached electric motors near the hand pumps, reducing the manual effort required to draw water. They fill the sintex water tanks for various uses, such as drinking, washing, and bathing. There are 39 *domkals* in the hamlet, but four are no longer in use due to the unpleasant taste of the brackish water.

Additionally, one-third of the *domkals* ceased operations after a few years of service. Depending on the population density, they have adequate water sources. These *domkals* also act as a gathering place for young people and adults to interact while working on their tasks. They have also installed bore wells for agricultural purposes. Other water bodies in the Mising villages include rivers,

streams, ponds, and wetlands. These water bodies are essential for the livelihood and culture of the Mising people, who depend on them for fishing, irrigation, transportation, and rituals. Some major rivers that flow through the Mising villages are the Brahmaputra, the Subansiri, the Dikrong, and the Jia-Bhoroli. These rivers also provide scenic beauty and biodiversity to the region. However, these water bodies also pose challenges and threats to the Mising hamlets, especially during the monsoon season, when they cause floods, erosion, and landslides.

Public transport

Public transportation is one of the significant problems for Sikari gaon. There are no bus routes to the village, and since the roads are *kuccha* and it becomes muddy and slippery during the rainy season, drivers want to avoid going there. They demand high fares in case of emergency. According to the data provided, only a few people in the village have personal vehicles, such as 45 motorbikes and two cars. Most villagers walk 2-3 km to the bus or auto stand from where they go to the market, town or offices.

Education and literacy

Sikari Gaon has two lower primary schools and one upper primary school. There are also two Anganbari centres for pre-primary children (3-5 years). There are no high schools or colleges in the area. Therefore, the students must walk or cycle five to eight kilometres to attend their classes. This results in a high school or college dropout rate in the village. According to the data provided by the village headman, approximately 70-90 students have dropped out of school or college in the village. The following table reveals the prevalence of high illiteracy and the significant difference between males and females. This impacts the prevalence of beliefs around witchcraft in the village.

Table 2.9: Educational qualification of the people of Sikari Gaon

Sl.Nos.	Educational Qualification	Sikari Gaon			
		Male		Female	
		No.s	%	No.s	%
1.	Illiterate	651	65.95	798	82.69
2.	Up to primary	239	24.21	109	11.29
3.	Up to 10th	49	4.96	38	3.93
4.	Up to HS	30	3.03	15	1.55
5.	Graduate	15	1.51	4	0.41
6.	Others	3	0.30	1	0.10
Total		987	100	965	100

Health care facilities

Most Misings living in the villages usually go to local healers upon identifying an illness. The healers, with their knowledge of herbs, provide medicine. The allopathy doctors are not available in the rural areas. There is no primary healthcare centre near Sikari Gaon. The closest centre is around ten to twelve kilometres from the village. In cases of emergency, it is impossible to reach the place on time because of bad roads and poor connectivity. Most of the locals alleged that the *Bor Doctor* (the principal doctor) of the centre would not be available in the centre. Most of his work is done by his compounder/pharmacist, whom the nurses often assist. The compounder provides medicines to patients in the nearby villages. The village has four Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers, female community health volunteers trained to provide information and assistance to women during pregnancy and other health-related issues. ASHA workers are part of the National Rural Health Mission launched by the Government of India in 2005. The problem of land ownership and low agricultural income affects the health care and nutritional status of the rural population, as most of them depend on farming activities for their livelihood.

The people of Sikari Gaon mentions that they face death due to hunger, epidemics, disease, non-availability of pure drinking water, lack of accessibility to the health centre, ignorance, negligence, illiteracy, poor implementation of the government's health policies and the negative attitude of officials towards making health facilities accessible to all.

Traditional medicine and knowledge

As discussed, Misings of Sikri Gaon primarily depend on ethnomedicine. Ojha or *mibo* is a traditional medical practitioner. They are generally male. Their knowledge about herbal medicine has been passed on from generation to generation, often in the same family line. They also suggest that people regularly consume a balanced diet of various grains and greens that have medicinal properties as a preventive strategy.

Aloconi is a plant that belongs to the ginger family and is characterised by its green, dagger-shaped long leaves. It is abundant in marshy lands across Mising villages and is an auto-generative wild plant. Although it has no edible contents, medicinal properties make it highly valued by the Mising people. The aroma of aloconi leaf has a typical therapeutic odour that can relieve stomach aches. Ailing individuals often keep a leaf in their pocket to help with recovery. Inhaling the aroma from the leaf at frequent intervals for about an hour can relieve stomach ache.

Another healing technique, the *Metsum* (parcel of Ember), is a traditional form of hot water bag-type medical tool. It involves placing a parcel of hot substances mixed with red-hot charcoal and warm ashes in green leaves called *taling ekkam*. The parcel has a sharply tapering handle above it. When prepared, the affected areas are lightly pressed with the Metsum to alleviate pain.

Without mother-care hospitals in this locality, women in the community were given Metsum treatment for four to seven days as a postnatal treatment. Mothers were advised to avoid oil-based foods and spicy preparations as part of a safe

postnatal dietary course. Instead, they were primarily given boiled foods as part of their puerperal diet for ten to twenty days.

This course is known as *Obo-yodnam*, which involves preparing a soup called *obo-yodnam jal*. The soup is intended to help mothers regain strength and recover. It is made using *marsang* (Indian spinach) leaves and its soft stems, tender *rugji* leaf (yellow fern), home-reared chicken meat, *jaluk* (black pepper), and a pinch of salt. The soup is given to the mother for approximately fifteen days.

Mibo uses *Kampon-talap* (garlic), *Bungki-repuk*, *Sohti* for ritual purposes. As he is famous as a witch finder, a wild herb, namely *bhootmola*, is used during his witch-finding process. The word *bhootmola* combines two words- *bhoot* (ghost) and *mola* (toss away), proven to have medicinal value.

Food habits

Rice is the staple food of the Mising. Different types of leafy vegetables, potatoes, sweet potatoes, elephant apples (*Dillenia indica*), tapioca, *arums*, and edible ferns (*dhekia*) are consumed in their daily meals. They are very fond of fish, and fishing is a regular and organised event. Womenfolk also take part in fishing in the shallow water. Fish is regularly added to their meal. They also consume pork and various poultry like chicken and duck regularly. Meat is often cooked with pulses or vegetables. They also cultivate mustard seeds mainly for commercial purposes.

Apong, locally made rice beer is their traditional beverage. Based on the preparatory methods, there are two kinds of *apong*, i.e. *Nogin apong* and *Poro apong*. Jatin Mipun (2000:34) analysed the different contents of *Apong* and explored its high nutritive value. It has been observed that the traditional *apong* is being replaced by another locally made drink called *chulai/Phatika*, which has become popular. The *chulai* does not have nutritious value like *apong* rather, it is very harmful and has no religious significance.

Plate 2.1: Mising woman preparing apong



Meals are usually taken twice a day in the village. Late mornings and early evenings are ideal for family members to gather together in the kitchen to partake in meals before they leave for work and after they return home, respectively. Tea and snacks are consumed at regular intervals. The Mising diet is well-balanced, with fish and leafy green vegetables as central dishes consumed at almost every meal. Children and adults enjoy seasonal fruits like Ber. As mentioned earlier in the chapter the fertile soil of the island supports a wide variety of edible trees and plants.

Housing pattern

The Mising traditionally live in a house called *Taleng Okum* or *Chang Ghar*, which is built on a raised platform. The platform is raised roughly five feet above the ground level. They prefer pile dwelling (*teleng okum*), which protects against regular floods and wild animals. It was a long rectangular single house containing one or more living rooms. Social and religious beliefs and practices often influence the construction of a house. The house typically comprises a large hall with a central kitchen, where family members gather to prepare and

consume food. Each room is demarcated by a fireplace, where children of every family sit around in the evening before retiring to bed. In the case of a joint family, the head of the family occupies the last room of the house, where food and drink are generally prepared and consumed. All family members sit around the fireplace in the head's room, sharing meals and discussing family matters. The house is designed with only two entrances, one in the front and the other at the back.

Plate 2.2: Mising taleng okum



The *taleng okum* or the *chang ghar* has reduced in size through the decades. Now, in many villages, it houses a joint family or sometimes even a nuclear family, unlike in the past, when an entire clan used to live together. This led to solid kin bonding but at the same time increased social friction due to clashing egos and lack of space and privacy; with the introduction of the idea of private property and space in the communal life of the Mising, the size of the *chang ghar* reduced. Nowadays, brothers and cousins live adjacent to each other within their *taleng okum* in relative peace and harmony. The belief and practice of communal corporation and brotherhood continues to this day.

Another significant change in the past few decades has been the construction of single-story brick and cement houses. Two main reasons have been increasing income and exposure and the Indira Awas Yojana (now Prime Minister Awas Yojana), which partially funds building concrete houses in rural areas. Families who can afford the raw materials and the labour build such houses if space permits to accommodate their growing families. Even in such cases, the kitchen and dining area are housed in the *taleng okum* where the family gathers for meals and entertains guests. The Mising is "at home" in the *chang ghar*, that the modern house cannot replace.

The Mising people construct their houses using wood, bamboo, cane materials, and thatch for roofing. Wooden ladders are fitted in the front and the back of the house for climbing to the raised platform. One or two spacious platforms called *kare* are constructed attached to the main house, mainly for drying paddy grain in the daytime and for sitting and gossiping in the evening during summer. On every fireplace, a piece of the ceiling made of bamboo splits is kept hanging to smoke fish and meat, which Mising relishes most. The suspended ceiling is called *perap* on which they keep earthen jars (which are used to store rice beer) upside down for smoking. It is important to note that the Mising regard the fireplace as the most sacred. It is constructed on the platform in the middle of the kitchen which is divided into upper area (*ri:sing*) and lower area (*koktog*). The *ri:sing* has ritual significance and social status. Males of the household sit there during meals and social calls with visitors. Women especially younger females, for example, the daughter-in-law, sit opposite or on the lower area (*koktog*), a practice of avoidance and maintaining distance from the men of the family.

The space below the *taleng okum* is known as the *Kitik*. This space should be clean in the Monsoon season as it allows the rainwater to wash away the dirt that flows down further into the shallow ditches and fish ponds beyond the backyards of the houses. During the rest of the year, the *kitik* is the place to store firewood and equipment in a corner. Many families house their livestock like goats and cattle. Since many Mising women are skilled weavers, as mentioned above, the

traditional handlooms are placed in another corner of the *kitik*. Women and girls of the house sweep and clean the ground regularly. The *kitik* is a site for romantic rendezvous, known as *Kitik Ginam* in Mising, after nightfall. In romance blooming between a boy and girl of the same village, they use either the *kitik* or the jungle to meet in secrecy. This happens as Mising practice village exogamy, and such liaisons are socially tabooed as children of a village are considered siblings despite not being blood relatives. However, in recent times, some changes have been observed in the marriage patterns of Mising people. Some have engaged in love and marriage within the same village, breaking the taboo of village exogamy. This may be due to the influence of modernisation, education and urbanisation on their culture (Nagtey & Borbora, 2019, pp. 16-22).

Village organisation

A traditional Mising village is, by and large, a self-sufficient one. The affairs of a village in organisational matters are looked after by a committee of older men known as the *Kebang* (discussed in detail in chapter 5). It can be compared with the present-day village panchayat. The *kebang* is headed by a *Gam*. Any conflict, violation of social norms and crime are adjudicated and settled by the *kebang*. The *Gam* performs the role of the president, and the elders help finalise the judgement. Generally, the offenders are punished with a fine in cash or by arranging a community feast. However, in extreme cases, sometimes the offender is physically assaulted, socially boycotted or even ex-communicated from the village.

There has been a merging of responsibilities of the *kebang* over the decades, with those tasks initially carried out by individuals and groups within the village or beyond. Along with judicial works, nowadays, the *kebang* handles the village's finances and the communal and developmental activities. The role of the village council has been elaborated further in the chapter on the resolution of witchcraft among the Mising.

The proceeding of a *kebang* is usually an affair of the male members. The village women participate only as accused, aggrieved or witnesses. Traditionally, the *kebang* was housed in the *Murong*, a public hall in the village. However, nowadays, a *namghar* or a school building is often used as a venue for holding a meeting of the *kebang*. A bigger council combines several villages called the *Bane-kebang* consisting of a few elderly representing all the constituent villages. The inter-village disputes and conflicts are handled by it. In the present day, the *bane-kebang* has lost its importance.

Besides, a youth organisation called *Mimbir-yame* exists in the village, where all the unmarried boys and girls are generally the members. However, some elderly members may also be involved in it to ensure discipline and smooth functioning of the organisation. An elderly member is generally selected as the leader (known as *bora*) of the institution who acts as adviser, organiser and president. The organisation looks after the collective welfare activities in the village and arranges the labour force for agricultural and other activities for needy families. Dancing, singing and other cultural activities are also organised by the *mimbir-yame* on special occasions.

Festivals

As noted earlier, the Misings observe their traditional festivals (i.e. *Ali-aye-ligang* and *Porag*) and the common Assamese festivals like *Bihu*. *Ali-aye-ligang* is an agricultural festival. According to their language, *ali-aye-ligang* means sowing roots and shoots (i.e., *ali*-roots, *aye*-fruits or seeds, *ligang*-sowing). It is celebrated at the beginning of the *ahu* (a dry variety of paddy) season, i.e., on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month of *Phagun* (February-March). Mother goddess Earth is worshipped, and seeds are sown ceremonially. A type of ceremonial dance called *pakso monam* is performed by young boys and girls. However, all the villagers, regardless of age and sex, may join. The dance is associated with the rhythmic beating of drums and cymbals (a musical instrument that produces a loud and sharp sound when struck together or with a stick. They are usually made of metal, such as brass, bronze or copper). The movement of hands and feet indicates the paddy leaves at

different stages of its growth. Also, a few agricultural activities like sowing, harvesting, tying of crop bundles, thrashing and winnowing are symbolised and highlighted through this dance. The dancing folk also visit every household, performing their dance for the welfare of the host. In return, the host offers them apong (rice beer). This is often observed for three days, during which the people do no vital work. Every family worships its forefathers at the festival's end, praying for a good harvest.

Porag is associated with ahu cultivation and is celebrated at the end of the harvesting of the paddy. *Porag* festival is also known as *nora-chiga bihu* (meaning uprooting of the left-out paddy straws). It is also a festival of merry-making and feasting for seven days. Since it is an expensive celebration, it is now observed at an interval of five to ten years and is organised collectively in collaboration with a few neighbouring Mising villages. The *murang okum*, the public hall or dormitory of the Mising people, is either newly built or beautifully decorated for this occasion. A *mibo* (religious priest) is invited, or a village expert is appointed to perform the rituals of the festival. The celebration starts with offerings to Sedi-Melo (the first female and the male of the tribe) and *Don:ye-Po:lo* (the Sun and the Moon). The festival starts in the early morning of a Wednesday. The youths encircle the murang and dance with the beating of drums and singing. A swan is also sacrificed at the centrally located pillar of the murang. A few pigs are slaughtered, and a grand feast is arranged. At night, the *mibo* leads the dancing folk, which continues for the entire duration of the festival. The festival ends on the seventh day with the prayer dance.

A few other traditional festivals of the Misings are also known as *Amrok*, *Saragpuja* and *Kuberpuja*. The *amrok* is observed in the Assamese month of Bhada-Ahin (i.e., in September), where the food items prepared from the harvested crops (especially the ahu paddy) is offered to the ancestors. Though this festival is generally performed at the household level, it is also observed at the community level. A feast with rice, pork, chicken and apong (local rice beer) is arranged, and youths perform a dance called *pakso-monam* and sing *oitinom*, a traditional form of Mising folk song and beating

drums. The malevolent deities (*urom-kasang*) are also offered oblation during this festival. *Saragpuja* (worshipping of heaven) is observed in the middle of their cultivation. The ancestral spirits are believed to protect the crops from natural calamities and pests. The people also worship *Kuber*, whom they believe is the God of wealth and agriculture.

Besides, the Misings also celebrate the Assamese *Bihu*. They observe the *Bohag* (or *rongali*) *bihu* relatively more zealously and regularly. It continues for the whole month of Bohag (i.e., April-May). Apong (rice beer) and other food items are prepared to entertain the guests and for household consumption. The people wear new clothes. The women folk and girls weave *gamocha* on their looms to offer gifts to relatives, guests and friends. The village youth visit every household, performing dance and song in the evening and collect donations. The amount thus collected is used to buy musical instruments and other equipment for the youth association. A part of the amount is also utilised in organising a feast at the end of the month to bid farewell to the Bihu for the year.

The people also celebrate *Magh bihu* (or *bhogali bihu*). It is held on the first day of the Assamese month of *Magh* (i.e., in mid-January). It is a festival of eating and drinking. Some special items of food along with apong are prepared in every family. Singing and dancing is also performed on the occasion.

Kati bihu is celebrated on the first day of the month of *Kati* (i.e., in October). It is a relatively less important festival for the people of Sikari Gaon. While performing it, they put banana saplings at the centre of the house, light earthen lamps in the evening and arrange prayers for the healthy growth of the paddy.

Conclusion

The tangible and the intangible of the Mising lifeways provide a background of the research context and help to unveil and analyse the research problem. The following chapter discusses the belief system about witches among the Misings, their folk stories and songs, and their relevance in contemporary scenarios. The

primary data is collated with secondary data to build the present work and highlight pertinent changes in the community practices.

Chapter III

Witchcraft: Perspectives from Folklore and Contemporary Practices

Background

This chapter analyses folklore on witches and witchcraft and examines the meanings people attribute in the present context. The folklore reveals the non-human existence of witches. The folkloric witches with supernatural characters are part of such stories. However, the human becomes a witch, emulating the characters of folkloric witches. The folk stories have made an everlasting impression on the minds of the old and young. The chapter also documents folklore of the Mising witch doctor. The witch doctor is known as *mibo*. He is believed to be vital in identifying and controlling evil spirits. Within Mising traditional *Donyi-Polo* religion, there is a belief that after the death of a person, his soul (*urom*) does not leave the human world. There are two types of spirits-benevolent and malevolent. It is believed that after the death of those who died an unnatural or accidental death, a malevolent spirit approaches the soul to take it away and make it a member of their *Pomjur Dolung* (malevolent spirits village) and use it to harm humans. The *Pomjur Dolung* is the place where spirits are trained. Thus, the rituals of persons dying unnaturally or accidentally are conducted outside the home near the river bank or jungle. Souls of persons dying a natural death remain in the human world and protect their home and their families. The Misings often offer *urom ui* (ancestor worship) to satisfy them. The Misings believe that unnatural death or accident, infected by an unknown ailment or disease, is the work of the evil spirit. It happens when an evil spirit takes away the lifeline or *Yalo* of the person. So, family members call *mibo* to examine the problem. With his inborn supernatural powers, he performs *Mibo-Dagnam* (for identification of malevolent spirit and subsequently the witch) and *Yalo-Gognam* (repossession of soul) procedures to talk to the spirit and bargain the needed offering in exchange for releasing the patient from suffering.

These folktales influence the day-to-day life of Misings. Within such belief, there is an essential link to their traditional religious practices called *Donyi-Polo*, an amalgamation of both animistic and shamanistic beliefs and practices. The Misings traditionally regard the Moon, Sun, wind, and lightning as responsible for all action on Earth. The beliefs and practices about what the Mising call *Urom/Ui*, meaning spirit or soul, does not fall into any sect of Hinduism or other form of world religion. According to their belief, some *urom* do not leave the human world immediately after death. They hold that when some people die unnaturally or accidentally at an early age, their *urom* roams in the forests, water, hills and mountains, and they experience hunger and thirst. They are aggressive towards humans and cause misfortune and sickness. It is believed that sickness is inflicted upon unfortunate persons by extrasensory functions like transgression, shock, incidences, premonition or apprehensive encounters with psychosomatic elements. This syndrome is called *Yalo-ginam*, meaning loss of longevity. To propitiate such spirits, material offerings are made and rituals are organised. In order to ward off sufferings, they propitiate the evil spirits by offering eggs, fowls, pigs, other domesticated animals and homemade rice-beer called *apong*. It is believed that these kinds of spirits can be reared by *marunetani* (witch) by feeding them to livestock and human (soul) periodically. Such kinds of spirits are believed to be *Pomjur uyu* (malevolent spirits) family members.

Tales of evil spirit

Tales of witches and evil spirits formed an integral part of the religious and cosmological world of the Misings. According to Mising cosmology, *Keyum* is the earliest stage of the creation of the universe. There was a great emptiness before the creation process started, beyond vision, beyond knowledge, infinitely infinite, unspeakable (Padun, 2005). *Keyum* is the beginning of the beginning or past of the past beyond the reach of human knowledge or senses. It is something like a zero from where no answer can be received. Is there water? The answer is 'no'. Is there Earth? Is there air, sky or wind? The answer is 'no'. The infiniteness of infiniteness started throwing out an ethereal vibration of friction. This then shattered the eternal silence and filled the emptiness with waves of

ethereal vibrations, leading to the creation of stages of *Kasi*, *Siyang*, *Angbo*, *Bomug*, *Mukseng* and finally *Sedi-Melo*, the real architect behind the creation of Dong Among or the Earth.

The creation of the universe, according to Mising oral tradition Mibo Ahbang; *Se:di:* is the female, considered as nature, came down with her male consort *Me:lo* from heaven to create Dong Among (the Earth) to start the process of creation of human beings. In the transition from the *Keyum* to *Mukseng*, there was no creation process on Dong Among. The creation of various objects, land, water and other earthly living and non-living beings slowly emerged when *Sedi-Melo* arrived on Earth. The evolution involves from the formless level of *Keyum* to the more embodied and conscious form of *Sedi-Melo*.

According to Mibo Ahbang, *Sedi* and *Melo* were sent from the heaven of God “Kihling Kanggey” to introduce worldly objects such as the Sun, Moon, land, water and other objects of nature and, more importantly, human beings. It is believed that *Sedi*’s two eyes first became *Donyi* (the Sun) and *Polo* (the Moon), which is considered the first important creation. Without *Donyi-Polo*, life is not possible on Earth. Because of that, it is regarded as an essential part of their traditional religious belief that comes next to *Sedi-Melo* ((Rikam, 1989; Kurian, 2022). Then *Sedi* transformed parts of her body into rivers, valleys, air, water, stones, rocks, flora and fauna, the Sun, the Moon and the stars. In this creation process, *Melo* has become a silent observer (ibid). In other words, the concept of *Donyi-Polo* represents the divine masculine and the divine feminine, similar to Yin-Yang in Chinese philosophy and religion (Rikam, 1989). They represent how the divine principle manifests itself, providing harmony and balance to the universe, for example, in the alternation of light and darkness, heat and cool, or unity (analogically, the Sun of the daily sky) and multiplicity (analogically, the stars of the night sky). The analogy through which the Divinity (*Sedi*) can be described is eternally veiling, unveiling and then revealing himself in nature (Mishra, 2023).

In the creation process of the universe, *Sedi-Melo* is divided into a series of stages: *Diling*, *Li:tung*, *Tuye*, *Yepe* and *Pedong*. In this process of evolution, different spirits started to emerge on the Earth. Conflict arose between the benevolent and malevolent spirits. Several folk stories narrate the significance of such spirits. The stories inform that *pomjur uyu* (malevolent spirits) came into conflict with the human world, and thus, these spirits were characterised as harmful, violent, destroyer, jealous, and vengeful of humanity. Mibo Ahbang narrates that most of the angry, vengeful, jealous nature of evil spirits start to emerge because of internal conflict. Therefore, these spirits must be satisfied by sacrifices and offerings as often as they wish. The benevolent spirits *Agam Uyu* are solely involved in protecting nature and the human world. They look after the welfare of the living children, grant mercy and protect their successors or family members from *pomjur uyu* (malevolent spirits). No sacrifice is offered to *agam uyu*. They do not seek any reward. The final stage of supernatural evolution *Pedong*, is believed to be the highest stage of “development” of nature and human beings. Some of the folk stories given below illustrate the nature of evil spirits.

Stories of two brothers: *Ro:bo-Ni:bo*

This is a story of two human brothers, *Ro:bo* and *Ni:bo*, the sons of *Pedong*. *Ro:bo*, also known as *Taro* transformed into a disembodied and invisible spirit after he turned evil. He is the chief evil deity of humanity. He is violent, jealous, and vengeful. According the story of Ahbang, *Ro:bo* or *Taro* was the brother of *Ni:bo*, the *Tani* or the first man of humanity. *Ni:bo* was smarter than *Ro:bo*. Therefore, he acquired all the earthly possessions from *Ro:bo*. The two brothers started fighting. To settle the dispute, various deities gathered to hold the world’s first *Kebang* (meeting). *Ni:bo* conspired there and was fortunate enough to acquire all the property there. As a result, *Ro:bo* could no longer exist in human society and took refuge in forests, trees, mountains and rivers. Since then, those objects of nature have been considered the property of *Ro:bo*. To hide from humanity, he took an imaginary net called *Doying Sabron* and stayed behind it. Since then, *Ro:bo* has remained an incorporeal deity behind the scenes. He became the unrivalled master of the world of earthly things, an angry one at that.

He was the victim of the conspiracy of *Ni:bo* and suffered a great injustice. *Ro:bo*'s vengeful spirit remained forever. He harms people in the forest if they do unpleasant things, such as cutting trees. He is disembodied, but when he appears, he becomes human and lures people into the forest to suck their blood alive.

The descendant of *Ro:bo* is *Epom* or *Yapom* who too is an evil god and disembodied. *Epom* has male and female forms and lives in trees, forests, rivers, mountains and various plants. The animals and birds in the forest are his/her property. *Epom* harms people when they touch his/her property. *Epom* kidnaps children when they go out to play and sucks their blood. Sucking their blood renders the children ill, and it is believed that their *yalo* or soul/lifeline has been temporarily taken away by *Epom*. A *mibo* is called to find which form of *Epom* has stolen the child's *yalo*. The *mibo* takes the help of the benevolent spirits to find *Epom* and bargain with it by usually offering sacrifices of an animal in return for the child's soul. *Epom* occasionally attracts selected people to the forest and shares his knowledge and techniques to communicate with other evil spirits and establish links with human society. The people who maintain this link are called *mibo* or *mi:ro*. This will be discussed in detail in the *mibo* and *mi:ro* sections.

A story of merciless evil spirits: *Banji-Bote* and *La:dang Bote*

Banji-Bote, also known as *Banji-Banmang*, a son of *Pedong*, is a bloodthirsty and life-destroying evil spirit. According to a folk story, he was a calm, honest and helpful spirit. During the creation of heaven on Earth, he used to fight with malevolent spirits. However, he fought with his elder brother *Do:bom* and thus, the second son of *Pedong* turn into an evil, violent bloodsucker. The brothers fought over a girl, and *Do:bom* was accused by his brother *Banji-Bote* of using *Muini Ban* to seduce and steal her. He always carries poisonous weapons and is fond of conflicts in society and sucks the blood of opponents through his merciless and demonic traits. When someone dies in an accident or due to blood deficiency, people blame it on the influence of *Banji-Bote*'s evil power. This story reveals that romantic relationships significantly cause evil practices in Mising society.

La:dang Bote, a younger brother of *Banji-Bote*, is an evil spirit of rivers. He searches for certain unfortunate people and kills them by drowning. It is believed that he eats a person's head by cutting it with an axe when a person dies by drowning. Because of his evil power, people fear to visit the river alone. Some village stories relate his evil power to that of witches, as it is believed that witches also use the same trick when someone accidentally dies in water.

Nomgu Bote: Spirit of disease and suffering

Nomgu Bote is the spreader of disease, poverty and suffering. He is believed to live in the forest. Wild animals, numerous insects and birds are his servants. When he is displeased, he sends his servants to spread disease, destroy crops and cause famine. Disease, poverty and famine are the causes of human suffering. *Nomgu Bote* teaches magic tricks (*baan mara* or invisible arrow) to chosen people at night in the jungle. He usually holds a *ui-kebang* (a kind of coven) every month during the new Moon. There are about thirteen new moons each year. On the day of *Kartik Amavasya*, he gathers novices around a pipal tree at midnight. He burns a small lamp containing *karanj* oil (obtained from the hard-shelled fruits of the tree found in the forest and used particularly for its medicinal properties, especially for joint pains). Then *Nomgu Bote* orders to drink the fresh blood of any black animal or a rooster, call his ancestral spirits, and all begin to dance. While dancing, he tries to frighten away the learners of *baan mara*. Only those not frightened by the proceedings and brave enough to bear the fearful sight are lucky enough to be given further training in the occult. The procedure includes the sacrifice of animals, singing of songs and display of magical skills. It is believed that the secret followers of *Nomgu Bote* are the practitioners of *marunaam* (witchcraft) and use their skills on a living being or thing. Usually, a live tree is chosen, and the training is considered successful if the tree dries up or dies. In this manner, the novice becomes more confident to try it on human beings whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Folk songs on witchcraft (*Marunaam*)

Mising folksongs relating to witchcraft are usually soothing songs (*niyumnum oiye*) sung by the *mibo* to convince evil spirits to return patient's *yalo*. A witch or *butu* sings a few songs while performing witchcraft. The *marune-tani* (witch) sings songs to harm in multiple ways. For example, instigate conflicts among brothers or other family members, financial losses, ill health, and death of a person. They chant the target's name thrice while performing the witchcraft. Another example is love magic or *muini baan*, which they use to attract or seduce a girl in the favour or favour of a client. The witch sings the song below while casting magic to ensure success.

Kal kal kal
Tele pati miti moti kore,
Muje dile ei tel
Ratna hen jale,
Jaluk ratna karibo sur
Amukir hoiye amukar Matar chul
Amukar hugyan,
Denare barer kaliki chanidir
Kopal phute.

Translation:

Time is running
Oil in the hand warming,
If through the oil to her/his (targeted person)
It gets the result quickly, which comes like a gem (ratna hen jale),
As Jaluk looks like Ratna, and when it is taken
It starts swelling, and thus with this oil
I expect to see
His or her Misfortune (kopal phute).

He follows folk songs related to *butu onam* (rearing of a witch). It is believed that when the witch gives blood to his *butu*, he sings the following song to destroy the target's livestock.

Hae Donyi-Polo rune pene no
Nom kompasugela Ung nom eyyeim bidungko,
Ungom turyar molong
Lodipee nom eyyeim bikupe,
Edemepe turra dumolang.

Translation:

Hei Donyi-Polo, you are the creator, I pray you, I offer you blood regularly, my livestock are going to die, bless me with longevity and strength, make me stronger and stronger.

Eventually, the owner notices unusual deaths of his cattle or other livestock. He invites *mibo* to diagnose the reason. The *mibo* performs necessary rituals to help the victim.

Mibo: Marune-tani ettgapne

The origin of this shamanistic institution among the Mising has yet to be discovered. There are different versions of folk stories. The stories mention that migration from hills to plains is the leading cause. According to them, they encountered evil spirits during migration while clearing forests for their settlement. They caused several problems. Folklore reveals that the *Opob Me:zing* was the earliest human with supernatural powers given the charge to deal with the spirits. He was also responsible for training the future *mibo* or *mi:ro* to protect the *Tani* community; thus, the institution was operational since then. As per folk stories, the birth of *mibo* is conveyed to the mother when he is in her womb. The parents are instructed in their dreams to follow specific rules. During pregnancy, his mother does not take garlic,

coriander, red cabbage and spinach. It is believed that such food disturbs the *mibo*'s spiritual power, so he, too, never consumes these items during his lifetime. If his mother takes such food during her pregnancy, she suffers from sudden illness or vomiting. In such a state, the mother dreams at night several times and is instructed to inform others about her dreams. Thus, people are happy to welcome their future priest and believe he will remove all suffering from their lives.

Certain rituals are observed after the birth of the child in the family. The *Opob Me:zing* captures the young prospective *mibo* while grazing cows in the forest with children of his age group. Trains him in the jungle for a week or more. Searching for the boy is a futile effort. He is given *Piro apin*, a type of food taken by the gods and is provided with accommodation for a fixed period and trained in divine powers. The boys are trained in divine behaviour and taught to identify symbols of spirits and knowledge of plant medicine. Because of his vast knowledge of plant medicinal properties, *Opob Me:zing* is also popularly known as the first doctor or medicine man of the *Tani* community.

Mibo is the chief of all the Mising priests and is believed to possess some supernatural powers. According to Mising belief system, *mibo* is the son of *Donyi-Polo*, and he is primarily sent to *Dong Amang* or the Earth in human form to perform religious rituals to ward off human suffering such as disease and illness. *Mibo* is derived from two words: *mi*, which means man and *abu*, which means father figure or protector. He is specially ordained (*uirnam*) by the most revered lady called *Sirkri Nane* (closest relative to *Donyi-Polo*), who bodily descended from heaven (*Regy Regan*) to confer on him a scapular with the sacred thread and a doctrinal sword of the order. *Mibo* is always a man chosen by *Sirkri Nane*, who supervises the functions and other rituals performed by subordinate priests. Thus, he is an important religious, political, and social figure in the Mising community. He is a psyche, a fortune teller, and a physician who, by his supernatural powers, can cure anyone or direct and guide someone properly.

Even today, the Mising people believe that no village is free of witches or *marune-tani* the embodiments of evil. They perceive witch doctors can save the villagers from an evil spell, no matter how powerful. The *mibos* are the messiahs who heal physically and spiritually when the village is in the throes of an epidemic, and all the government's healthcare facilities fail. They are the supreme religious priests and perform all the *Donyi-Polo* religious rituals. No priest performs a ritual without the consent of a *mibo*. Thus, he is placed at the top of the priest hierarchy and is believed to have inborn supernatural powers that can see good and evil spirits and interact with them. In several cases, individuals claim to have supernatural powers to gain the status of *mibo*. In the village Nolduar, of Majuli, on the 8th of September 2022, a twelve-year-old boy publicly stated that he was a *mibo*. He claims *Opob Mizing* appeared in the dream and told him to get the sacred *Yakcha* from a particular spot of the river Subansiri (Protidin, 2022). In this case, the family members call him a *mibo* from childhood as they claim to have identified traits of a *mibo* in food consumption and other behavioural aspects. In such cases, elders in the family motivate the kid to make such claims upon realising that he is mature enough to make a public statement. Believing the claim, the village conducted rituals to recognise and announce him as a *mibo*.

However, a few village people are suspicious of the claims as he does not display calmness, a significant characteristic of a *mibo*. They believe the placing of the *Yakcha* was pre-planned—the boy has been travelling from place to place to perform rituals since then. Many *mibos* have agents to deal with people requiring assistance, and unlike earlier, the *mibos* today are inaccessible to people and demanding. The *mibo* position guarantees a high status- spiritually, socially, economically and politically in Mising society. The villagers place him next to God, as he saves the villagers from various diseases and calamities. They are the ones who play a pivotal role in solving and suggesting solutions for misfortune, disputes over land or family quarrels. Studies have shown that the rural population fall for the hypnotic spell of the *mibo* (Barman, 2002; Mishra, 2003; Misong, 2019). Over-reliance on *mibo* and believing in the idea of malevolent evil spirits such as witches and sorcery is at the root of the problem, leading to violence against those identified witches. In doing so, it is necessary

to look at the rituals and sacrifices these religious leaders perform. It is essential to record performative aspects, songs, and stories chanted during the process.

A life of a legendary *Mibo*

This is the story of a famous legendary character called Lapu Mezing, a *mibo* of Moluwarmiri village of Majuli. He died in 1999. However, Misings fondly remembers him even today. They say he rescued many people from diseases, misfortunes and family problems using his supernatural powers. His story is similar to descriptions in folk narratives of Misings. A member of the village described his experience and the capabilities of Lapu Mezing as follows:

“We are fortunate that Lapu Mezing lived in our village. I was very close to him. A *mibo* like him cannot be found now. He rescued many people from our village and other villages, too. He was a god to me. I went to the doctor when my son became ill, but he could not cure the illness. I completely lost hope. Then I took my son to Lapu Mezing. He saved my son. I will always be indebted to him.”

Lapu Mezing, also called Lapu Mibo was the most popular *mibo* in Majuli. He was born around 1929-30 in the Balukaguri village, Lakhimpur district of Assam. His father's name is Rakte, and his mother's name is Karmi. She died soon after giving birth to him. Rakte's father, Naam thought that Lapu's birth was illegitimate and did not allow Lapu to be brought to his house. It led to a conflict between Lapu's mother and father's families. However, upon the village council's judgement, Lapu Mezing was taken to his father's house in Moluwarmiri village when he was three years old. Other family members did not like him except for his father and grandmother. His grandmother nurtured him. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, he took refuge in the nearby forests for two or three days from time to time. There, he was trained by the *Opob Me:zing*. During the time of his disappearances, the cattle he was supposed to oversee grazing scattered and either got lost or was found destroying neighbours crops. The family had to compensate the people whose crops were destroyed. This angered the family members of Lapu Mezing. The family fails to identify the signs of him becoming a *mibo*. The family found this behaviour deviant and took

him to various priests to prevent him from doing such things in the future. He was given a *tabeez* (talisman). Lapu Mibo faced severe illness after the *tabeez* was placed around his neck. Then, his father took him to his maternal uncle's house in Bardubil to consult another priest, where he continued to stay. Because of the illness, his right little finger got infected and had to be cut. It is believed that inappropriate rituals are performed, which causes illness. He had to live a semi-nomadic life. No one treated him with sympathy. He married a young woman from Mudai village nearby with pressure from his maternal family. However, she died during childbirth. Among the Mising it is believed that a *mibo* cannot have a female partner, and if he marries, she will die very soon.

Plate 3.1: Dogne of mibo



Then his life became unstable. He was forced to return to his father's village of Moluwar in Majuli. One day he went to Chiramchapari, where he had been trained by the *Opob Me:zing* as a child. He came home and started avoiding vegetables forbidden to *mibos*, like coriander, red cabbage, and garlic. He began sharing his experiences and instructions with his family members and villagers. He began to inform people about the rules and regulations given during his training. He told the villagers and his family members that they had to call a meeting of five nearby villages and gather publicly at a designated place under the direction of *Opob Me: zing* and worship *Don:yi-Po:lo* before sacrificing a black female pig. This ritual is called the '*Rey Rengam*' festival in the Mising

community. Moreover, the principal reason for the ritual is to recognise and announce a *mibo* formally. Like Lapu Mezing, a *mibo* shows the community the *Dogne* and *Yakcha*, the divine tools *Opob Me:zing* bestowed on him when he visits the *mibo* in his dreams and leaves after instructing him about the maintenance of these sacred tools. The *Dogne* is a stone-like tiny object the colour and size of a corn kernel, which assists the *mibo* in talking to spirits. The *Yakcha* is a sword. The *Dogne* has to be placed under his pillow, and the *Yakcha* hung above his head on the wall while sleeping. These tools should never be touched or handled by females of any age. The *Yakcha* can only be unsheathed by the *mibo* from its wooden scabbard, and any attempt by others is always unsuccessful. After the completion of this festival, people began to visit him for solutions to their problems and benefited from treatment or herbal medicine given by him. He was a *mibo* for many years, rescuing many people and families from misfortune and diseases.

Like Lapu Mizing, other *mibos* of the Mising community have been offering services for the people for a very long time. The two rituals conducted by *mibos* are known as *Mibo-Dagnam* and *Yalo-Gognam*, which has been described below.

Role of a *Mibo*

The *mibo* is central to the performance of *Donyi-Polo* religious rituals. He goes through rigorous training and follows a strict routine. He memorises long verses called *Ahbang*, acquires ethno medicinal knowledge, remembers the names of objects used in religious ceremonies, recognises symbols of magic, understands the behaviour of evil spirits' performance methods, and remembers the rules and regulations of performance. The *mi:ro* is an assistant of *mibo* and learns techniques from *mibo*. Unlike *mi:ro*, the *mibo* possesses supernatural powers and can contact evil spirits. *Mi:ro* must be a male member and may become *mibo* after completing training. Only a few members successfully attain miboship.

According to Mising *Donyi-Polo* belief system, demons or spirits disturbs the family when some member commits a sin or does not perform ancestral worship. It may result in several problems, including the death of a family member. They suspect the evil intentions of enemies if they are uncertain about the cause. In such cases, the Misings take the help of *mibo*, who works as a mediator between humans and the spirit world. It is believed that the *mibo* alone can appease such spirits through bargaining material offerings and other religious rituals. Besides, they call *mibo* to treat any illness. They believe the *mibo* can find the reason and solve the problem with his divine abilities. He searches for the *yalo* (soul) while examining the symptoms of misfortune or a disease. The *mibo* inspects the person through *mangal sua* ritual. It is a ritual usually performed by *mibo* through which he can identify the problem of the sick person and his family using rice. *Mibo* prescribes procedures to be done based on the findings from the *mangal sua* ritual. He performs *Yalo-Gognam* and *Mibo-Dagnam* the following days to retain the soul, which has been described below.

Yalo-Gognam: the repossession of soul

The Mising language employs the term “*yalo*” to denote both shadow and soul (Doley, 2023). In Mising folklore, the soul is often perceived as a shadow, which becomes visible in sunlight or other sources of light. A person or body without a shadow is considered lifeless, as the presence of a shadow is intrinsically linked to the existence of a body. Only spirits or ghosts of the deceased can wander without shadows, rendering them invisible to humans. When the soul departs from the body, the individual is considered deceased, and the lifeless body cannot wander. Thus, in Mising language, the terms “shadow” and “soul” are synonymous with “*yalo*,” which is associated with the living body. According to Mising beliefs, the soul roams this world, experiencing hunger and thirst. The spirits and ghosts of the deceased (referred to as “*ui*”) seek retribution against those who have wronged them. These vengeful spirits bear resemblance to symbols of demons.

In various cultures worldwide, death and sleep are often regarded as analogous states. For instance, traditional Ukrainian folklore posits that death represents an

alternative form of existence, signifying that life does not cease upon death. The concept of death is frequently likened to a prolonged slumber in many cultural contexts (Kukharensky, 2011). The phrase “the person sleeps like the dead” denotes an individual who slumbers so profoundly that they cannot be awakened by any means. During sleep, a person’s soul is temporarily released from their body. In certain tribal societies, it is forbidden to abruptly awaken someone from sleep, as it is believed that their soul may not return at that moment, potentially leading to their demise. In some cases, individuals may remain unconscious following a severe illness, during which it is believed that their soul has departed from their physical form.

According to Mising beliefs, when a person dies, their soul goes to *Pomjur-Dolung*, the spirit-village. The spirits imprison the *yalo* until they are satisfied with rituals and offerings. The *mibo* uses his *Dogne* to speak with his familiar spirit, which helps locate the evil spirit responsible for stealing the victim’s soul (*Yalo-Gognam*). The transmigrated soul of the *mibo* talks with the spirit responsible for the sickness. Thus, he enters the land of the departed souls and speaks with them one by one, soul to soul, to find the cause of the theft of the human soul. He negotiates and often convinces the evil spirit and makes a vow before it of wholesome offerings. Upon these promises, the evil spirit complies and grants an extension of life for the sick person. However, this ritual is performed with the permission of the affected family and can be expensive. The ritual of *Yalo-Gognam* comprises chanting of Mibo Abang songs by the *mibo* with assistance from *mi:ro*. The *mibo* charges a fee ranging from five to seven thousand rupees, which excludes material costs required for rituals. *Yalo Gognam* can be understood as a preliminary ritual of soul repossession that graduates further into an extensive process in instances of *Mibo-Dagnam* rendering it more expensive than *Yalo Gognam*.

Mibo-Dagnam

The *mibo* also searches for the *yalo* through *Mibo-Dagnam*. During the ritual, he can enter the kingdoms of spirits by singing *Ahbang* songs. As per folktales, there are several kingdoms of ghosts and spirits, such as *Ramku* (the place of the

oldest ghosts), *Ramnu*, (the place of the newest ghosts and spirits), *Rum:to*, (the place of the young children of spirit) and *Rumlee* (the place where the souls of those who died in an accident).

The procedure of communicating with both good and evil spirits by *mibos* is known as *Mibo-Dagnam*, which happens at night. It is a group performance by the *mibo* and five to seven of his assistants called *mi:ro*; all chant *Ahbangs* (hymns) and display *Dagnam* (steady footwork), keeping the *mibo* in the middle of the circle. The *mibo* performs *Mibo-Dagnam* upon the request of a family in trouble or affected by unknown diseases.

Plate 3.2: Mibo perform *Mibo-Dagnam*



The *mibo* chooses a day to perform the *Dagnam* and arrives at victim's house at the appointed time. He performs it in the courtyard of the victim's family. He uses *Dogne* and *Yakcha* during the performance. There are two types of *Dogne*; one is living, and the other is dead. *Dogne* in a person's hands has no value; it is just a simple piece of stone. However, the *mibo* uses it to communicate with spirits. Living *Dogne* provides details on the ancestors' mistakes and how future generations can suffer the consequences and provide a means of cure. Dead *Dogne* works as a supernatural anti-body for the *mibo* during the *Mibo-Dagnam*. *Yakcha* is a weapon, a sword made of iron, a vital instrument for *Mibo-*

Dagnam. *Mibo* uses it to protect himself from attack by invisible forces or arrows called *baan mara*. At the beginning of the programme, he invites the village chiefs and youth of the community and questions them about the unfortunate incidents which have taken place in the village. In three steps, the *Yakcha* is cleansed with the yolk of two eggs, rice grains mixed with ginger water and *apong* (rice beer). Then, the ritual begins. First, he recites the names of cosmic powers such as *Sedi-Melo*, *Donyi-Polo*, and *Pedong Nane*, who are the creators of the living beings on Earth, for the success of his performance. The duty of *mi:ros* is to repeat the *Ahbang* songs sung by the *mibo*. He starts:

Obnari Sa:bo
Mibo bi Togdak
Pikalo Kalo,
Do:me Situng
Tiromokakui Tiromokakui
Kambong Appun Rekakui Regama.

The song is sung in the Mibo Ahbang dialect. It can be roughly translated as below but could not be deciphered.

Mibo comes to you through Obanari river to make a deal with you. Sun is setting let's have fun. I will give you an offering; tell me what you want. Instead, return the patient and release him from suffering.

This song is sung to call upon the evil spirits that have taken someone's *yalo* or soul, which is believed to be the cause of suffering in the family. He holds *Yakcha* in hand, swinging it around while singing in the middle of the circle called '*Gulung*', where a small mound of soil is made, and it is believed that during the programme, the benevolent spirit sits there. At the beginning of the programme, the *mibo* sprinkles rice grains in the courtyard and the front yard of the house to prevent an attack by any invisible evil force and to protect the priests and the people in attendance. The *mibo* advises *miro* and the people to be vigilant in case of a witch attack with an invisible arrow and if it makes him

unconscious. The *miros* should continue chanting and dancing till he regains consciousness.

As the chanting is initiated, the *mibo* communicates with some benevolent ancestral spirits such as *Gumin So:in* and *Epom*. They are kind by nature, always bless the family and are omnipotent. They protect *Mibos* against evil forces when communication is initiated with evil spirits. They try to help the *mibo* to communicate with the evil spirit by entering his body and talking to the evil spirit responsible for the sickness. According to informants, the soul of the *mibo* transmigrates for a short period with the benevolent spirits who take him to the land of spirits. This land exists on a supernatural plane with many villages of good and evil spirits. The benevolent spirits assist the *mibo* in locating the evil spirit responsible for a person's or family's disease and misfortune.

In case of an evil attack, the *mibo* falls unconscious among the crowd. Then the *mi:ros*, ask for the *Pahyoga apong*, the purest form of *apong* (traditional Mising rice beer) which is then sprinkled on the unconscious *mibo*. Then the people shout *VRROI! VRROI!* which forces the evil spirit to retreat due to the strength of the people's cooperation. The *mibo* regains consciousness and resumes his work. Then, the *Yakcha* is cleaned with the yolk of two chicken eggs and rice grains mixed with ginger water and *apong*. The *mibo* can only tell about the problems of someone's ancestral lineage of the household when he is delighted with the rituals of sacrifice before the *Mibo-Dagnam* commences. He can tell the names of ancestors of five generations of the family preparing for the *Mibo-Dagnam* and their ancestors' evil deeds or crimes. He can also tell of the evil deeds of the present generation, which cause others misfortunes and diseases that have occurred in the family.

While performing sacrifice rituals, patients and their families follow certain restrictions and taboos known as *Gena*. For example, females do not touch palm and banana trees in abandoned fields. Menstruating females are separated from the house. The members of the household observe *Gena* for two or three days. The *mibo* hangs bamboo flowers on the walls of victims' houses before the

performance. It is believed that the bamboo helps confiscate the evil spirit. According to Padun (2005), flowers picked from bamboo called *Nari* help the spirit called *Nari* (a spirit/god of disease) to communicate with the *mibo* as he wishes. *Nari* is believed to talk to birds and animals, helping the *mibo* find out the spirits hiding the patient's soul. It is believed that *mibo* does not pick flowers at the home where the *Gena* takes place since it is polluted. He collects the flowers from a neighbouring village. He takes them in his hands when he sings the *Ahbang* song. During *Mibo-Dagnam*, women at the site must wear cloth called *gale* or *ribi gacheng* around their waist.

The familiar spirit leaves the body of the *mibo* after the performance, and the *mibo* returns to his normal state. While searching for *yalo*, *Mibo* encounters a variety of detours and obstacles to his destination in the spirit world. However, with divine powers, his soul can fly like a bird in the sky, like a tiger in dense forests or a snake. He eventually reaches the largest lake called *Kahje Patang*. It is believed that the most substantial ghosts and demons (*ui*, *urom*) sometimes gather on the lake 'Patang' banks. The dead souls of animals and humans drink water from it. The biggest of all the ghosts gathered on the banks of the lake is called *Dahying Ani* (mother of spirits). When *mibo* reaches *Patang*, he tells her the cause of his arrival and sings the *Ahbangs* as a lullaby to satisfy her. When the 'mother' is pleased, he asks where the patient's *yalo* is.

Dachi piri-l-piri-l-payga
Dahchiki-likarim peril payga
Jemani karuna pibi-l payega.

The song roughly translates to, "Do you know who took a sick person's *yalo*? Please help me? I will offer you what you want or desire".

Mibo address her as *pagyega* (the responsible mother), and at the end of the song, *mibo* asks for the whereabouts of the *yalo*. He can find the *yalo* when *Dahying Ani* satisfied with his performance. She instructs the *mibo* to go back with the *yalo*. When he arrives at the place where the patient's *yalo* is, he can enter the place himself or pass the message to some

helpful spirit whether he gets the spirit or sends a message through another spirit. Finally, the demon who has taken away the *yalo* must respond. The soul of the patient may avoid the unfamiliar soul of the *mibo*. However, *mibo*'s soul convinces the patient's soul to return with him. At that time, the demon or evil spirit commanding the patient's soul relieves only if the *mibo* promises the offerings. The *mibo* reveals the promises made to the spirit upon regaining consciousness. He explains about offerings the demon wants. He describes what the spirit or demon is looking for. It could be a pair of pigs or poultry, specifically chicken. In chickens, the male should be a red-coloured cock or a white hen. Pigs should be white (*yegpung*) with black spots on the forehead (*tuppung*), white legs (*lapung*), folded ears (*ru:jeg*), short tail (*metung*), and white head (*gahpong*). After bringing the offerings, the family members make *Aagnam* (worship) in the name of that particular spirit and promise to worship it every three or five years. The *mibo* is called to officiate the ritual whenever they perform it. *Mibo* calls the patient's *yalo* by singing

Chidi Akchinna, Nam Bomi Ahji Chak yalo Bamnie
Attaku Nam Taku Gump:o Nam, Chil Tang,
Yegrak Yihpahtak Abila Nam Chil Yal Jangchak,
Jahbi Dunkuni YaloDurgam Dubi.
Dunkuni Chil Chidi Ajang Kamank Kabila Kochi
Primank Pubi Dunkuni, Cha Mui Ga Bala Dawa.

Translation:

Here, grandfather of the Bomi clan (if the spirit takes the *Yalo* of a member of the Bomi clan), a five-year-old male pig has been slaughtered for you today. We also serve *paro* *apong* (black ash wine) and ginger mixed with fish (seasoned with *apong*) prepared for you. You come and eat with great joy. We offer you your share. Come quickly. Let's get the *Yalo* back soon. I'm offering you a five-year-old pig, *apong* and fish. Come, come with joy.

On the day of the *Puja*, *mibo* sacrifices pigs in the name of the demon or spirit. On the day of the *puja*, pigs, chickens and *poro apang* (wine) are fed to the

patient. The pork feeding ritual is known as *josak*. The patient gets cured after eating the sacred food.

The next day, the *mibo* builds a small *chang* (raised platform) with the trunk of *Pi:ro*, a hardy pampass grass. He also builds a small ladder leading up to the *chang*. Then the *apong*, ginger and fish items are poured on the little ladder of the *chang ghar* and call the *yalo* of the patient again by singing as follows, which guarantees the permanent return of the *yalo*.

Umle a-ya-ma-l lob
Lob umle-a-ya-ma-l lob
Lomnaa Gitoku, nok legape
Ede toyala dung.

Translation:

“We satisfied you several times and please go away, release the yalo fully. Please release the Yalo, the family is eagerly waiting for the yalo to return, despite all the obstacles of the spirit world”.

When the evil spirit flies away and the *yalo* returns, a piece of white soft *Pi:ro* flower appears on the patient’s head. Then *mibo* holds it and puts a turban on the patient’s head with a cotton *japi* (traditional conical hat). After that, the *yalo* which had left the body of the patient completely retained.

Mising’s practice of *Marunaam* (witchcraft)

Belief in witches or spirits is central to tribal spiritual and moral life. Kuli (2014) wrote that it formed an integral part of the religious and cosmological world of the Misings. According to him “there is no genuine Mising who does not believe in witches” (Kuli, 2014, p. 83). Tribal communities believe that the world is teeming with disembodied spirits, much like a tree is full of leaves (Sinha, 2007). The core tenet of their religious belief system revolves around seeking assistance from benevolent spirits and harnessing control over malevolent spirits

through magic and exorcism. This belief system distinguishes between white magic, considered beneficial, and black magic, associated with evil. In tribal communities, the *mibo*, also known as the diviner or medicine man, employs his supernatural abilities to counteract the powers of witches.

The Misings folklore is significant in ordering social and economic relations and shaping their perceptions of health, disease, and medicine. For instance, in the *Robo-Nibo* folktale, both the characters are engaged in a dispute over property and *Banji-Bote* and *Dobam*, the brothers/characters, quarrel over a girl. The characters reflect human nature with feelings of jealousy, rage and revenge. There are parallels between these stories and the practices and belief systems of contemporary society. The belief in the usage of witchcraft to inflict harm and misery for the other with regard to property, love, jealousy, and revenge results in witch-hunts.

The Misings view *marunaam* (witchcraft) as a depraved practise. However, a few experts (*marune tani*) practice it. Anybody can use the services of a *marune-tani* to harm their enemies. Another name for the *marunaam* is *Butu onam* (Kuli, 2014; Payeng, 2014; Pegu, 2019). Mising community describes ‘witches’ as the ‘human embodiments of the evil eye’ meaning that they are ordinary humans who are capable of supernatural powers which involves raising and deploying of evil spirits (Kuli, 2014), or a wild ghost known as *butu* and keeps it at home like a pet in order to attack a person, potentially resulting in the latter’s death (Pegu, 2019, p. 271). Misings, believe that a witch rears an evil spirit, which makes him powerful and enables him to use on a target. The witches can cause harm to humans (through illnesses such as smallpox, cholera), crops and livestock. There is also a belief that *marune-tani*, the practitioner, is supposedly obligated to provide the spirit with a human soul or else the spirit would kill the practitioner.

The Misings believe that following the death of some individuals who experienced an early, unnatural, or accidental demise, the *urom* (soul) does not instantly go. These spirits still reside close to where they once lived in this world and are still hungry and thirsty. Whenever a family member dies unexpectedly or from unidentified illnesses, the family suspects the *marune-tani* of

conducting *marunaam* (Payeng, 2014). *Marune-tani*, according to the belief of the Misings, with the help of such an evil spirit, shoots an invisible arrow (*baan mara*) at a target by chanting a mantra. The *marunaam* process begins with such a magic spell. Then other mantras like *Tekeli baan* (causes a stomach ailment in which the sufferer's stomach swells up, giving the appearance of an earthen pot) and *Bayoo baan* (causes smallpox) are used. Misings believe that it is impossible to escape *Baan Mara*. It may lead to disease and a person's death, disputes within the family or neighbourhood, and the death of cattle. Only witch doctors (*mibo*) and witches can see the *baan* and help diagnose and cure it.

The performance

The Misings reside in a distinctive *taleng okum* or *chang ghar*, an elevated house constructed using bamboo stilts. The space below *taleng okum* is known as *kitik*, considered a family's private space. Entry into *kitik* is known as *kitik ginam*, which is restricted to family members. The *marunaam* is a secret procedure carried out in the dark, ideally on a new moon (*Amabhaisya*) night, which requires placing a talisman in the *kitik* precisely beneath the place where the target sleeps in the house. The *marune-tani* stealthily gathers a little portion of the target's material possessions, such as hair, nails, clothing, bed linens, and mosquito nets, and administers *sindoor* (red vermilion). They keep everything in a *tabeez* (amulet) and bury it in the *kitik*. Due to the proximity of the residences, inhabitants frequently interact with one another, making it easier to acquire every aspect of the target. According to some respondents, before executing *marunaam*, *marune-tani* puts a live fish in a pot with a secret spell in the victim's name and occasionally feeds it with contaminated food and drink. According to Anjali Daimari (2012), a similar type of custom exists among the Assamese Bodo people, where the witch (*diana*) inflicts injury using rituals, charms, and medications while also using the victim's hair, nails, and clothing (Daimari, 2012). *Marune-tani* gathers the soil left by the target's footsteps, bury the *tabeez* filled with the soil in the *kitik*, and performs a naked dance in a secret spot to boost the chances of success. Some think that nudist dance results from the performer's anxiety and relieves uncomfortable anxiety. Such internal anxieties what Goffman (1959:13) refers to as "defensive practices," a practice

that helps a person avoid the embarrassment by substituting contact and, more crucially, by safeguarding identity.

Marunaam is a phenomenon that is invoked to narrate misfortune by ascribing it to someone's evil effect, which may be either from inside or outside the community. Whenever a person is ill, they believe it as a witch's spell. If a woman is sterile, it is blamed on a witch. Whenever their cattle die, it is identified as witchcraft. If a plant does not bear green leaves or fruits, it is believed to be a result of witchcraft performance under such trees. The community identifies witchcraft as one of the significant reasons behind any misfortune. Thus, Mising's "construction of diseases or health and illness" is related to their belief system, particularly witchcraft. It is used against rivals, perceived oppressors, or to rouse the passion of love in the person who is the object of desire, to invoke the dead, or to cause the death of some loathsome person.

There is significant fear associated with *marunaam*. Even today, the community believes in the existence of evil spirits. They believe witches continuously engage in destroying life and property. The community is controlled by witch doctors who are projected as saviours of the community. It fulfils all the demands of a witch doctor, from offering money, rice, chicken, pigs, goats, and local brew—those who are accused of being witches. Thus, so-called witches are living under a cloud of continuous suspicion and fear. The next chapter will discuss this issue in detail.

Conclusion

The chapter is divided into two parts; the first part illustrates the types of spirits and witches, witchdoctors, and songs related to witchcraft. The second part of the chapter discussed the contemporary understanding and relevance of witchcraft in the Mising community. For the Mising's, the spirit world is separated into benevolent spirits (*agam uyus*) and malevolent spirits (*pomjur uyus*). The *agam uyus* are considered to be spirits of ancestors who protect their descendants. At the same time, the *pomjur uyus* are also ancestral spirits who

died of unnatural causes or due to witchcraft. *Pomjur uyus* are believed to be aggressive and inflict harm and devastation. The origin and genesis of the stories are traced back to the folk stories. The popular among them being the stories of brothers *Robo-Nibo*, *Banji Bote – Dobom*, *Ladang Bote*, these stories instances of dispute, enmity between people over tangible and intangible aspects of life.

This chapter has attempted to bring together traditional and contemporary aspects of Mising beliefs pertaining to witchcraft. The folklore is analysed and interpreted to connect the past with the current scenario. The chapter also discussed significant aspects related to witchcraft, such as, identification of an evil spirit (*Mibo-Dagnam*) and healing the victim by restoring the soul (*Yalo Gognam*). The causes for sustaining beliefs and the consequences are explained. Despite observable changes in other development aspects such as education and healthcare infrastructure, economic development, transportation and other communication facilities, the number of witchcraft and with-hunt cases reveals sustenance of such practices.

The tribal way of life is closely intertwined with nature, which sometimes serves as the root cause of belief in witches. The belief in witchcraft is so strong among tribal communities that no amount of reasoning can dissuade them from their beliefs, which often necessitate the murder of witches (Dalton, 1973; Man, 1983; Bodding, 1986; Sinha, 2007). The only solution is to take the help of the *ojhas* or *mibos*- who has the expertise to counteract the harmful effects of black magic and sorcery and find solutions. While the *ojhas* are projected as the protector of tribals, the witches are considered malignant creatures (Mishra, 2003; Sinha, 2007).

Chapter IV

Causes of Witchcraft Accusations and Status of Accuser and Accused

Background

The chapter focuses on the causes and consequences of witchcraft accusations. The social and economic status of the accuser and the accused are analysed to understand the social relations and to examine the impact on decisions of the traditional political council. The chapter delineates how a person can be victimised in the process of identifying a witch. The chapter examines how the accusations made by individuals, generally from a dominant clan, on other individuals, generally from a poor and low-status clan, invite the intervention of the collective to resolve the conflict.

Witchcraft Accusations in Sikari Gaon

This section presents case studies of male witches in Sikari Gaon, where 47 such cases have been identified. Some case studies have been discussed in detail to understand the nature of witchcraft accusations and the social, economic, and political status of accusers and the accused. As already mentioned in the second chapter, Sikari Gaon is divided into two areas: the western area, which has fertile land and is inhabited by the Chiru sub-clan, and the eastern area, which has sandy soil and is home to the Koktak sub-clan and other migratory clans such as the Yein, Mili. The western area is closer to the Brahmaputra River, which makes it more vulnerable to flooding during the monsoon season.

In July-August 2014, Sikari Gaon experienced severe flooding that affected the entire village. The flood waters destroyed livestock, crops, houses and infrastructure. Many villagers lost their belongings and sources of income. Some of them had to live on the roadside, which was one of the few places that were not submerged. As the flood waters receded at the end of August, waterborne diseases such as malaria spread among the villagers. The nearest Primary Health

Care Centre was 20 kilometres from the village, and the flood washed the road away. The only way to access medical services was by boat, but few villagers had boats. There was a *mibo* in Sikari Gaon, who was both the local priest and medicine man of the village, who tried to provide medicines and prayers to the sick villagers, but his efforts were not enough. Five people died in one day due to diseases.

The *Gam*, the village council head, took notice of the situation and convened a meeting with the council members; they discussed how to deal with the crisis and prevent such disasters in the future. In order to find out, the *Gam* and the council members consulted the *mibo*. The *mibo* said that he would perform *Mibo Dagnam*, a ritual to detect and punish witches who were believed to be responsible for the calamity. The ritual was scheduled to be held in the *murong okum*, the community hall, in the presence of the entire community. The *mibo* gave a list of requirements for the ritual to the council, which included a black male goat, a red cock, five earthen pots of *apong* (a local alcoholic drink), one big sack of rice, betel nut and leaves, 5 kilos of pulses, 10 litres of mustard oil, turmeric and salt.

During the ritual, the *mibo* identified several people as witches who belonged to the Koktak sub-clan. The *mibo* ordered the village council to bring them to the *murong okum* and to remove the witches from their bodies. The accused were made to stand separately. The *mibo* commanded them to confess or face punishment. Some confessed, but most of them did not. The ones who did not confess were tortured physically and mentally. They were forced to drink urine, faeces and sewage water and were starved for more than two days. Under duress, they finally confessed that they were the reason for people's deaths and diseases. The *mibo* then let them go on the condition that they pay 5001 rupees to the village council within two days. After three days, they were ritually purified in public by the *mibo*, who declared that their bodies were witch-free.

A week later, the police arrived at the village and started investigating the incident. However, none of the villagers cooperated with them. The police

randomly arrested some people but could not gather evidence against them, so they had to release them.

An example

Babakanta, a 45-year-old resident of Sikari Gaon, belongs to the Koktak sub-clan and has a tall and fair complexion. He was a victim of a witch-hunt that took place in the village. He migrated to Sikari Gaon from Bekele Gaon 21 years ago with his father Chandra Kanta, who also faced witchcraft accusations in the past. They left their original village due to severe soil erosion that affected their livelihood. Babakanta lives in a dilapidated house made of mud and leaves with his wife and daughter. His daughter is pursuing a bachelor's degree. His economic condition is deplorable, and he struggles to make ends meet. Babakanta had two marriages in his life. His first wife was infertile and could not bear any children even after 12 years of marriage. His family members persuaded him to marry another woman who could give him an heir. He eloped with a woman named Maloti from a nearby village with the help of a friend. However, Maloti's family was unhappy with this arrangement and came to Sikari Gaon to confront Babakanta. They claimed that Babakanta had used *muini baan*, a magic spell, to bewitch Maloti and make her run away with him. They also cited the previous incident of Chandra kanta being accused of witchcraft as evidence of Babakanta's involvement in sorcery. The villagers gathered to settle the dispute and decided that Maloti should return to her family and break off the marriage with Babakanta.

Babakanta and Maloti's love story did not end with the villagers' decision. Maloti ran away from her home again a few days later and rejoined Babakanta. Her family finally accepted their marriage and let them live in peace. They enjoyed a happy married life until 2014 when tragedy struck. Maloti died in her sleep one night without any apparent cause. Her family suspected she had been killed by Babakanta's witchcraft, which they believed he had inherited from his father. They reminded the villagers of the past accusations against Chandra Kanta and demanded justice for Maloti's death. With the help of *mibo*, the village council accused Babakanta of being a witch and blamed him for his

wife's death. He tortured him and coerced him to confess his guilt. Babakanta, already grief-stricken and traumatised, gave in to the pressure and admitted to killing his wife through witchcraft.

This incident illustrates the complex interplay of socio-cultural, religious and political factors that contribute to the persistence of accusations. Such accusations can be invoked whenever required by the dominant clans. In this context, the *mibo*, who belongs to the Chiru clan, exploited his influence and power to manipulate the villagers' beliefs and fears and target his clan rivals, the Koktak members, as witches. The case study also shows how the traditional village council failed to protect the rights and dignity of the accused men and instead sanctioned their persecution and violence.

Babakanta, a member of the Koktak sub-clan and one of a victim of witch-hunt, deviated from the norms of his gender and society. Babakanta was poor, childless, and married a second time, though the marital relatives opposed that marriage. These factors made him more susceptible to suspicion and scapegoating, especially when his father was famous for being involved in magical practices. The suspicions became more prominent after the death of his wife Maloti, and Babakanta was believed to be practising witchcraft/ *butu onam* (black magic) like his father.

This incident exemplifies the concept of dual deviance. At the tribal level, the *mibo*, acting as a moral entrepreneur, labelled the accused men witches. The Koktak Panging members, mostly village people, were the victims of the witch's evil spell. The moral entrepreneur and his followers, including other villagers and traditional council members, believed that punishing the witches through physical torture was necessary to restore peace in the village and combat the epidemics. They considered the witch-hunt essential.

At another level, the police personnel viewed the witch-hunt as a crime. They regarded the *mibo* and his followers as co-conspirators in executing this crime. The police, who act as moral entrepreneurs at this level, made arrests to restore

balance and order in society at large. Witch hunts are considered cases of homicide that call for punishment of the guilty.

Illness stigma: An example

In late February 2016, Munu, a primary school teacher and a village council member from Sikari Gaon, faced a crisis. His 16-year-old daughter suffered from severe abdominal pain and fever for over ten days, and his livestock were dying mysteriously. He suspected witchcraft was behind his troubles and sought the advice of a *mibo*, who lived in Balijan, a village 13 km away. The *mibo* performed a ritual and confirmed that Munu's family was under the influence of a male witch from Sikari Gaon, who had tried to cast a love spell on Munu's daughter but failed and caused her illness instead. The *mibo* claimed he could reverse the spell and identify the witch if he visited Munu's house.

Munu returned home and consulted his family and the elders of the village. They agreed to invite the *mibo* to expose the witch and end the curse. The *mibo* arrived and inspected Munu's house, describing the witch as a middle-aged unmarried man but not revealing his name. He then urged the village council to summon the witch and dig out the amulet from under the *chang ghar*, saying it was the only way to save Munu's daughter.

The *mibo* identified the witch as Krishnakanta, a Sikari Gaon resident and a Koktak sub-clan member. He had long hair and a white spot in one eye, which distinguished him from the other villagers. He was known by the villagers as 'Doctor Babu' because he was the first person to whom the villagers turned for medical help, although he was not a qualified doctor. He claimed he had done a pharmaceutical course, but some villagers doubted his credentials. He had given some tablets and a health check-up to Munu's daughter when she first fell ill, but her condition worsened afterwards. Munu suspected that Krishnakanta had harmed his daughter with witchcraft, and his suspicion was confirmed when the *mibo* described the witch's appearance. Munu was convinced that Krishnakanta was the culprit.

Krishnakanta was brought to Munu's house, where 17 persons, including the *mibo* and the council members, surrounded him. The *mibo* interrogated him in front of the whole community. "Where did you bury the *tabeez*?", he asked in an authoritative voice. "Which *tabeez* are you talking about? I haven't buried any *tabeez* anywhere." Krishnakanta replied, bewildered. The *mibo* repeated his question several times, but Krishnakanta denied any involvement in witchcraft. The *mibo* then started to flog him mercilessly. Krishnakanta screamed in pain and pleaded with the *mibo* to stop. When he could not endure the torture any longer, he agreed to show where the *tabeez* was buried and the *mibo* stopped flogging him. He pointed to a spot under Munu's *chang ghar*. A few men began to dig up that spot, but they could not find any *tabeez* there.

The community was divided in their opinions about Krishnakanta. Some believed he was a witch who had tried to harm Munu's family, and they supported the *mibo*'s actions. They wanted Krishnakanta to confess and face punishment for his crimes. They also feared he might cast spells on them or their loved ones. Others doubted the *mibo*'s claims and felt sorry for Krishnakanta. They thought that he was a victim of false accusations and unjust violence. They wondered why the *mibo* could not find any evidence of the *tabeez*, and they questioned his credibility and motives.

The *mibo* announced that he would purify Krishnakanta by giving him a ritual bath, and he demanded some ingredients from the village council for the ceremony. However, before the ritual occurred, Krishnakanta escaped from the village. He feared facing humiliation and violence from the *mibo* and his supporters. He stayed away from Sikari Gaon for six months, hoping the villagers would forget the incident and leave him alone. When he returned, he changed his occupation and opened a grocery shop before his house. He no longer treats any patients. He wanted to avoid any suspicion or conflict with the community.

This case reveals how illness stigma and witchcraft accusations are intertwined. Illness stigma refers to people's negative attitudes or beliefs towards a person or group of people with a health condition, which can result in social disapproval,

discrimination, isolation and reduced opportunities for them (Goffman, 1963). Sometimes, illness stigma can trigger witchcraft accusations, especially when the illness is misunderstood, feared or attributed to supernatural causes. People may seek help from traditional healers or witch doctors instead of modern medical professionals. This can hinder them from getting proper treatment and expose them to harmful practices. It can also reinforce the stigma and discrimination that they face from society (Stangl et al., 2019).

In this case, a teenage girl suffers from severe abdominal pain and fever for more than ten days, and her father suspects that witchcraft is the cause of her illness. He consults a *mibo*, a priest who claims that a male witch from the same village has tried to cast a magic spell on the girl but failed and caused her illness instead. The *mibo* identifies the witch as Krishnakanta, a middle-aged unmarried man known as ‘Doctor Babu’ by the villagers.

Krishnakanta becomes a convenient scapegoat in this situation because of his occupation and his physical appearance. His work as a compounder of allopathic medicine makes him an outsider and a suspect in the eyes of the villagers who rely on traditional healing methods. His long hair and the white spot in one eye make him stand out from the other villagers and mark him as different and deviant. His frequent visits to the girl’s family make him an object of envy and suspicion. The girl’s illness is seen as a stigma, a sign of an evil curse inflicted by him, who is interested in her. Thus, Krishnakanta is assumed to be the apparent culprit who harmed the girl and the community.

Blood-stained Dhoti: Suspicion and accusations

Maneswar, a 35-year-old farmer from Sikari Gaon, had been suffering from haemorrhoids for several months. He had tried various medical and folk treatments, but none had helped him heal, as he had to work hard every day to support his family. His wife was disabled, and he had two children to feed. He also owned a small farm and a new house built on his land.

One day in the autumn of 2020, after the monsoon floods had receded, he rowed a boat from his village to Kaniyajaan. He noticed that his white dhoti was stained with blood from his rectum, a sign of his worsening condition. His bleeding also caught the eye of some of his neighbours, who belonged to a different clan. One of them Kalinath, who belongs to the Chiru sub-clan, had a long-standing dispute with him over land. He was jealous and resentful of Maneswar's new house, which he claimed was built on his land. They also envied him for getting a house under the PMAY scheme of the government, which he had not received.

Kalinath seized this opportunity to accuse him of witchcraft, saying that he was harbouring a witch inside him and that he was bleeding because he was drinking the blood of sacrificed animals. He spread these rumours among the villagers, hoping to isolate him, take his property, or drive him away. Kalinath complained to the village council and asked them to punish him. The council brought a *mibo*, a ritual expert, from a faraway village to test Maneswar. The *mibo* did some ceremonies at the community hall and said that Maneswar had a witch inside him. Maneswar disagreed, but the *mibo* made him admit it. The terrified villagers asked *mibo* for a solution. Then *mibo* claimed he could exorcise the witch on a new moon night by sacrificing a chicken, putting it in a pot, and throwing it into the Subansiri river. He also gave Maneswar an amulet to wear around his waist for protection. However, the ritual failed to cure Maneswar's haemorrhoids, and he still bleed from his rectum. This raised suspicions among some villagers that the witch had not departed. Maneswar is healthy after consulting a doctor and works hard in the fields all day.

The case study of Maneswar illustrates how illness/disease can be exploited as a pretext for witchcraft accusations and persecution among the Mising community. Maneswar, who suffered from haemorrhoids, was falsely accused of harbouring a witch inside him by his envious neighbour, Kalinath, who had a land dispute with him. The village council, influenced by superstition and ignorance, hired a *mibo*, to perform an exorcism on Maneswar, which involved animal sacrifice, amulet-wearing, and a monetary fine. However, this did not cure Maneswar's condition, nor did it dispel the suspicions of some villagers. Maneswar was able

to recover only after seeking medical help from a doctor. This case shows how piles disease (haemorrhoids), a common and treatable ailment, can be stigmatised and misunderstood as a sign or consequence of witchcraft among the Mising. People with piles may be subjected to violence, discrimination, or ostracism by their accusers, who may have ulterior motives or false beliefs about the disease. They may also be denied access to proper health care or justice by the traditional authorities, who may rely on ineffective or harmful rituals to deal with the alleged witchcraft. Witch hunting can thus be seen as a form of social oppression and injustice that violates the human rights and dignity of the victims (PLD, 2014).

Unrequited love: A case study of conflict and accusations

Gopal was in his early 20s when he was accused of practising *marunaam*, an incident in 2018-19 in Sikari Gaon. The seeds of his persecution were sown when he fell in love with Menaam, a lass of the same village. Menaam, who was initially uninterested in him, soon began to reciprocate his love, and both started meeting secretly since their families were not on good terms. The residents of Sikari Gaon believed that Gopal's grandfather was involved in *marunaam*, which he learned from a faraway place called Chabjali in Bangalmora, and there were also allegations that he got one of Menaam's uncles killed through his *marunaam*, which was claimed to be the reason behind the animosity between the two families. Meanwhile, after Gopal started dating Menaam, one fine day when Gopal's sister went for a bath in the river, she was harassed and beaten by some relatives of Menaam. This incident further worsened the already strained relations between the two families. Soon, Menaam's family learned that she was dating Gopal, and they warned her against talking to him since they would never marry her into a 'witch's family'.

One night, accompanied by his friend Heeren, Gopal sneaked in to meet Menaam at the *Kitik* of her *Chang Ghar*. As they were talking, one of Menaam's uncles saw them. Soon, a rumour began circulating in the village that Gopal had been practising *marunaam* to get everyone in Menaam's family killed. Menaam's family claimed that Gopal entered their *Kitik* to bury a *tabeez* in the

soil to get them killed. The next day, a *kebang* (village meeting) was held in the village, and Gopal was made to appear before the villagers, who began interrogating him. “Where did you bury the *tabeez*? If you don’t want to lose your life then dig it out quickly”, said a few of them to Gopal. He was repeatedly threatened and doused in petrol. He tried his best to prove his innocence by claiming that he went there to meet Menaam and not to bury any *tabeez*. “Menaam does not love you, so who invited you, and why did you enter our *Kitik* in the middle of the night?”, interjected a man from Menaam’s family. When Menaam was asked by the members of village council if she loved Gopal, she straight away replied a ‘no’ and denied all claims made by Gopal regarding his relationship with her. Gopal was sure that Menaam was forced by her family to speak so. He was questioned repeatedly in the *kebang*, but his answer remained the same. He was punished brutally, and when he could no longer bear it, he gave in and accepted the allegations against him. Gopal was ordered to leave the village immediately.

This case study shows how romantic relationships can be accused of witchcraft for various reasons, depending on the historical, cultural and social context. The accused, Gopal, a young man, had a grandfather who was reputed to be a witch rearer. Gopal fell in love with a girl, Menam, from a rival family with a history of conflict with his grandfather over witchcraft. Gopal was caught entering Menam’s *kitik ginam*, a cultural space for romance. The girl’s family accused him of using witchcraft to seduce Menam, who denied having any interest in him. The village council banished Gopal from the village as a punishment. It illustrates how some romantic relationships can be seen as deviant or immoral by others in terms of relationships that cross social boundaries or challenge dominant values, such as different status, clan/caste, race or religion, or unconventional roles or practices, and face accusations of witchcraft or the devil. Gopal’s narrative describes the complexity of the phenomenon. Identifying a *marune-tani* (witch) operates outside the community’s belief system. The family background, economic conditions, and power relations between the clans and sub-clans are vital in identifying the witches. The social and economic status of the accused and the accuser are crucial in accepting or rejecting *marunaam* allegations and punishing decisions. The village council

meeting, the arguments, and the decisions reveal the status differences and power relations in the Mising community.

People who are accused of witchcraft are often from impoverished and marginalised communities and rarely receive support from village councils. When community tensions rise, some people attempt to channel evil power for their benefit. The accusers are usually those with whom they already had strained relationships (Chaudhuri, 2013). In this case, when the victim entered Menam's *Kitik* late at night, the severed relations with Menam's family resulted in the charges of witchcraft. The socio-economic position of Menam's family played a significant role in determining the perpetrator. Menam's family dominates the village and owns most of the land. They frequently lend land to the tenants of the village for farming. Hence, they receive unwavering support from the majority of the village.

On the other hand, Gopal's family has two acres of fertile land, which is not enough for his family. Menam's family also plays an active role in village politics; some senior family members are village council members. This significantly impacts council decisions, too. They can identify a *marune-tani* of their choice and punish him/her. Menam's family members could not accept their daughter's relationship with a person from an impoverished family. Hence, they have used their position in the village to victimise Gopal. When Menam's uncle passed away unexpectedly, her family blamed Gopal's family, which marked the beginning of their enmity. Gopal's involvement in a romantic relationship with Menam escalated the tensions between both families. They accused Gopal because Menam resisted withdrawing from the relationship. Gopal's family's reputation as witches strengthens their charge. The *kebang*, the traditional village council, has not allowed Gopal to prove his innocence. Gopal and his family could not get support from the village community due to their lower status. As a result, Gopal and his family were isolated and brutally attacked at the council meeting.

Attributes of the primary victim

The criteria used for profiling the 47 primary victims in the case studies include age, marital status, clan/group identity, economic and educational status, each of which is set out in a separate section below. The major trends that appear about each comprise the attributes that define a typical primary victim- in other words; these attributes render a person more vulnerable to being targeted as a witch.

Age of the victims

The victim's age reflects his status and role in his family and society, which may influence his likelihood of being targeted by witchcraft accusations. The table below summarises the data on age and shows the dominant trends for the most vulnerable groups of men.

Table 4.1: Age group and number of male victims

Sl. No.	Age group	Number of victims (%)
1.	10-20	3 (7.24)
2.	20-30	21 (46.37)
3.	30-40	10 (23.19)
4.	50-60	13 (20.29)
5.	60-70	0
6.	70-80	0
	Total	47 (100)

The table reveals that men aged 20-60 are at risk of being accused of witchcraft, but the 20-30 age group is the most affected, accounting for more than 44% of the cases (21 out of 47). Most of these cases relate to conflicts due to romantic relationships, such as illicit or unrequited love. The data also includes three cases of victims aged 10-20, but two were 18-19 years old, involved in love relationships. The other vulnerable groups are men aged 30-40 and 50-60, comprising 10 and 13 cases, respectively, and mostly accused of witchcraft due to property issues. These men usually have a significant position in their household and community. Notably, the researcher found no instance of

victimisation in the age groups of 60-70 and 70-80 years. However, the researcher cannot conclude that this age group is not vulnerable since the population of this group is likely to be low on account of increased mortality among individuals of these age groups.

Marital status of the victims

The marital status of the victims in the compiled data is linked to their age. Out of the 47, 19 victims were married, and 23 were unmarried. The table below shows the distribution of the victims into the categories of single, married, and widower.

Table 4.2: Marital Status of Victims

Sl. No.	Marital status of the victim	Male
1.	Single	23 (48.93)
2.	Married	19 (40.42)
3.	Widower	5 (10.63)
	Total	47 (100)

The data shows that most of the victims were unmarried; 23 out of 47 men were single when they were accused of witchcraft. There were 19 cases where the men were married and only five cases where the victims were widowers. Although only five of the victims were widowers, it must be noted that the social stigma attached to widowers in large parts of India also applies in the context of Assam and, in particular, in the communities of the victims.

The most striking aspect of the findings of the victims who were unmarried and were in the age group between 20-30 years was that the men were about to get married before the victimisation took place. They were targeted because of pre-existing conflicts with their relatives or other community members or jealousy over their romantic relationships before their families arranged their marriage. Indeed, in all the cases of unmarried victims, witchcraft accusations occurred when these men were found in the *kitik* (under *taleng okum*) of the girls' house whom they loved and wanted to marry.

Group identity of the victims

In Mising villages, the social ties woven are based on the clan system. The relations between different clans and sub-clans in the village and the resultant power dynamics often influence decisions concerning village matters. As mentioned earlier, in Sikari Gaon, there are four clans: Panging, Mili, Taye, and Yein. Panging is the dominant clan. There are two Panging sub-clans - Chiru and Koktak. Most of the victims of the village belong to the Koktak Panging sub-clan (34 out of 47) followed by the Chiru sub clan (7) and Yein (3). It is significant to have the majority of the victims from the Koktak. It is discussed in 5th chapter.

Table 4.3: Number of victims according to clan

Sl. No.	Panging		Mili	Yein	Taye
	Koktak	Chiru			
1.	34	7	2	3	1

Economic condition of the victims

The economic condition of the victims is one of the most significant aspects. In a rural context, it is challenging to differentiate between an individual's assets and those of the family, particularly in joint families where members share space and live together. Most victims were not employed or individual property owners. Therefore, household income is the only indicator to assess their economic condition. However, instances where victims were employed or owned property have also been mentioned. It is important to note that victimisation inevitably leads to loss of property.

Ownership of land

The cultivable land is one of the significant indicators of prosperity. The land ownership of the victims is shown in the table below.

Table 4.4: Land ownership of victims

S.N.	Land Size	Nos.
1.	Landless	34 (72.34)
2.	0-2 <i>bigha</i>	10 (21.27)
3.	3-4 <i>bigha</i>	2 (4.25)
4.	Above 5 <i>bigha</i>	1 (2.12)
Total		47 (100)

The economic status of victims in the data can be broadly catalogued as those of victims with landholdings. However, higher land ownership does not make them rich.

The data shows that out of 47, 34 victims are landless, lost their land in river erosion, and were using encroached land temporarily (i.e. land not registered in their name). Only one victim owned between 5 and above *bigha* land as inheritance after his father's death, which is not too large for a family whose primary source of livelihood is cultivation. The rest of the victims were all with varying quantities of land. Amongst the landholdings group, a few have a reasonable landholding between 3 to 5 *bigha* land, and others have marginal holdings of between 1-2 *bigha*.

Livestock

The data indicates that most of the victims owned small livestock, comprising cattle, goats and poultry, with five having no livestock. The largest ownership of livestock consisted of three cows, six hens, and one pig. The other seven victims owned three ducks, two bullocks, and a pig. The remaining victims and their families owned a much smaller number of animals or none. In most cases, livestock was not the primary source of income for families. Instead, it served as a supplement to the household's nutritional needs and enabled them to generate a small income by selling dairy produce.

Material possessions

The table below illustrates the types of vehicles owned by the victims and their families, which reflect their low socio-economic status. Out of 47 victims, more than half (27) owned no vehicle, while the rest had only basic modes of transport such as bicycles and motorcycles. Only 12 victims owned a bicycle, 5 owned a motorcycle, and 3 owned both.

Table 4.5: Mode of transport owned by victims

Bicycle	Motorcycle/bike	Both	Nothing possess
12	5	3	27

Besides livestock and vehicles, some victims had other properties, such as a weaving loom or a pucca well. Other forms of ownership included betel gardens or a fishery.

In terms of the living conditions of the victims, most of their houses were *taleng okum* or kutcha houses before their victimisation, with 17 victims living in pucca houses before their victimisation. Of these, 14 victims living in pucca accommodation were constructed under the Prime Minister Awas Yojana (PMAY), and three victims owned their accommodation with their expenses. In addition, the 36 victims who reside in the *taleng okum*, and one of the victims who lived in thatched house lived in deplorable conditions even before their victimisation.

Occupation

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the village communities in Assam. The Mising tribe are the original inhabitants of Majuli and depend on agriculture and fishing for their livelihood. Erosion by the river Brahmaputra has destroyed their farmlands, fishing grounds, and homes and forced them to migrate to other places or live in refugee settlements. According to Sahay and Roy (2017),

between 2008 and 2012, more than 10,000 families of the Mising tribe were affected by river erosion in Majuli. Many of them lost their land rights and became landless labourers, working on the land of the dominant Assamese community on a shared agriculture basis (Sahay, 2023). The data shows that most victims were landless labourers (34 out of 47). Most victims' families were also engaged in non-agricultural economic pursuits and employed in temporary casual labour. Their low income and status made them more susceptible to witchcraft accusations and less able to defend themselves against the allegations from the accusers, who had more land and power in the village.

Table 4.6: Occupation of the victims

Sl. No.	Occupation	Male
1.	Landless labourer	34
2.	Fishmonger	2
3.	Medical compounder	1
4.	farmer	3
5.	Livestock seller	2
6.	Teacher	2
7.	Boat builders	1
8.	Shop keeper	2
	Total	47

Most victims supplemented their household income by selling fish, livestock, and other farm products, like betel nuts, seasonal fruits, vegetables, or forest products, like firewood and straw. Two victims work as shopkeepers; a single victim is involved in boat-making to generate his household income. Some landless labourers are also involved in undertaking contractual farming with owners (adhikheti). Three victims have land and primarily depend upon agricultural activities and selling farm products like mustard seeds, black lentils, sugarcane, and vegetables like garlic, potato and tomato. In addition, as reflected in data, it will be exciting that some government employees, such as teacher, medical compounder, are also primary victims of witchcraft accusations.

Education qualification

The data on the educational status of the victims is dismal, with 35 out of 47 victims in the case studies having received no formal education. There is a lack of formal education among the victims of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting. Such people are more vulnerable because they lack the awareness and education to challenge the false allegation or seek legal help. They also face stigma and ostracism from their communities, who believe in the power of witchcraft and fear its consequences. The accusers gained attention and power by playing on the fears and prejudices of their community, who believed in the devil and his influence on human affairs. Illiterate people are also more likely to believe in witchcraft and accuse others of it because they lack the scientific knowledge and rational thinking to explain natural phenomena or diseases. They may resort to witchcraft to cope with uncertainty, insecurity, or suffering. This may also be influenced by religious beliefs or cultural traditions sanctioning witchcraft as a valid practice or a source of evil.

In the data, only one instance of highly educated individuals is present in the village communities where targeting and victimisation occurred. Although it is evident that all victims are characterised by a lack of formal education, establishing a plausible connection between the denial of education and victimisation remains a challenge.

Table 4.7: Educational Status of the Victims

Sl. No.	Educational background of the victims	Nos.
1.	Illiterate	35 (74.46)
2.	Up to primary	6 (12.76)
3.	Up to 10 th	3 (6.38)
4.	Up to HS	2 (4.25)
5.	Graduate	1 (2.12)
Total		47 (100)

The attributes defining the victims reflect a combination of individual, social and economic characteristics that increase vulnerability to being labelled as a witch.

Men emerge as the primary targets of witchcraft accusations when they are in the middle and above middle age categories. Most victims are in subsisting pre-marriages, were about to get married and were targeted because of previously occurred conflict with neighbours and villagers and jealousy due to the developments connected with their marriage.

The following tables, in the next sub section, deal with the accusers. The accusers are typically the individuals who make the accusations of witchcraft against the accused.

Accusers in witchcraft accusation

For this study, the accuser is defined as the person who accuses or labels the victim as a witch, regardless of the reasons for targeting. The accuser could be a *mibo* or a village member. This part contextualises the accusers' social and economic backgrounds and their relationship with the victims to better comprehend the motivations for targeting, which is investigated.

Relationship between the accuser and the accused

According to the data, the accusers were known to the victims in most cases documented. They were either close to the victims or had familial relations with them.

Table 4.8: Relationship of the accuser to the victim

Sl. No.	Relation to the accused	No. of Accusers		
		Total	Male	Female
1.	Family member/ relative	13	11	2
2.	Neighbor	17	14	3
3.	Friends/co-workers	5	5	0
4.	Village member	10	8	2
5.	Outsider of the village	1	1	0
6.	No relation	1	1	0
	Total	47	40	7

The above table shows that neighbours are the most common instigators, followed by relatives, friends, or co-workers. In 17 of the 47 cases, the main instigator was a victim's neighbour, with 14 males and two females involved. This number is closely followed by relatives who instigated the victimisation. In 13 of the 47 cases, the victims of witch hunting were related to their accusers through marriage. In the remaining cases, ten accusers were village members, and 5 were friends and co-workers. The proximity in relationship and location between the victims and the accusers also indicates a close social and economic relationship, which could lead to competition in some cases, resulting in conflict.

Role of *Mibo* or local healer

Mibos, in addition to the main accusers described above, are known to sometimes lead and, at times, promote the allegation of witchery, which frequently heralds the commencement of physical violence and aggressive victimisation.

Table 4.9: Mibo's involvement in identifying witches

Sl. No.	Role of <i>Mibo</i>	No. of cases
1.	Involvement of <i>mibo</i> (who identify the witches)	47
2.	With trial or village meeting held for resolution	35
3.	No trial held prior to the hunt	12

This data suggests that the *mibo* played a crucial role in identifying and labelling the victims as witches according to the cultural norms in all 47 cases. In 35 cases, a witch trial was held before the resolution, while in 12 cases, no trial took place, and the *mibo* himself carried out the punishment. In addition, in all the cases, an accuser other than *mibo* identifies a witch as responsible for his family's misfortunes.

Sex of the accuser

According to the data, men were not the only ones who instigated and perpetrated witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting. Women were also involved in the victim's targeting in a few cases. Although there were fewer cases in which the accusers were primarily female (9 out of 47), there were several cases involving both men and women. In the majority of cases, women joined men as secondary instigators.

Group/clan identity of the accusers

The case studies gathered by the researcher do reveal the accusers' group identities, i.e. clan. However, in the case of accusers who were members of the victims' familial circle, it can be deduced that the former belonged to the same group.

In Sikari Gaon, most of the 24 accusers are from Chiru, a sub-clan of Panging. Out of 47 cases, 13 accusers are victims' close kin group, and 17 accusers are neighbours. Five accusers are friends and co-workers. This allows for discernible community dynamics, reveals social group differences and conflict, and results in victimisation and witch-hunting.

Economic condition of the accusers

Many cases reveal that the victim's economic status and differences were insignificant enough to cause the targeting. However, material interests may have played a role in most cases. Thirty-one out of the 47 cases suggest that the accusers are wealthier than the victims. The victim and accusers were on economic parity in two cases. In the 19 cases where the accusers appeared to be much better off economically than the victims, they either possessed vast tracts of land, up to 40 *bighas* or had more cattle, vehicles and better dwelling conditions than the victims while having identical property holdings. There were fewer examples when the victims were better situated financially. Only in four

cases the victims had more assets than the accusers. Furthermore, in those cases, the victims possess more land than the accusers.

Factors trigger accusations

This section discusses the causes of witchcraft accusations concerning the socio-cultural and economic factors that shape the dynamics of witch hunting. It acknowledges that the prevailing belief systems and superstitions of the communities provide a legitimising framework for accusing and persecuting alleged witches. However, it also examines the underlying conflicts and tensions between the accusers and the victims that often trigger or exacerbate the accusations. Moreover, it explores how systemic deprivations, such as the marginalisation of certain clan members from village councils, denial of access to communal resources, and lack of adequate infrastructure and services, contribute to the vulnerability and scapegoating of specific individuals and their associates. Additionally, it discusses how environmental stress is a significant factor that triggers witchcraft accusations, as it creates conditions of scarcity, insecurity and uncertainty that increase the likelihood of people attributing their hardships and calamities to the malevolent actions of others and resorting to supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. It illustrates this argument with the case of Sikari Gaon. This village has experienced erosion, isolation and displacement due to environmental degradation, and shows how these factors have influenced witchcraft accusations among the Misings community. Therefore, it offers a complex and nuanced understanding of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves individual, interpersonal, structural, and environmental dimensions.

Geographical isolation

Geographical isolation limits the exposure and access to alternative sources of knowledge and explanations for natural or social phenomena. People who live in isolated areas may rely more on traditional beliefs and practices, including witchcraft, to make sense of their environment and cope with their challenges (Hutton, 2004). Geographical isolation can create a sense of insecurity and

vulnerability among people who face threats from nature, such as diseases, disasters, or predators. People who live in isolated areas may resort to witchcraft accusations to express their fears and anxieties or to protect themselves from perceived enemies or dangers. It can foster a strong sense of identity and solidarity among people with a common culture, history, or religion. People who live in isolated areas may use witchcraft accusations to reinforce their social norms and values or to exclude and punish those who deviate from them or belong to different groups.

Regarding connectivity, Majuli and Sikari Gaon are accessible only by ferries from the city of Jorhat, which take about an hour to reach the island. There are no bridges or roads connecting Majuli to the mainland. The ferry service is often disrupted by bad weather, low water levels or technical issues. These affect the mobility and accessibility of the people living in Majuli, especially during emergencies or disasters. Another issue is that Majuli needs more basic infrastructure and amenities such as electricity, water supply, health care, education and communication. The island has only one hospital and a few primary health centres that must be more staffed and equipped. The literacy rate in Majuli is 75%, which is lower than the state average of 85%. The internet connectivity and mobile network could be better and more reliable.

Erosion and displacement

Erosion and displacement can create environmental and economic stress for communities, leading them to seek scapegoats for their misfortunes. Witchcraft accusations can serve as a way of blaming others for natural disasters, crop failures, diseases, or poverty. It can disrupt the social fabric and cohesion of communities, weakening the bonds of trust and cooperation among people. Witchcraft accusations can reflect the fear and suspicion that arise from social fragmentation and isolation. Erosion and displacement can expose people to different cultures and beliefs, creating tensions and conflicts between groups. Witchcraft accusations can be used as a tool of discrimination and persecution against minorities, migrants, or outsiders who are seen as threatening or incompatible with the dominant norms. Erosion and displacement can affect the

identity and status of individuals, especially those who are marginalised or vulnerable. Witchcraft accusations can be motivated by envy, resentment, or greed towards those who have more resources or power or by hostility, contempt, or fear towards those who have less.

Due to its geographical location in Sikari Gaon, natural disasters, flooding, drought, and erosion have displaced many families residing near the flood-prone areas. Interestingly, most of the victims of witchcraft accusations are landless poor who had to bear the brunt of flooding, erosion and ultimately the complete loss of source(s) of livelihood and sustenance. The increased influx of the affected poor landless families towards newer, different inhabited places within the region is followed by conflict over the sharing of resources.

Majuli is a river island that is constantly losing its land area due to the floods and erosion caused by the Brahmaputra River. In the 1790s, the island covered an area of 1300 square kilometres, but by 2020, it had shrunk to 352 square kilometres. Many villages and habitats have been washed away by the river over the years, displacing thousands of people and threatening their livelihoods, creating a sense of insecurity and desperation. Displacement can create psychological stress, social disruption and economic insecurity, which may increase the likelihood of witchcraft accusations as a way of coping with the loss and finding scapegoats. People who fear witchcraft may avoid social interactions and exchanges with others whom they distrust or fear being harmed by. This may reduce the opportunities for cooperation, mutual support and collective action essential for social and economic development (Gershman, 2016). In addition to the exposure to drought and crop failures due to changing weather correlated with witchcraft beliefs, consistent with evidence that weather shocks are essential triggers of witchcraft accusations. In Majuli, where agriculture is the primary source of livelihood, droughts and floods can cause severe losses and hardships for the farmers, who may resort to witchcraft accusations to vent their frustration and anger (Behringer, 1999; Parida et al., 2018).

Unemployment and poverty

Unemployment and poverty can create frustration and resentment among people who struggle to meet their basic needs and aspirations. Witchcraft accusations and witch-hunts can serve as a way of venting anger and aggression towards those who are perceived as more successful or privileged or as a way of competing for scarce resources or opportunities (Miguel, 2005). Unemployment and poverty can reduce the access and quality of education and health care for people who live in deprived conditions. It can undermine the social capital and cohesion of communities that face economic hardship and insecurity. Witch-hunt can indicate the breakdown of trust and cooperation among people who are suspicious and fearful of each other or the erosion of social norms and values that encourage violence and discrimination.

Majuli has a high rate of unemployment and poverty, which can create a sense of hopelessness and despair among the people. Unemployment is also positively correlated with witchcraft beliefs, possibly reflecting the stress-inducing nature of joblessness in the modern world. Poverty in Sikari Gaon can also create envy and resentment among the people, who may accuse others of witchcraft to express jealousy or grab their assets.

Poor healthcare services

When people face unexplained deaths or illnesses of their family or community members, they may seek alternative explanations that involve supernatural forces or malicious agents. With a lack of access to medical services and education, they may rely on witch doctors who may be accused of witchcraft to gain power or money. Such factors can create a climate of fear and suspicion that can trigger violent attacks on those labelled witches.

Majuli suffers from poor healthcare services due to the government's negligence, lack of infrastructure, outdated equipment, and shortage of doctors, nurses, and medical ambulances, creating conditions where the disease is familiar and routine illness can be fatal. Due to its location, Doctors and other

staff are unwilling to join to provide their services in Majuli. Majuli is a remote and isolated island, which makes it difficult for doctors to travel and communicate with the mainland. The island is only accessible by ferries. Also, the island has poor road connectivity, limited electricity supply, and low income and demand for doctors due to low population density and a high poverty rate, affecting doctors' quality of life and work. Majuli has a different culture and lifestyle from the mainland, which may not suit the preferences and expectations of doctors, which is another possible reason for not being willing to provide services in Majuli. To curb the problem, the government of Assam announced posting senior doctors on a rotational basis for 90 days at a time in Majuli. However, in reality, it does not transform into action. Thus, the people of Majuli are deprived of proper medical treatment and must go to Dibrugarh or Jorhat to access basic medical facilities.

According to Swapnalee Saikia and Bornali Gogoi (2019), the availability of health centres needs to be higher in Majuli, with only 15 primary health centres, 22 sub-centres and two community health centres for more than one lakh people. There are no availability of private hospitals in Majuli. Sri Sri Pitambardeva Civil Hospital is the only hospital in Majuli undergoing upgrade works since 2019 to become a 200-bed district hospital with better facilities and equipment. However, the hospital faces many challenges in providing quality healthcare services to the people. There is the allegation that the hospital is still being clinically diagnosed through outdated X-ray machines. Also, Because of the absence of a blood bank in the river island, doctors face severe problems during emergency treatment. The frequent power cuts also disrupt emergency operations and running medical equipment and facilities, such as oxygen concentrators, ventilators, refrigerators, and lights. Poor referral systems and transportation networks, which hamper the timely transfer of patients to high-level facilities, also pose a severe threat to patients and their families. The major challenge for the medical patients of Majuli in emergencies is that they have to cross the river by boat, which is often overcrowded and unsafe. Patients and their families face a tough time when they cannot afford the government-run ambulance and ferry service to cross the Brahmaputra river at night during emergencies. The government of Assam has launched a boat ambulance service

24x7 for Majuli to address this difficulty, but most of the time, it remains non-operational due to technical problems.

Many concerned citizens, including teachers, retired civil servants, students, and medical professionals, have raised concerns about neglecting the only civil hospital on Majuli Island. They argue that equipping the Majuli hospitals with modern facilities and adequate staff may impact the profitability of private nursing homes and laboratories in neighbouring Jorhat, Dibrugarh and other parts of the state. Additionally, there are allegations of corruption among some government doctors and medical staff who take advantage of the lack of modern medical infrastructure and staff shortages at the civil hospital. Islanders have accused certain doctors and staff at a local hospital of accepting bribes of up to Rs 5000 for delivery operations. Due to the absence of gynaecologists in Majuli hospitals for several years, many pregnant women and their attendants have had to rely on a limited number of experts at the Sri Sri Pitambar Deva Goswami Civil Hospital. Unfortunately, the baby-care units at this hospital lack essential clinical facilities and adequately trained staff.

Illness, deaths and tragedies

The data suggests that accusations of witchcraft are often triggered by situations that spur the accuser in some way. These situations can be individual or collective tragedies that lead to despair and a search for resolution. In this context, examining the various motives and triggers that set off accusations and victimisation in case studies is essential. In the below-compiled data of 47 cases, 14 are directly related to the illness or death of a human or an animal and the attribution of this to the victim.

Table 4.10: Reasons behind witchcraft accusation

Sl. No.	Reasons behind witchcraft accusation		No. of cases
1.	Diseases, death and tragedies	(a) Stomach ailment	3
		(b) Diarrhea	2
		(c) Malaria	3
		(d) Jaundice	2
		(e) Infertility	1
		(f) Death of livestock	2
		(g) Piles	1
2.	Love related conflict		15
3.	Conflict over land with neighbours and family		9
4.	Non conformity and conflict with village council		9
Total			47

In all the cases collected, the victims were held responsible for an actual or alleged illness, ranging from a stomach ailment, diarrhoea, malaria, jaundice, infertility, piles to unidentified illness and death of livestock. In addition, the detailed case studies reveal the relationship between illness and death in witchcraft accusations. The limited medical knowledge about illnesses combined with a cultural belief system that every problem in life has a supernatural origin “predisposes people to look for scapegoats for who is responsible” (MacLean, 2014; Douglas, 1995). Some of the worst healthcare facilities in India are found in the tribal belts of the country. The poor healthcare in tribal areas creates problems of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting by leaving people vulnerable to diseases and deaths that they cannot explain or treat with modern medicine. Felicity Thomas (2007), while exploring the ‘indigenous’ construction of illness, found that in the Caprivi region of Namibia, an upsurge of witchcraft accusations can be seen as a direct reaction to increasing AIDS-related illness and death. The social and economic pressures, including conflict, poverty, urbanisation and the weakening of communities, or HIV/AIDS, seem to have contributed to the recent increase in witchcraft accusations (UNICEF, 2010).

The accusations of witchcraft are more likely to be believed when the victim shares physical and familial proximity with the accusers, a common feature of all cases. Anxieties and grief in these situations play into existing tensions between the parties or are manipulated by local healers, who confirm the

accusations. The local healers do not introduce the idea of a ‘witch’, but rather confirm the idea and perform or reinforce the identification. The absence of adequate healthcare facilities and infrastructure in the affected regions exacerbates the vulnerability of the local population. The cases of Krishnakanta and Maneswar in Sikari Gaon illustrate how health-related stigma can emerge when people hold negative or prejudiced attitudes towards individuals or groups with certain health conditions, especially those poorly understood, feared, or attributed to supernatural causes. Consequently, they may resort to traditional healers or witch doctors instead of seeking professional medical assistance.

The people of Majuli face various health problems due to recurrent floods that damage the infrastructure and disrupt access to safe drinking water. Therefore, many people depend on ponds for drinking water, often polluted by flood waters, leading to diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria, typhoid, cholera and leptospirosis. Malnutrition and anaemia among children and women are also serious health problems in this area. In addition, according to a study by Goswami et al. (2020), Majuli suffers from groundwater contamination by arsenic and other metals, which poses a severe health risk to the population. Due to the high levels of arsenic in their drinking water sources, which can cause skin lesions, cancers, cardiovascular diseases and other chronic ailments, these diseases require medical treatment and medicines, which increase the health expenditure of the people in Majuli. A study by Oxfam India (2021) found Assam has a high out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) on health care of Rs. 2,361 per capita per year, higher than the national average of Rs. 2046 per year. The OOPE for the rural areas is Rs. 2,147 per capita per year, which is also higher than the national average of Rs. 1,855 per capita per year. This means that many people in Majuli may be spending a large portion of their income on health care, which can push them into poverty or worsen their existing poverty due to damage to crops by flood.

Stigmatised love

The compiled data shows that conflict over romantic love within families and with village members claims the highest number of victims. Out of 47, 15 cases

related to love (hetero-romantic relations), due to conflicting relation(s) with families of the couples, became stigmatised when the boy was accused of practising witchcraft. The victims of the age group 20-30, as displayed in the data set above, are representative of the stigmatisation of romantic relations. This occurs whenever a relationship is judged and not agreed upon by the family members or perceived by people negatively, and these judgments are based on the visible characteristics of the people in the relationship (Côté & Bégin, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2023). It is to be noted here that in this particular age group (20-30), matrimonial alliances as a result of hetero-romantic relationships become a reality. The case of Babakanta marrying a young Maloti, aged 22, which the girl's father's family dismissed, led to allegations of witchcraft against Babakanta when their daughter died suddenly in his house.

Similarly, in another case, Krishnakanta was accused of practising witchcraft on a teenage girl by her family members and relatives. They believed that the frail health condition of the girl resulted from Krishnakanta's witchcraft, intending to seduce her. These cases highlight the use of witchcraft accusations to counter unexplainable tragedies.

The case of Gopal, a man in his 20s, further sheds light on stigmatised love. The village council punished him after receiving complaints from the family members of a girl named Menaam. Despite their mutual love, Gopal was forced to leave the village.

In another case, Guru Prasad, aged 23, was accused of witchcraft several times by his neighbours after various misfortunes befell them. He was also suspected of having a witch's teat under his tongue. He may have used his grandfather's reputation as a witch to intimidate or threaten others or even identified as a witch himself. Some neighbours informed that one of the relatives of Guru Prasad taught him how to use magical spells to attract girls through *tabeez* (amulet). The *tabeez* would work on a new moon day (Amavasya) or full moon day (Purnima). He started providing *tabeez* to young boys to attract girls and to marry them. People who were not getting married and those who were not satisfied with their sexual relationship in their marriage would take

such *tabeez* from him. Some neighbours who claimed to be an eye witnesses said that Guru Prasad went to the jungle at midnight to perform his rites and rituals and was giving a feast for the success of the *tabeez* he sold to the people. Some said that he asked to collect pieces of cloth, hair, or soil of the girl whom his customers for performing witchcraft, and thus, he was trying to help young boys acquire feelings of love from the girls they had expressed their interest in. While burying the amulets beneath the *kitik* of the girls' houses, some of the young boys were caught by their respective families and complained to the village council. The council punished the involved individuals accordingly. Harsher punishments per the instructions of the *mibo* come into play only when the individual whose *kitik* had been visited by any other person and the family member(s) of the house had fallen victim to any illness and if any unnatural tragedy had befallen upon them. In the case of Guru Prasad, his admission to being a love magic practitioner was met with suspicion and hostility from people who did not accept or understand his beliefs. This is an instance of how intolerance and ignorance can stigmatise individuals who associate themselves with the term 'witch'.

From Babakanta, Krishnakanta, Gopal, and Guru Prasad, all the main characters of the stories discussed above share a central link of witchcraft and the practice of witchcraft specifically associated with male members, especially when they are believed to cast spells/a set of mantras meant to get a person infatuated with themselves. Because of such belief, they are believed to have the power to control women's minds and bodies. Among the Mising community of Assam, such a practice is called *muini baan*. Generally, it is believed that in cases of unrequited love, the boy uses *muini baan*, which requires them to place a talisman in the *kitik* precisely beneath the place where the girl sleeps in the house. They believe this would guarantee a return of affection. Nevertheless, most often, Misings consider the *muini baan* as a *marunaam* (witchcraft) performance if used with malicious intentions.

As discussed above, *marunaam* or witchcraft is performed in the *kitik* to inflict harm to the targeted person. Hence, a stigma is attached to the entry of another's *kitik*. The *kitik* is a space below the *taleng okum*, considered a family's

private space. Entry into the *kitik* is known as *kitik ginam*, which is restricted to family members. In cases of romance blooming between a boy and a girl of the same village, the *Kitik* used to be frequented by the boy at night to conceal his identity. Traditionally, the Misings have been practising village exogamy, and the community prohibits the girls and boys of the same village from establishing pre-marital relationships. However, the boys of a village visit girls' homes at night to meet them when a romantic bond is formed. Girls sometimes meet the prospective husband in the *kitik* before the parents officially arrange the marriage. This space gives them privacy to engage in conversations. This practice is unique only to the Mising community of Assam.

Among the Misings, when there is pre-existing conflict(s) between families of both boys and girls romantically involved, results in witchcraft accusations. When the girl's family does not want the boy she is involved with, the girl's family accuses the boy of practising witchcraft to kill the girl's family members. In the case of Gopal, two rumours, combined with being caught red-handed in the act of carrying out *muini baan*, made the situation worse. There was an old rumour that Gopal's grandfather was a powerful witch, a trait which was being passed down to the male heirs. Another rumour was that the girl he was involved with, her uncle, had died due to witchcraft. Thus when Gopal was caught one night in the girl's *kitik* by one of her male relatives, he was immediately accused of *marunam*. There have been earlier conflicts between Gopal and the girl's families, and the result of the incident in the *kitik* was a witchcraft accusation against him. However, her family was against their union mainly because of money and status. Gopal was poor. Poverty plays a significant role in witchcraft accusations.

In other cases where jealousy arises among friends over the love of a girl, it also results in witchcraft accusations and hunts. Whether or not the young men exercise the art of love magic to attract women or cause mischief, their success often results in them being accused of witchcraft by other men who are jealous or suspicious of their success with women. They are also sometimes accused by women who were their targets or spurned lovers.

In Sikari Gaon, the rules of matrimonial alliances, sometimes, causes conflict leading to witch-hunts. There was a mutual agreement between the Chiru Panging clan and the Mili clan concerning the establishment of matrimonial alliances. It was not merely a matter of marital alliance(s) but a factor that also played a role in forming social capital. The age-old tradition is still followed, where boys from the Chiru Panging marry girls of the Mili clan and vice versa. At the same time, the Koktak Panging can enter into matrimonial alliances with the other clans, namely Yein, Taye and Mili. This is where the conflict arises as girls of the Mili clan are solely believed to marry into the Chiru clan; the interference of boys from the other clans in this established dynamic between the dominant Chiru and Mili clan unfolds in the accusation of boys of Koktak sub-clan on charges of witchcraft.

In the year 2021, the accusation of three boys of Koktak on charges of witchcraft to disrupted an already agreed upon matrimonial agreement between a boy of the Chiru Panging clan (employed in the government service) and a girl from the Mili clan. The family members accused the three Koktak boys of practising witchcraft on their girls. The matter became more interesting as the father of the boy from the Chiru Panging clan (whose matrimonial agreement was disrupted) was also the *Gam* of the *kebang* (the village council). The case ended with the three boys of the Koktak clan being reprimanded and punished by the *kebang*. In this instance, the father of the Chiru Panging clan boy utilised his position to administer punishment and to further the tradition of the social relation that enforces and contributes to the augmentation of their social capital. Power positions and family status often factor in witchcraft accusations (Gershman, 2016; Spence, 2017; Sanou, 2017).

Economic differences as a source of conflict

In most case studies, it is possible to identify factors that may have contributed to conflicts between the accuser and the victim, often involving their respective families. Notably, these conflicts often arise from disputes over land or property, attempts to undermine legitimate claims, jealousy over the victim's family's prosperity resulting from economic entrepreneurship or inheritance, failure to

establish control over the victim or their family, jealousy over strong marital bonds, or the possibility of acquiring inheritance through a second marriage. These factors have led to discord and animosity, ultimately targeting victims and their families.

In one case, rationalising the death of a little girl, which seems to have been paired with the desire to settle scores with an inconvenient relative, highlighted potential circumstances that may have constituted a material basis for a conflict between the accuser and the accused. Dumiwola, a victim of witchcraft accusation in the Sikari Gaon, was hounded for raising a witch (*butu onam*). He was summoned multiple times to the village meeting, but the charge was not established. After that, a local healer was identified and established Dumiwola's *butu-onam* practice.

The death of a little girl, his brother's daughter, prompted the allegation of witchcraft against him. In the community, Dumiwola had a little medicine healing practice. The villagers occasionally contacted him when someone became ill or was infected with an unknown ailment. One day, the girl fell while playing and felt discomfort in her legs. On the recommendation of a neighbour, he was invited to the girl's family that day, even though both families were not on good terms. Though Dumiwala was apprehensive about visiting the impacted family, he did so after knowing of the little girl's critical condition. He administered some medication. The following day, the girl experienced severe pain throughout her body and died a few days later. Family members of those affected also stated that the doctor did not recognise the condition. Following the incident, the victim's relatives accused Dumiwala of killing their daughter. They suspected that Dumiwala used *butu onam* (witchcraft) on the little girl to take revenge on his brother over a land dispute that had created tension between the two families in the past.

In this case, it is noticed that the existing conflicts over land between Dumiwala and his brother triggered a witch-hunt. In their neighbourhood, each of them was aware of the relationship between the brothers. As a villager, the local healer

was aware of the problem in their neighbourhood. So, he took advantage of the family feud and accused Dumiwala of killing the girl.

Another incident in Sikari Gaon led the accuser to believe the victim was a witch because his ailing wife frequently saw the victim in her dreams. There is also an instance where the victim was verbally abused by her husband and cursed the accuser's daughter; later, when the young girl had started unbearable pain in her stomach, the victim was blamed- although the victim himself explained the targeting as an excuse to deny his wages. In one case, after the death of her husband after consuming rice beer served at the victim's house, the death was seen as an outcome of some black magic practised by the victim. However, jealousy appears to be at play as the victim; the victim had lots of land, and once, there was a conflict between the families over the accuser's use of land without permission. Thus, rationalised death or illness appears to have been combined with the desire to settle scores with an inconvenient relative, neighbour/villager (Nathan & Kelkar, 1993, 2020; Konwar & Swargiari, 2015; Daimari, 2012, Chaudhuri, 2008).

In another case, Tumpal was accused by his brothers due to a conflict over property, which led to punishment and social ostracisation. Tumpal, in his 30, earns his livelihood by selling the village's products- leafy greens, vegetables, poultry meat and pork, at the weekly market of Gaurisagar, a town close to Sikari Gaon. He is the youngest in his family and has three brothers. Tumpal's eldest brother, Ronjeet, being in military service, has been living with his wife and children outside the village. The second elder brother, Bijoy, works as a mason in the village. The other brother, Tete, lives in Bengaluru, where he works as a wage labourer, while his wife and his children live in Sikari Gaon.

After the demise of their father, the four brothers began to feud with one another over property issues and for obvious reasons, they began living in separate houses. Tumpal's strained relations with his brothers, except the eldest one, were already well-known in the village. Further, in close-knit Sikari Gaon, one's successes and failures are noticed and talked about by almost everyone. So, when Tumpal's business began to flourish, and he got himself a motorcycle

while his two other brothers, Bijoy and Tete, were struggling financially, people began to gossip about it. Meanwhile, because of Tumpal's success, Bijoy and Tete were consumed by jealousy, widening the existing rift between them and Tumpal.

One night, in 2018 he went latrine at around 11.30 pm. There is hardly any latrine in houses there. People defecate in the backyards of their houses. Also, at that time, Sikari Gaon was yet to be electrified. So, Tumpal grabbed the torch and headed towards the backyard of his house. Unfortunately, the torch was not functioning properly, and he had to manage with its dim glow. He suddenly felt the presence of someone behind him. Tumpal panicked and immediately stood up with a jolt and began running. Running in panic through the dark with a torch that glowed dimly, he lost his way and bumped into one of the posts that supported Tete's *chang ghar*, and the torch fell off his hand. It was around two weeks since Tete had come home from Bengaluru. The thud awakened Tete and his family, and they rushed out of their house to find out what had caused the sound, and soon a commotion ensued. Engulfed in shame and fear, Tumpal silently sneaked into his house without getting caught. The next day, Tete informed the matter to the village council, stating that someone had practised *marunaam* to cast a spell on his wife. The torch accidentally dropped there, making it easier for the council members to identify him as the culprit. However, after considering everything that had happened the previous night, the village council declared him not guilty of practising *marunaam*.

Tete, however, did not seem to be satisfied with the judgement of the village council. After the council dismissed his first complaint against Tumpal, he lodged another, stating that Tumpal had committed *kitik ginam*. To support his allegation, he stated that he and his family had felt the presence of someone under their *chang ghar* for several nights. His clothes convinced Tete that the person was none other than his brother Tumpal. When Tete approached the village council, he pleaded with them to consult the *mibo* of the village as well before delivering their judgment. The *mibo* of the village declared Tumpal guilty of casting a spell on Tete's wife in an attempt to kill her. As a few residents of Sikari Gaon claimed, Tumpal had had an affair with Tete's wife before she got

married. Since it was difficult for Tumpal to get physical with her after her marriage, he decided to get her killed through *kitik ginam*.

A similar pattern to the abovementioned case can be seen in several cases, with 19 of the 47 cases directly linked to a property dispute or fight over financial resources within the framework of a familial relationship between the victim and the accuser. Another set of examples involved jealousy over different forms of success in familial ties and relationships, which resulted in victimisation. In order to avoid paying the victim, the accusers contrived the witchcraft charge to get rid of the victim.

Transgression, non-conformity and difference

The personality of the victim, particularly his assertiveness and characteristics that set him apart as different or transgressive, also become a reason for labelling. In Sikari Gaon, plenty of cases, i.e. 11 cases out of 47, are directly linked with non-conformity and conflict with the village council. In a singular instance, the long protracted conflict between the Koktak and the Kebang, the traditional village council (mainly representing the Chiru), began in 2005 and ended 2013-14 with 11 members of the Koktak Panging accused of witchcraft.

Conflict arose between families in Sikari Gaon when two ponds which was situated in the land of the Koktak Panging were occupied by the *kebang* and named a community resource; these ponds were a significant source of livelihood by selling fish from them and using them for irrigation purposes, the *kebang* had promised the affected Koktak clan family members of rightful compensation after the acquiring of the ponds. Upon the non-repayment of compensation from the *kebang*, many individuals of the Koktak Panging clan voiced their disagreement against the unfair attitude of the *kebang*, which they saw as biased in favour of the Chiru Panging. The outcome of their disagreement, transgression against the authority of the *kebang*, resulted in the targeted punishment of the 11 male members of the families of the Koktak Panging clan who were supposed to be involved in raising against the *kebang*. The *kebang* began with the utilisation of the healer, who himself belonged to the

Chiru Panging; the shared reverence of the position helped the ostracisation of the members of the Koktak further. The local healer singled out the individuals of the Koktak sub-clan and blamed them for inviting problems upon the people in the region, ranging from crop failures to death of people, and he accused them of carrying out witchcraft in order to wreak destruction in the lives of others. Blaming people of witchcraft here is a convenient excuse, a meticulous strategy to exact punishment. This is how the Chiru Panging and the *kebang* dealt with the vocal opposers who displayed reticence in adhering to the rules of the *kebang* and its authority. The outspoken nature of the victim(s) in this instance of accusing the *kebang* of the misappropriation of the funds received after the commercialisation of community resources in the region led to their targeting as, according to the *kebang*, it marked transgressing established notions of behaviour and order within the society. As the commercialisation of land and other natural resources creates social and economic dislocation, some people may lose access to the natural resources that sustain their livelihoods for years. This can lead to poverty, inequality and resentment, fueling witchcraft accusations and witch-hunts.

Conclusion

The chapter examined witchcraft accusations, focusing on the underlying reasons and consequences. The social and economic status of the accuser and the accused shed light on the primary victims of such accusations. It revealed instances where individuals from dominant clans level accusations against marginalised, landless individuals who lost their land due to river erosion. The community invite the attention of the *mibo* and levels accusations against a few identified individuals, predominantly in love-related conflicts, health and illness situations, and property disputes. Nevertheless, such allegations are often rooted in past disruptions in the relations between individuals and families. The chapter established how the social, economic, and political factors are a significant concern in identifying the accused. Subsequently, the accusers move the accused to the traditional political council of the village to seek justice for their loss by punishing the accused. The structure and functions of the traditional political council and the resolution process will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter V

Kebang and its Role in Dispute Resolution

Introduction

The *kebang* is a significant political institution that is expected to offer a social resolution to any evil occurrence in Mising society. Even with the increasing intervention of the police, the *kebang* often tends to follow the social expectations of the people who demand solutions within their community without the intervention of outsiders or any government agency. Hence, this chapter discusses the structure and functions of *kebang*, the process of conflict resolution with an emphasis on witchcraft-related disputes, the role of the accuser and accused, and the factors that influence the council's decisions.

The structure of *Kebang*

The *kebang* is a traditional institution of self-governance or village council that regulates the social life among the Misings of Assam. It is a complex or composite body of Mising administrative, developmental, judicial, and welfare mechanisms that deal with routine community activities, extraordinary occasions, and atypical occurrences (Danggen, 2003; Kardong, 2022). The *kebang* is an assembly of villagers that addresses issues relating to their village, such as social, economic, political, and judicial matters. It is an integrated whole where politics, religion, and the economy merge to form a single institution. Padu (2021:12) mentioned that *kebang* is a non-adversarial justice delivery system that believes in amicable settlement of disputes outside the courts and is also the custodian of the unwritten customary law that governs the social conduct (Koyu & Singh, 2020). It is considered the backbone of the Mising society and has been in practice since the inception of the Misings. The *kebang* is not a single person but a collective body of elders, leaders, and villagers participating in the decision-making process. The *kebang* comprises 10 to 25 elderly male members arranged in a pyramidal or hierarchical order. It has

a clear structure with different portfolios and roles allocated to its members for performing their routine activities in the village.

A *kebang* is headed by the chief, or *Gam*, and supported by *kebang abus* or other knowledgeable village elders. Before choosing the *Gam*, the *kebang abus* consults with village residents on their choices. *Kebang abus* selects the village *Gam* after considering the nominations made by the qualified residents for the position. They all agree to choose the most suitable person to be a *Gam* (Pegu, 1981; Koyu & Singh, 2020). The qualities of wisdom, familiarity with standard legal procedures, persuasive oratory skills, and honesty are prerequisites for a *Gam*. The *Gam* may belong to any clan but typically represents the most influential one. The villages in the region have two or more clans, each with different size and land holdings. The clan with the largest population and land area has more influence and preference in the *kebang*. The *Gam* of the *kebang* manages the village resources, such as community land, pond, and river. The village can sell or lease these resources to generate funds for development projects. The *Gam* is in charge of the financial management of the village fund. He also represents his clan's interests and power. Therefore, politicians often try to win the favour of the *Gam* by offering monetary help when they visit the villages. The *Gam* and *kebang abus* have a strong sway over the villagers' voting choices. Therefore, politicians and their parties sanction grants during election rallies to the *kebang* in the name of village development. However, this does not always result in effective action. Moreover, politicians often ignore the witch-hunts and other forms of violence. This political move wins the loyalty of dominant clans or most villagers except the victims.

The *Gamship* is a prestigious and influential position in Sikari Gaon, which a member of the Chiru sub-clan has held since the *kebang* was established. The Chiru Panging has a smaller population but a larger land area than the other clans in the village. The *Gam* is highly respected, and his opinion is usually accepted as the final decision by the *kebang*. However, he decides after careful consultation with the members of *kebang*. The *Gam* of Sikari Gaon has been selected from the Chiru clan seven times since the village was founded. The position of *Gam* is not passed down by inheritance (Kagyung, 1989:12), but

the *Gam*'s eldest son has a chance to become the next *Gam* if the *kebang abus* agree. In such cases, it depends on traditional criteria such as status, wealth, clan, and leadership of his father. Since the establishment of the *kebang* in Sikari Gaon, there have been only two instances in Sikari Gaon where the *Gam*'s elder son has become a *Gam*.

Other than inter-clan politics, intra-clan relations also determine political affiliations. Often, some villagers who struggle financially fall into debt traps. Members of the influential clan or *kebang* often play the role of money-lenders for such people by lending them money appropriated from the village funds, a sheer case of misappropriation. *Gam* also uses his economic power to influence the political choices of the villagers. He lends money to those who need it, but they must vote for him or his allies in the local elections if they fail to repay the loan within a certain period. He also exploits the landless villagers by allowing them to cultivate some of his land in exchange for their loyalty and support. These strategies enable *Gam* to maintain his dominance and control over the village. It has far-reaching implications in crimes, assault, and witchcraft. However, witchcraft and witch-hunt cases stand out due to the exceptional characteristics that combine the social and the supernatural. Privileged clans and members of *kebang* with ulterior motives, who exert power, can often implicate innocents.

Plate 5.1: Gam of Sikari Gaon along with the *kebang abus* and their wives



The *kebang abus*, along with the *Gam*, hold important positions in the village administration. The selection of the *kebang abus* is based on the numerical size and the dominance of clans, similar to the *Gam*. The Chiru clan, which claims to be the original settlers of Sikari Gaon, dominates the *kebang abus* positions. At the same time, the Koktak Panging, which has a larger population in the village, has only three representatives out of 19. Other clans like Yein, Taye, and Mili have no representation. This imbalance leads to conflicts and grievances, as the Koktak and other clans feel their problems are ignored or dismissed by the Chiru Panging clan in the *kebang*.

Ideally, the *kebang* adopts a decision-making process by consensus on matters of importance and interest for their community, following the customary law and sometimes referring to previous verdicts. The *kebang* is the guardian of the customs and traditions of the Misings. The community members are expected to comply with the decisions without any violation. Otherwise, the *kebang* may impose *Ajeng* (fines) or compensation on the violator, depending on the nature and severity of the offence. The Misings did not resort to the police or courts to resolve village or interpersonal issues until recently. Even heinous crimes such as kidnapping, murder, and others were adjudicated and penalized by the *kebang*. In cases when the *kebang* members encounter inter/intra clan disputes among themselves, they postpone the meeting and resume it the next day to continue the discussion and try to reach a consensus. If the dispute is more significant, senior members of the concerned clans from one or more nearby villages are invited to offer advice and suggestions for resolving the conflict. Moreover, when there are conflicts between different villages, the *kebangs* from each village collaborate to find a resolution.

The *kebang* is supposed to be a democratic institution that listens to and respects the views and rights of all the village members and strives for harmony and consensus. However, it may sometimes behave as an authoritative institution. The *kebang* members have the final say and authority to settle disputes and keep peace and order in the Mising villages, and they may resort to violence against their own villagers or their rivals and oppress them. Also, traditionally, all male

members of the village are counted as members of the *kebang* meetings with limited female participation. Furthermore, minor clans of the village often complain that their *kebang* does not reflect the whole village community since the *kebang* members are primarily from the dominant clan and those who have property and only care for or consider their own clan or group members and neglect the issues of the minor clan in the village.

Types of *Kebang*

Social and Judicial Kebang

The *kebang* is a system of village governance that serves various functions in Mising society, such as social, economic, and political. The *kebang* engages in several developmental tasks to uphold law and order. As a result, the *Kebang* plays a crucial role in encouraging group efforts to pursue larger social goals. It can be classified into two types: social *kebang* and judicial *kebang*. A social *kebang* is an assembly or council of villagers who manage the development projects of the village. The *Gam*, or the council head, appoints one or two *kebang abus* or village elders, to oversee the development works and report back to him. The *kebang abus* also assigns roles and responsibilities to the village members and coordinate their efforts to address the issues.

Plate 5.2: Social *kebang* of Sikari Gaon



The social *kebang* is a collaborative and participatory form of village administration. To discuss village matters such as communal fencing, upkeep of the *murang okum* (community hall), communal hunting and fishing, building of bridges, roads inside the village boundary, cleanliness of the village, celebration of festivals like *Po:rag* and *Ali:aye li:gang*, use of village funds, and even providing social assistance to those in need. include Social *kebang*. Villagers who do not participate in community work are fined by *kebang abus*. As they reach adulthood, all of the males in the village naturally join a Social *kebang* and actively participate in its activities. The Mising uses physical, mental, and sexual development as indicators of adulthood. Nonetheless, some taboos can result in a man's temporary exclusion from *kebang*, like being bitten by a snake, being the father of a child within a week of its birth, and others. Several women attend the social *kebang* as they are allowed. In the past, older women took part in judicial *kebang* as well. However, women's participation in the *kebang* is constrained due to patriarchal beliefs. Additionally, widows and widowers are never allowed to join the *kebang*, both social and judicial. Males play a dominant role in almost all activities. Secondly, following marriage, the girl moves to another clan or village. Hence, they are not considered permanent members of the village and are not allowed to participate in *kebang*. It should be emphasized that the custom of marrying into a clan from another village has effects that go beyond the family of the bride and groom. This strategy results in partnerships between settlements on the social and political levels. Mutual cooperation and the trade of products and services are also accomplished. Due to such relationships between the two villages, the respective *kebang* can manage disagreements amicably when they arise between individuals or groups from the two villages. The functions and participation of members vary between the social and judicial *kebang*, even though both operate under the authority of the *kebang abus* or the *Gam*. A judicial *kebang* is limited to elderly male village members such as the *Gam* (village council head) and *kebang abus* and those whose names are listed (persons relevant to the subject). However, it excludes women, young boys, and children from participation, leading to political inequality and injustice in the village. However, in a social *kebang*, every member of a village has the right to speak and offer his views as a participant.

The judicial *kebang* serves as a local judicial mechanism that deals with civil and criminal cases involving political, social, and economic conflicts among the members. Such *kebang* is not convened regularly but meets as and when needed. The Misings prefer the *kebang* over the regular courts for seeking justice, as the *kebang* has a long tradition of mediation, conciliation, and even punishment, providing a platform for the conflicting parties to reach an acceptable settlement. As a “court of justice,” the *kebang* interprets and decides cases based on customary laws. The *kebang* judgements usually start with a narration of the history and glory of ancestors. Then, the *Gam* explains the reason for convening the meeting and invites both the conflicting parties to present their arguments before the *kebang abus*, who are expected to deliver impartial justice. The *kebang* settles disputes among clans, families, groups, and individuals on various issues, such as property, money, debt, harm, divorce, elopement, adultery, rape, theft, cheating, robbery, and murder. It imposes fines or physical punishments on those who violate the norms and peace of the community. Village elders frequently mention ancestors practises, demonstrating the precedent of past decisions. A *kebang* does not stray from traditional customs, although some adjustments have been made in light of the contemporary legal system and shifting social dynamics. The verdict of the *kebang* is considered fair by the Misings because it reflects the collective will of the village. Pandey (2012) claims that “the *kebang* functions on the concept of unshakable allegiance to the local community and customary laws” (Pandey, 2012, p. 12).

Dolung Kebang, Bango Kebang, and Bane Kebang

The *kebang* can be broadly divided into three types to dispose of judicial matters based on the jurisdiction in which it operates: *dolung kebang* (village council), *bango kebang* (inter-village council), and *bane kebang* (tribal level council), formerly known as *bogum-bokang kebang* (Praveena & Dharmaraj, 2018). These are organised on a pyramidal or hierarchical order, from the village level to the entire tribe. The most powerful and smallest administrative institution is the *dolung-kebang*, also known as *kebang*. It oversees all of the village’s administrative, educational, judicial, and welfare functions. It is more efficient and well-organized and contributes to the smooth operation of the

village administration. *Murong okum* (community hall), where a *dolung kebang*'s proceedings take place, is a rectangular building or structure with an elevated platform like a stage in an auditorium.

According to the issues discussed, the *dolung kebang* can be further divided into the *Atek kebang* and the *Dolung bane kebang*. The smallest *kebang* unit is called an *atek kebang*. In this type of *kebang* adjudication, parties attempt to resolve conflicts, such as theft, marital issues, infidelity, family problems, and land disputes, within the family rather than in front of the village community. In cases related to witchcraft accusations, the conflicting parties sit together in a courtyard of a neutral neighbour and try to resolve the issue. In the *kebang* proceedings, a few village and family elders participate. Only when the *atek-kebang* is unable to settle the dispute the *dolung bane kebang* is called to intervene. In *dolung bane kebang*, all the villagers gather to discuss and decide on the matters. As already mentioned, the *dolung bane-kebang* is the highest authority in the village and has power over disputes involving the village members. Contrarily, the *atek kebang* has a narrow scope and is called upon when sudden disputes between people or organisations crop up. It is crucial to remember that an *atek kebang* is an effort by parties to resolve conflicts within families to protect family dignity in the village; if necessary, they are free to submit their issue to the *dolung bane kebang* (village council). As witchcraft-related cases are sensitive where physical punishment or even murder is involved, generally, *dolung bane kebang* tries to settle the issue within the village without outside influence. The *bango-kebang* resolves conflict if members from more than one village are involved.

Bango-Kebang is the next higher level. The *bango-kebang* consists of two or more villages, depending on their vicinity, comprising several villages within a particular area or boundary. All active *dolung kebang* participants also become members of *bango-kebang* and participate in its activities. The *bango kebang* takes on all disputes at the inter-village level, including those involving river water sharing, village boundaries, and local welfare. When witchcraft-related cases emerge between two or more villages, all the affected *dolung kebang* (village council) members participate and try to resolve the issue by

coming together. The *bango-kebang* members are from both the *kebangs* of the individual accused of performing witchcraft and the village where that particular individual performed witchcraft. The members of the respective villages hear both parties and award a punishment that needs to be implemented by the *kebang* of the victim's village. This collaboration between the *kebangs* of the neighbouring villages signifies the harmony that is considered essential to maintaining social norms.

The *bane kebang* is on top (council of the Mising tribe). The Mising *bane kebang* is comprised of all the prominent *Gams*, *kebang abus* of multiple *bangos*, and the elite and public figures. Only a few cases are brought to this *kebang* because the *dolung kebang* and *bango-kebang* handle most disputes. The delegate brought up the issues and challenges for top-level deliberations. This *kebang* addresses unity, peace, and harmony of all the tribes or sub-tribes. At this stage of *kebang*, the development plan and policies are designed and implemented. However, this apex organisation no longer exists.

Resolution of witchcraft accusation by *Kebang*

The *kebang* is a traditional institution of the Mising community of Assam that deals with cases of witchcraft accusations. Its purpose is to resolve witchcraft accusations peacefully, considering the social, cultural, and legal aspects. However, nowadays, it imposes punishments on the accused, such as physical violence, social exclusion, or expulsion from the village. The *kebang* is usually convened by the *Gam* when an accuser complains against a suspect. Then *Gam* invites all the *kebang abus*, the elders, and the villagers to participate. The *Gam* leads the *kebang* to investigate the allegations of witchcraft by gathering evidence, testimonies, and witnesses. The council bases its identification of the alleged witch on the complainant's suspicion and the opinion of experts such as healers, priests, or astrologers. These experts use various techniques to confirm or deny the presence of witchcraft, such as observing the suspect's behaviour, inspecting animal organs such as examining the chicken or pig liver or conducting rituals with pebbles, rice grains, or *Yakcha* (a sacred object) (Koyu & Singh, 2020). In some cases, the local

priest may influence the council members and the villagers to label the suspect as a witch, especially if the suspect has a family history of witchcraft practices. The family's reputation and the community members' distrust can put them at risk of a witch-hunt. The council may then expedite the punishment process. If the council is not persuaded by the evidence presented by the complainant or the experts, it may request Mibo to perform a ritual called *Mibo Dagnam* to ascertain the guilt or innocence of the suspect. The council then summons the convicted witch and announces and enforces the penalty. The accusation of being a *marune-tani* or witch is thus often based on vague or random criteria. It can lead to the punishment of innocent people. This makes the accused's situation precarious in the community and vulnerable to persecution.

In Sikari Gaon, witchcraft accusations occurred, where a few individuals were identified for causing harm to accuser's families through sorcery. One of the accusers was Munpol, a Chiru sub-clan member, who accused his neighbour Apatani of cursing, resulting in the illness and death of two of his relatives. He sought justice from the *Gam*, the village council head, by offering him *apong* (a local liquor) and *tamul pan* (betel nut and leaves). The *Gam* brought the matter to the council and invited a priest to verify the accusation. Another accuser was Menam's uncle, a council member, who accused Gopal, a Koktak Panging member, of practicing sorcery when he discovered that Gopal was having an affair with his niece Menam in the *kitik* of the *taleng okum*. He used his power to expedite the accusation process and punish Gopal. Another accuser was Munu, a council member, who blamed Krishnakanta, another Koktak clan member, for casting a spell on his daughter, who suffered from severe pain. He consulted the priest, who used rice grains to identify the source of the evil and named Krishnakanta as the culprit. Krishnakanta was summoned to the council and asked to confess. When he denied involvement, the council tortured him until he admitted his guilt.

The context of this accusation was that the village had experienced regular floods in August-September, which resulted in various diseases spreading among the villagers, such as malaria, dengue, and other waterborne infections. The Chiru sub-clan members were more vulnerable to these diseases as their houses

were located in the lower part of the village, where the flood water had reached the highest level. On the other hand, the Koktak Panging members were less affected as their houses were situated near the roadside and on higher ground, where the flood water had minimal impact. The *kebang* sought the assistance of the *mibo*, a village member, to resolve the dispute. The *kebang* arranged the ingredients for the ritual performance to conduct a ceremony to identify the witches. The ceremony occurred in the *murong okum*, a community hall, in the presence of the villagers. The complainants, who were mostly from the Chiru Panging clan and some of whom were also part of the *kebang*, accused some people of being witches and causing harm to the community. In a village where supernatural forces are blamed for misfortunes, crisis, and diseases, people rely on the *mibo*, a person who claims to have divine or supernatural powers, to identify and punish the alleged witches. The *mibo* also belongs to the Chiru, the same clan as the majority of members of the *kebang* belong, and that decides the fate of the accused. The *kebang* members usually support the *mibo*'s accusation and facilitate the process of retribution. The punishment of the alleged witches is swift and brutal. They tortured, lynched, mutilated, or burned to eliminate the perceived threat and protect themselves and their community. These violent actions terrified both the victims and the witnesses of the witch-hunt. The council created a climate of fear and distrust, where anyone could be accused of being a witch and face mob violence without any legal protection (Yasmin, 2018). Using violent actions in witchcraft accusations to resolve and order in the tribal community is a paradoxical and problematic strategy that often leads to more harm than good (MacDonald, 2004).

Kebang used various tactics besides violence or consulting a priest to verify witchcraft accusations. It followed some democratic values and tried to resolve the conflict peacefully. It encouraged the accused to confess their guilt or renounce their alleged practices and the accusers to drop their charges or accept compensation. In a few cases, the accused may get mercy if they confess before the *kebang* and the accuser. For example, in Gamchuk of Majuli village, an accuser forgave the accused when he confessed and apologized to the council. Forgiving someone accused of witchcraft is uncommon because it means going against cultural norms. The only way for the accused to restore peace with the

people who accuse them is to admit their guilt, show remorse, do ceremonies or give money (Spence, 2017). In this case, the culprit/accused said that he used *marunaam* to cast a love spell on the accuser's daughter, who stopped seeing him after her father disapproved of their relationship. The culprit promised he would never meet her again or do such things. The council, respecting the father's mercy, spared him from retribution or penalty.

Structural and procedural changes in the *Kebang* in contemporary times

The *Gam* is a mentor to the village community and presides over *kebang*. However, due to the impact of statutory administrative mechanisms, the institution of *the kebang* has somewhat eroded, followed by a diminishing reputation it previously enjoyed, and had to undergo certain structural adjustments to operate. In recent years, however, the *kebang* system has undergone certain changes under the influence of modern institutions. The decision making process has undergone several changes.

The British colonial rule introduced the institution of Gaon Bura in Assam, which appointed the oldest and most knowledgeable person in a village or a cluster of small villages as the head of land and revenue matters (Das, 2022). It was one of the methods of the British administrators to control and surveil the tribal people, who had their traditional village council for decision-making and consensus-building. The *Gam* and *kebang* system was impacted by the establishment of the Gaon Bura institution. According to Jahnabi Gogoi, while the *buranjis* (Ahom-era chronicles) do not have the word Gaon Bura, the concept existed in some form even in the pre-colonial period (Agarwala, 2023). Over the years, the Gaon Bura became central to rural life and inevitably featured in several writings, including novels and plays of the 19th century. Among them is Assamese litterateur Padmanath Gohain Baruah's famous social play, 'Gaon Bura.'

The British colonial administration recognized and institutionalized the Gaon Bura system under the Regulation 1945. This regulation conferred the status of "village authority" to the Gaon Bura. The term "Gaon Bura," meaning village

elder, was used to refer to the village authority in the official letter of recognition (GB Certificate) and the local parlance. The Gaon Bura was entrusted with some powers and privileges to assist the Deputy Commissioner in maintaining peace and order, land and revenue matters, and other issues in the village. The British introduced this system to secure their dominance over the Mising territories, which resisted external interference. The Deputy Commissioner appointed the Gaon Bura from the candidates nominated by the villagers through a hand-raising vote in front of the Circle Officer or other representatives. However, most of the time, the nominators were not the true representatives of the village since they belonged to the wealthy class and were loyal to the British. So, there was a high possibility of appointing people who favoured the British authority and neglected the villagers' concerns and difficulties. Also, the British administrator chose the candidates for the hand-raising vote by visiting villages or sending their loyal members. They usually ignored or disregarded the *kebang's* opinion for selecting the Gaon Bura for their village. The British wanted loyal and obedient Gaon Bura who could enforce their rules and interests in the village. It created a conflict between the Gaon Bura and the *kebang*, who had different views and values on governing the village and resolving disputes. The *kebang* resisted the Gaon Bura's interference in their customary affairs, while the Gaon Bura tried to assert his authority as the British agent. The conflict of interests between the *kebang* and the Gaon Bura disrupted the smooth functioning of the village administration and justice system. Even after independence, when the government formalized the role of the Gaon Bura as a part of the Assam Revenue and Disaster Management department, giving him more responsibilities and a small honorarium, the tussle continued. While Gaon Bura works for the district administration to ensure smooth functioning and maintain order and peace in the villages, *kebang* works for their villagers who look after the problems related to socio-economic, judicial, and political issues in the village. They try to maintain peace and harmony within their village through customary procedures. The district administration bestows the position of Gaon Bura and comes with several duties. These include maintaining a population register of the village, maintaining land records, helping the mauzadar in revenue collection, notifying circle officers if there is any encroachment on land, and helping police investigate crime, among others. Thus,

Gaon Bura is considered the eyes and ears of the district administration at the village level. Gaon Bura acts as an intermediary between the district administration and the villagers and demonstrates his loyalty by reporting village-related issues to the administration. It has led to the district administration intervening in village matters.

The *kebang*, the traditional village council, wants to preserve its power and autonomy over village affairs and does not like outsider interference. The Gaon Bura, the formal head of land, revenue, and other village matters, may have conflicts with the *kebang* over his duties and responsibilities. However, they also try to avoid disagreement on any village matters nowadays. In most cases, Gaon Buras are found to be more loyal to their villagers than the administration. If a Gaon Bura ignores *kebang's* opinion, *kebang* often ignores or punishes the Gaon Bura and does not let him participate in any village matters. *Kebang* fears that his non-cooperation with the council would undermine their authority and affect the villagers. Doley (2003) gives an interesting example of how *kebang* is more powerful than Gaon Bura. He shows how *kebang* used threats or accusations of witchcraft and ostracism against a Gaon Bura who disagreed with them. Therefore, the Gaon Bura must respect the *kebang's* opinion, and both institutions work together to benefit the villagers. If such a conflict arises, they hold a meeting under the leadership of Gam, where the Gaon Bura participates as a member of *kebang*. They discuss how to deal with the matter and present it to the district administration so that the decision does not affect the village members adversely in the future. The Gaon Bura also consults with the *kebang* first and then conveys opinions to the district administration on village matters, thus trying to bridge the gap between the traditional and the formal systems. Hence, they are reluctant to report the witchcraft-related violence and even death penalties imposed by the *kebang* to the authorities. Even when the authorities get the information, they are usually too late to stop the incidents or save the victims, and the culprits get away due to the lack of witnesses.

The Gaon Bura do not report witch-hunt incidents and even participate in them. In such cases, he gives false excuses for his ignorance of the incidents. For

example, one Gaon Bura said he was ill and hospitalized during a witch-hunt incident but was in the village. He did not report the incident on time to the authorities. In another case in Borduwa of Majuli, in August 2019, three family members, including a four-year-old boy, were murdered and cut into pieces by the villagers at night in the name of witchcraft. However, the Gaon Bura of the village says he was unaware of the incident until almost 48 hours later. They claimed that the *kebang* members attempted to conceal the incident and did not involve the neighbours in the murder to prevent the information from leaking. They reported the incident to the police, who arrived at the village and found that their women had hidden all the male villagers to avoid arrest. The men hid in the neighbouring villages for almost 20-25 days. A month later, when the situation improved, the Gaon Bura and *kebang* met together to negotiate with the police before handing over the names of some of the people who were involved in the murder. They wanted to minimize the harm to the villagers and their reputation and safeguard some members involved in the murder. The *kebang* of the village then gave the names to the police. However, some villagers alleged that the main culprits were not named, and some innocent people were implicated. They said the real perpetrators escaped because they were *kebang* members or their relatives who had a lot of money, land, and power in the village. The District Court recently delivered the verdict of the case, where nine people were found guilty. Out of these nine, two were from the same family. Their family confessed that they had taken the blame for other members involved and made a deal with the main culprits for the money. Their families accused the Gaon Bura and *kebang* of the village of initiating the deal and misleading them by advising them to take the blame. They assured the family they would not be punished and that the police would only detain them for three months. They also said the *kebang* members would look after them and handle all the legal matters. However, when the court sentences the culprits to life imprisonment or the death penalty, it leaves their families in despair and injustice. The *kebang* and other members have abandoned them and threatened not to approach the police. They are too poor to afford legal representation and fight for their rights in court.

To tackle such problems in the villages, the government has introduced the Village Defence Party (VDP) at the village level to help the Gaon Bura (village headman) function independently over village matters and to assist the police in keeping law and order and maintain peace in the villages. The VDP is unique to Assam in India, established under the Act of Village Defence Organisation 1966. Although it did not originate recently, it became popular in Assam recently, and now the government is keen to appoint such volunteers to reduce crime. It consists of 20-25 volunteers from each village responsible for safeguarding their area and timely reporting of the crime. The VDP empowers the Gaon Bura to act independently, safeguard the villagers, and inform the authorities of any crime or suspicious activity without fear. This reduces the chances of *kebang* interfering or influencing the Gaon Bura in cases where *kebang* members are involved and try to dissuade him from reporting to the police. The VDP also assists the police in preventing and detecting crime and criminals, gathering intelligence, carrying out routine patrolling duties, and undertaking various welfare activities such as repairing/building roads, bridges, schools, and planting trees. There are 19,881 registered VDPs and 4,058 unregistered VDPs in Assam. The VDP is thus a vital force in ensuring peace and security in the rural areas of Assam.

In the case of Sikari Gaon, it was observed that the Gaon Bura and VDP, who belonged to the same village, was loyal to the villagers despite being government employee. They had the duty to report the police on time, but he claimed he was not present during the witch hunt incident. He tried to protect his villagers and *kebang* members who punished the accused witches. He reported the police seven days after the witch-hunt incident. The initial reluctance of the Gaon Bura to inform the police about the witch-hunt incidents in Sikari Gaon was confirmed by Bhadra, a resident of Sikari Gaon whose brother was a victim of the witch-hunt. Bhadra narrated:

“The *kebang abus* and the Gaon Bura were confident that the matter would be resolved within the village without outside interference. When the *mibo's* witch trials continued for another 3-4 days, and the situation worsened, the VDP Secretary and the Gaon Bura began to panic because more delay in informing the police might cost them their positions. When they had no choice, they

reported the matter to the police. However, before doing so, they first met a *kebang* member and warned all the residents of Sikari Gaon not to say anything to the police. They also threatened to banish anyone from the village who dared to inform the police.”

The Mising community shows strong social cohesion and solidarity by abstaining from or delaying reporting witch-hunting incidents to the authorities. The Gaon Bura and VDP try to protect their fellow villagers from legal consequences. Even the victims do not speak out against the accusers or punishers when the police and other authorities ask them about the incident. In Sikari Gaon, the victims are reluctant to complain to the police or to talk about it with NGO personnel. As a victim mentioned, the *kebang* and Gaon Bura pressured him to keep quiet if he wanted to stay in the village. He said, “If I complain against the *kebang* and other members, my family and I will not live happily in the village. They will torture me. I will suffer the stigma for the rest of my life. I am getting old, and my children are small. Where can I go at this age?” It reveals the helplessness of the victims in the village.

Commercialization of Common Property Resources (CPR) and Conflicts

In 2003, the *kebang* of Sikari Gaon agreed to lease out the communal resources of the village, such as land, ponds, *beels*, and *ghats*, through tenders. It has led to the privatisation and commodification of communally managed resources of the village. However, the residents of Sikari Gaon are eligible to submit tenders. Once leased to individuals, all decisions about the use of such resources would be at the discretion of the individual owners, guaranteeing complete private ownership over those resources during the specified lease period.

In the early 1990s, Sikari Gaon had a low population density and abundant natural resources that sustained its inhabitants. However, this situation changed dramatically in the second half of the decade, when the Brahmaputra river caused massive erosions that wiped out large areas of land belonging to several adjacent villages, such as Muttum, Bhekeli, Sraibari, and Kongkur. These villages either vanished completely or relocated due to the river’s course

alteration. The displaced population, predominantly from the Koktak, migrated to Sikari Gaon, resulting in various challenges associated with rapid population growth in the region. With the increase in population, land and other resources began to dwindle, resulting in clan conflicts, for instance, the conflict between the Chiru Panging clan and the Koktak Panging clan. Since the Koktak Pangings had immigrated to Sikari Gaon after the erosion of their villages, the Chiru Pangings blame them for the problems faced by the village due to the rise in population.

Due to inadequate resources, mainly financial, communal celebration of several annual festivals and ceremonies like Dobur Ui, Porag, and Ali Aye Ligang, developmental works like school buildings, roads and bridge repair, and other local works suffered a setback. Consequently, the *kebang abus* approached every household to raise funds for those activities. Since those who had immigrated to Sikari Gaon, especially the Koktak Pangings, were already impoverished due to the loss of their property because of erosion before settling in Sikari Gaon, they failed to donate to the cause. In such context, the *kebang abus* elected a president and secretary for smooth functioning. The main objective was to put the communally managed resources of the village up for sale on lease so that they could use the money earned to celebrate annual festivals and ceremonies and implement village developmental works. The money earned through the sale of communal resources was generally to submit to the Gam, who is the actual custodian of the village money, and he releases the funds based on the village's requirements. The *kebang* believed the villagers had misused the communal resources since they had been using those at their discretion with no restraints. Therefore, they claimed that leasing out the communal resources was a justified step towards the welfare of the village. For instance, many village ponds and communal lands are utilized by the members of the Koktak Panging, who rely on selling the fish they catch from the ponds and cultivating crops on the lands since they lack other sources of income or government jobs that would enable them to live with dignity in the village. However, this decision provoked the resentment of many Sikari Gaon residents, particularly the Koktak Pangings, who had previously subsisted on communal resources, which would become inaccessible with the onset of privatisation and commodification of those

communal resources. The *kebang* has not considered Koktak Pangings' grievances. Nevertheless, they had been persistently expressing discontent in the *kebang* about the appropriation of funds by the *Gam* and *kebang abus*.

Table 5.1: Cash collection from CPR of Sikari Gaon 2020-2022

Sl. No.	CPR of Sikari Gaon	Size/Quantity	Cash collection		
			2020	2021	2022
1.	Land	119 Bigha	40350	35631	40201
2.	Beel (a lake)	10 Nos.	295942	340101	345950
3.	Ghat (ferry service)	3 Nos.	12309	10921	15755

The leasing out of communal resources generated an annual income of 2-4 lakh rupees, which was supposed to be added to the village fund. However, there had been frequent accusations, especially by the Koktak members, that only a tiny portion of this fund was spent on village welfare, while the *Gam* and other *Kebang* members embezzled the rest. A member of the Koktak Panging reported that commercializing the village's communal resources did not benefit the village except for the *kebang* members and the Chiru Panging. He said they feared the Koktak members' prosperity from using the village resources, which they had not used. He also said Chiru members were envious of Koktak members if the Koksaks harvested reasonable amounts of paddy and other crops and caught good fish in the pond. He claimed that after commercialization, they wanted to control everything and rig the tender process so that most Chiru Panging members won the tender and sold the resources to outsiders under their name. Such corrupt practices had been triggering opposition to the *kebang*. A particular incident involving two *beels* (wetlands) that were located within the private land of Koktak Panging families sparked a fierce conflict between the Koktak Panging and the Chiru Panging. The Koktak Panging families claimed compensation for the lease of their land, but the *kebang* refused to acknowledge their rights. As a result, the aggrieved families, along with some other villagers, defied the authority of the *kebang* and prevented them from accessing the two *beels*. As a result of the dispute on two *beels*, the *kebang* targeted not only the families in the conflict but also some other Koktak Panging families and individuals from other clans (Taye, Yein) who supported them in the rebellion

against *kebang*. The *kebang* seized the opportunity when the village was plagued by diseases and deaths, mostly affecting the Chiru Panging members, and sought *mibo*'s help in identifying the culprits. *Mibo*, a local healer from the Chiru Panging, assisted the *kebang* in publicly accusing them of witchcraft and sanctioning the supposed witches.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the role of *kebang*, the traditional village council of the Misings of Assam, India, in resolving disputes in the village. The *kebang* comprises over a dozen older men (*kebang abus*) with a *Gam* as its head. The council handles various issues, such as conflicts, violations of social norms, and crimes. In addition, it deals with allegations of witchcraft, which are prevalent in the Mising community. When a complaint of witchcraft is made, the *kebang* summons the accused and convenes a meeting under the supervision of *Gam* and *kebang abus*. They consult the *Mibo*, a local healer who can identify the culprit and prescribe a punishment through his rituals and supernatural powers. The severity of the punishment depends on the extent of harm or loss caused by the alleged witch. However, the *kebang* often fails to protect the witch-hunt victims, usually from the impoverished and marginalized sections of society. They rarely receive any support from the council members or the rest of the village. Wealthy and influential people can use witchcraft accusations to eliminate their enemies and maintain dominance in the community. They can also secure the support of the *kebang* members and the rest of the village, as shown by the case studies in the previous chapter. The violence and injustice involved in witch trials and witch hunts are legitimized by the institutional mechanisms of the village society despite their inherent flaws. The *kebang* system has undergone several changes under the influence of modern institutions, such as the police, Gaon Bura, and VDP. These institutions have impacted the decision-making process of the *kebang* to some extent. Nevertheless, the *kebang* still plays a vital role in conflict resolution. The next chapter will discuss the witch-hunt incidents, violence, and coping strategies of victims.

Chapter VI

Witch-hunt, Violence, and Coping Strategies

Background

Witchcraft accusations as a form of violence have been prevalent in many parts of the world for centuries. They often result in witch-hunts, the systematic persecution and killing of people suspected of practising witchcraft. Witch hunting is a violent form of witchcraft belief (Yadav, 2020) and is seen as a way of resolving conflicts, restoring order and enforcing social norms. However, they also create ruptures, disorder and trauma in the communities where they occur. This chapter focuses on the consequences of witchcraft accusations and coping strategies of victims in Sikar Gaon of Majuli, Assam. As already discussed, the *kebang* attempts to resolve the accusations. Nevertheless, in many instances, the resolution is in the accuser's favour and leads to witch-hunts and violence against the accused. The researcher draws on the theoretical perspectives of the anthropology of violence and scepticism to analyse the paradoxes and complexities of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunts in Assam. Victimisation goes beyond violence in the cases of witch-hunting. The victims suffer social stigma, exclusion and harassment. Such suffering has lasting consequences as it labels the victims and their families as witches and breeders of evil for their entire lives.

Resolution of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunt

The resolution of witchcraft accusations often results in the victimisation of the accused, who suffer social ostracism, economic hardship, legal difficulties, or psychological distress even after their release or pardon. The witch-hunt survivors suffer guilt, shame, or self-blame for their alleged crimes or resentment for their involvement in the trials, either as accusers or as confessors (Duncan & Cacciatore, 2015). Moreover, the burden of stigma continues to haunt the accused. They may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts due to the trauma of being accused, tortured, or persecuted. Moreover, they may have difficulty trusting others, forming relationships, or seeking help due to the fear of being betrayed, rejected, or harmed again. Some victims who resist the accusers or seek justice for their punishment may experience discrimination, denial of justice, or false imprisonment by the accusers. For instance, in Maluar Miri Gaon in Majuli, a victim who complained against his punishers was falsely accused of theft. The village authorities complained against him in the police station. He suffered imprisonment due to lack of evidence to prove himself innocent. He could not wage a fight against the organised village authority.

The term “witch-hunt” has become a metaphor for any unjust or irrational persecution of a group or individual based on false or exaggerated accusations. The metaphor draws on the historical experience of witch-hunting as a form of social control that targeted those who deviated from or threatened a society’s dominant norms or interests (Levack, 2006; Jensen, 2007). In this sense, witch hunting did not end with the repeal of witchcraft laws or the decline of witch trials but continued in different guises and contexts throughout history. For example, in Nazi Germany, Jews were demonised as enemies of the state and subjected to genocide (Gilbert, 1978); in McCarthyist America, communists were vilified as traitors and blacklisted (Schrecker, 1994); in modern-day Africa, albinos are hunted for their body parts and accused of bringing bad luck, cursed or possessed by evil spirits and thus people with albinism face stigmatisation, discrimination, and harmful practices related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks (Ashforth, 2005). The concept of witch-hunt provides a useful framework for analysing how the dominant group or institution shifts the blame for its failures or problems onto a subordinate group or individual. This scapegoating allows the elites to divert attention from their incompetence or corruption and justify their oppression of a vulnerable minority (Ashforth, 2005; Jensen, 2007).

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicates that more than 2937 people were killed in India from 2001 to 2019 on alleged charges of practising witchcraft. Only in 2019, 102 killings took place (NCRB, 2019). Also, the latest

report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2021 reveals that men made up 40 per cent of the victims of witch hunting; in some places, the number is as high as 70 per cent. According to the report, out of 68 members killed in the name of witch-hunts, 27 were males. The maximum number were reported from Chhattisgarh (20), followed by Madhya Pradesh (18) and Telangana (11). The North-Eastern Indian state of Assam has also been a significant hotspot of violent witch-hunts. According to the CID report of Assam in 2018, between 2001 and 2017, 193 people had been branded as ‘witches’ and killed, out of which 79 were males, and 114 were females of the total 202 cases that the police had registered (CID, 2018). According to personal communication with the researcher, the police reported more than 931 unregistered cases of witchcraft accusations in Assam. They claimed that most cases occurred in remote villages where travelling and collecting information was challenging and sometimes very dangerous.

In Sikari Gaon of Majuli, the police records showed only 15 cases of witch-hunts, while the actual number of witchcraft accusations was 53, among which 47 were male victims. The police confirmed that 15 people were physically punished due to these accusations.

Gradation of violence in witch-hunting

The witch trial/witch-hunt involves a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft, followed by punishment. The main actors in the witch-hunt are the accused, the accuser/accusers, the enforcer, the bystanders and the helper. After identifying the accused, the enforcers, such as the healer or *mibo*, the *kebang* members, and the other villagers, carry out violence and torture against the accused witches. They can act on their own or under the influence or direction of the accusers. The bystanders are the people who witness or know about the witch-hunts but do not intervene or help the victims. They can be passive, indifferent, fearful or supportive of the witch-hunts. The social norms or pressures of the community can also influence them. The helpers are the people who try to assist or protect the victims of witch hunts. They can be

relatives, friends, activists, NGOs, lawyers, journalists or sympathetic people. They can also face threats or violence from the accusers or enforcers.

A spectrum of brutality, with physical violence being a part of it, is witnessed in each case study. The following chart lists the abuses of victims in Sikari Gaon. The classification of violations is only for broad differentiation, although many of these spill into each other.

Table 6.1: Intensity and types of violence against witchcraft-accused

Sl. No.	Intensity of violence	Total cases
1.	Verbal abuse and harassment	31
2.	Social exclusion and boycott	7
3.	Economic exploitation and dispossession	11
4.	Physical assault and torture	21
5.	Sexual assault	2
6.	Murder and lynching	2

Verbal abuse is the most typical way of harassment. In a majority of cases, 31 out of 47, the victims were abused with a range of locally popular derogatory terms and labels that denotes a “witch”, including taunting, cursing, threatening or spreading rumours about the accused witch, such as *marune tani*, *daini and buttu oni tani*, *jadu jana manuh*, *bateloga*, *zara fukah kara manuh*, *masi haya* and *tani done tani*. This can cause psychological distress and humiliation for the victim and their family. All these words refer to a person who knows magic or eats human blood. Lambudhar Taye, an accused male member, was addressed as *masi haya* (man-eater) and *yonaam peligsumane* (sex addict) during the witch trial. Birson, another victim accused of witchcraft several times, was verbally abused by his neighbours, calling him a *marune-tani*, a liar, a drunkard, and a troublemaker. Guru Prasad, the self-proclaimed love finder (a person who helps others find love through a spell or ritual), was verbally abused by neighbours, calling him a fraud, *kala jadu kora manuh* (black-hearted rogue), and a disease spreader. Apart from the verbal abuse, the case studies reveal that public humiliation demonises the person, resulting in social exclusion and boycott.

Physical assault and torture is another common form of violence in witch-hunts. The intensity of such violence differs based on the severity of the accusations. Physical assault can include beating and forcing to consume human excreta or other substances. Torture involves severe methods of inflicting pain and suffering, such as burning, stabbing, mutilating, waterboarding, electric shocks, hanging by the limbs, sleep deprivation or sexual violence. Sleep deprivation is a common form of torture that attacks the core of a person's mental and physical health. It involved depriving the accused of sleep for days until they would hallucinate or confess to witchcraft. This was also known as "waking the witch". The accused are often forced to undergo various tests to prove innocence. In the Sikari Gaon, the *mibo*, administered the witch trial, where victims went through agonising tests like sitting on a stool made of thorny wood, holding iron balls or chewing whole betel nuts to prove they were not witches. For instance, Misings believes a witch can never finish chewing a complete betel nut. In some cases, attempts were made to kill the victims, but they survived. Some of the victims also faced grave physical injuries. Babakanta, Dumiwala, Gandhiram and Susul were beaten up with an iron rod when they resisted and did not confess the crime. They sustained severe head injuries. Gandhiram had lost his front teeth. Nepul, a victim of witch hunting in Sikari Gaon narrates:

"On the day of the witch trial, several men dragged me out of my home and made me appear before the *mibo*. They stripped off my clothes, made me wear a towel and kept me standing in front of the *mobo's* house for whole night. Then my hands and feet were tied, and I was taken to the backyard drain and forced to bath with the filthy water. I was feeling terrified and helpless. I could hear my wife wailing and begging everyone to have mercy on me. I could no longer take it and even though I was innocent, I ended up accepting all the allegations they had against me, including the killing of three men through witchcraft". He was allowed to go home after accepting all the allegations.

Kileswar, a victim of accusations, was tormented mercilessly along with his 8-year-old son. "The entire night, they continued flogging me and my son. My son kept wailing in agony, yet I could do nothing. Never had I felt so helpless," He

added. “My body was smeared with crushed chillies, and a hot tawa (a kind of an iron griddle) was placed to burn the skin. I silently endured all the pain they inflicted on me, but seeing my little son getting flogged, punched and kicked was too big a pain to bear. I kept praying to God to save my son and to give him strength to survive that horrifying night.”

Sexual assaults against male accused are also recorded. It can happen in various ways and settings, affecting men of any age, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. This can involve acts of a sexual nature carried out against a person’s will through physical force, intimidation or coercion, or any attempt to do this. The accused male members are intentionally punished by pressing their testicles, unwanted touching or groping of genitals, buttocks, chest or nipples when they do not confess to their crime. In extreme cases, murder and lynching are also a reality involving the killing, hanging, drowning or burying the accused witch. They are usually carried out by mobs who believe the accused person is responsible for deaths, diseases, misfortunes or failures in their community. In Sikari Gaon, the data reveals that two accused died after two weeks when the *mibo* punished them brutally; one committed upon humiliation, and the other succumbed to death due to injuries suffered during the physical torture.

These forms of violence are often used to extract confessions punish or eliminate the accused (MacDonald, 2004, 2021). Such violence occurs in situations with suspicion or hostility towards someone (Yadav, 2020). Torture is a more extreme and deliberate form of violence usually carried out by people with some authority or power over the victim. It is also more likely to have a specific purpose or goal beyond harming the victim. Torture is often used as a repression and terror tool affecting entire groups or populations (Akrong, 2007; Schnoebelen, 2009). The victims are often subjected to economic exploitation and dispossession. The case studies reveal that common post-trial occurrences include extortion, looting, confiscating or destroying the property, land, livestock and other assets of the accused witch. This can deprive them of their livelihood, income and security. It affects victim’s access to basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, health care and education. As a result, they become dependent on the accusers and deny participation in decision-making. It

sabotages their employment opportunities, controls their financial resources, or discriminates against one's inheritance, property rights or communal land use (Federici, 2008; Kelkar & Nathan, 2020).

The behaviour of the crowd in witch-hunt

An anthropological perspective on crowds highlights the localised and situational aspects of collective behaviour. A crowd is not simply a group of people in the same place but a temporary social formation that emerges from a common focus of attention and interaction (Blumer, 1969). Various factors can influence this focus, such as the presence of crowd crystals - individuals who attract attention by their actions or appearance (Canetti, 1962). In witch hunts or witch trials, two types of crowds can be distinguished: conventional and expressive (Milgram et al., 1969). Conventional crowds are deliberate gatherings that follow established norms of behaviour, such as attending a public hearing or a ritual. Expressive crowds are spontaneous gatherings that form around events with emotional significance for the participants, such as witnessing or participating in the accusation, punishment or lynching of a suspected witch. These events can trigger intense emotions among the crowd members, leading to collective action that may be violent or aggressive. Mobs are expressive crowds that pursue emotionally driven goals, often targeting a scapegoated group or individual (Massey & Myers, 1989). The accuser group tries to incite emotional hostility against the identified witch and to influence the crowd to act more violently towards the accused. In such situations, mobs act impulsively and destructively without regard for the consequences or the rights of the victims.

In some cases, it was also observed that before planning a witch-hunt, the accusers sometimes secretly decide on the method of punishment and mobilise emotional support from the crowd and the villagers. They also recruit more people to incite aggression towards the accused witch and offer them liquor as an incentive. These recruits manipulate the crowd by explaining how the witch poses a threat and how punishing the witch is necessary to neutralise the evil power. In some other cases, the accuser also provides liquor to gain support for

the accusation and the witch-hunt. This was also evident in many Mising villages in Majuli where witch-hunts have occurred.

Mr. DP observes, “*apong* and *phatika* (liquor) are distributed to increase the attendance to the meeting and to gain support for the accusation. Hence, the entire village joins the group and tortures the accused and their family members and sometimes, they expel the accused witches from the village. However, the villagers occasionally kill them. No one steps forward to assist them. If some villagers are interested in assisting the accused, they are also intimidated by the attackers. People go to the police station for assistance, although accepting the allegation and paying a fee is preferable to being expelled from the village. Ultimately, the accusers triumph and the accused are stigmatised.”

The accusers guide the community members who attend the meeting. Some people may want to support the accused but fear the consequences of opposing the community. Therefore, they choose to remain silent. Some villagers are persuaded to join the witch-hunt by the lure of liquor and even small sums of money; most locals join without coercion and transaction. Especially the young people aged 14-18, who have no personal grudge against the victims’ families, get involved in the witch-hunt out of a sense of conformity and peer pressure. They do not intend to harm the victims, but they get involved in the witch-hunt in later periods and are also influenced by the idea that “everyone is doing it, so we should do it too”. Many villagers join the gathering out of curiosity and sometimes to “watch the fun”.

Nirula from Sikari Gaon says that “generally, men accuse a fellow member of the village as a witch and mobilise others to support the accusation. Young boys are provided with imported liquor. Moreover, once they confirm the accusation, women support the men without understanding the reason”.

Role of rumours and gossips

Rumour and gossip are informal communication that spreads information or misinformation quickly and widely among people. They influence how people

perceive and react to events, situations and other people. Both can have positive or negative effects, depending on their content, context and intention (Stewart & Strathern, 2004). In the cases of witch hunting, rumours and gossip play a crucial role in creating suspicion, fear, hostility and violence against the alleged witches. In a tribal community, where people share similar values, beliefs and lifestyles, they feel a strong sense of collective identity and moral obligation to each other. Rumours and gossip are seen as a way of maintaining or reinforcing solidarity among the Mising, by identifying and excluding those perceived as different, deviant or dangerous (Bergesen, 1978). They serve as a mechanism of coping with uncertainty or crisis by providing explanations or solutions for the problems faced by the community.

In Sikari Gaon, along with distributing imported liquor, *apong* and *phatika* to the villagers, some of the accusers used ‘whispering campaigns’ (rumours and gossip) to influence the public opinion or the judicial process of the *kebang* against the accused. Accusers request a few supporters to spread and amplify information like the sudden death of Maloti, the wife of Babakanta and Maneswar’s rectal bleeding incident to portray the accused as evil or dangerous. That created fear, anger and resentment against the accused in the community. Those men and women manipulated public emotions and beliefs of the people and gained loyalty. Eventually, the people joined them in the witch-hunt and supported the accusers. The social pressure influences the *kebang* to compel the accused to conform to the majority’s opinion or face the consequences of the witch-hunt. The *kebang* assures to impose lesser punishments if they agree to the accusation.

Thus, rumours and gossip can express envy, resentment, frustration or dissatisfaction with the existing social order (Stewart & Strathern, 2004). These strategies play a crucial role in mobilising people against a victim who, in a matter of a few hours, is blamed for the misfortune of others by entire villagers. These factors play a crucial role, both at the beginning of the stressful period in the community and later during the accusation and mobilising support for the witch-hunt. Rumours and gossip through conspiracies play a crucial role in displacing reality in the minds of the people. In these cases, the “accuser group”

pursued the villagers successfully, convincing them who otherwise had no motive for killing or punishing the accused. Rumour and gossip established “a rationale of how witchcraft works” that becomes ‘true reality’ (Chaudhuri, 2014).

Traumatic experiences of the victims in the aftermath of the witch-hunt

The long-term effects of witch-hunts on the victims are examined in this section. As already discussed, those accused of practising witchcraft are subjected to various types of physical and mental abuse and execution. Long after the first attack, the victims continued to experience shame, anxiety, dislocation, and social isolation. In addition to the witch-hunt victims, the families and anyone who helps the victims suffer, making them secondary victims. In many instances, the wives took the brunt of the victimisation of their husbands. The victim’s wife had to deal with minor to significant penalties. The victims’ wives often suffer with their husbands, as they have to leave their homes and lose their livelihoods. Sometimes, they are also physically assaulted by the accusers. For example, in Sikari Gaon, Nilam was dragged and beaten when she tried to stop the attack on her husband, Dulal. In another case, Gudsi was forced to beat her own husband in public. In a different incident, Laliti and her daughter were brutally beaten with a rod when Laliti protested against the witch-hunt of her husband.

Labelling individuals as witches has a significant negative effect on their children. Due to the widespread belief that a witch endows his offspring with the malevolent abilities of witchcraft, victims’ unmarried children rarely get marriage proposals. The Gopal witch-hunt case is an illustration of this situation. Since Gopal’s family had a history of practising witchcraft, it was difficult for him to persuade Menam’s family to let him marry her. This forced him to meet her secretly at night, which led to accusations relating to his *kitik kinam* and *marunaam*. The long-term effects were caused by various explicit and implicit forms of violence, which have been divided into different categories to distinguish between different kinds of suffering and deprivations of the victims, as presented below.

Table 6.2: Consequences of witch-hunt borne by the victims

Sl. No.	Consequences of witch-hunt	Total cases
1.	Restrictions on victim's access to public resources	14
2.	Dissolution of marriage proposal of the victim/ victim's children	3
3.	Exclusion from any community gathering or religious functions	11
4.	Denial of medical treatments to the victims and their children	3
5.	Denial of education to the victims' children	3

Once a witch always a witch: Life-long stigmatization

Witchcraft accusations and persecutions are frequently used to marginalise or target disadvantaged groups in society. As discussed earlier, the witchcraft accusation leaves a lasting stigma on the accused, regardless of their innocence or ritual purification. People are always considered guilty once suspected (Mgbako & Glenn, 2011). Witchcraft accusations are essentially mini-death sentences since they permanently stigmatise and marginalise the accused, leaving many homeless. Witchcraft allegations are distressing for the accused and their relatives, particularly when witchcraft is believed to be passed down through families (Akrong, 2007; Nyabwari & Kagema, 2014; Quarmyne, 2011). When one family member is accused of being a witch, the entire family suffers the consequences.

The consequences on children resulting from an accusation of witchcraft have long-term adverse effects on a wide range of areas. “Once accused of witchcraft, children are stigmatised and discriminated [against] for life” (Cimpric, 2010, p. 1). As a result, they experience trauma, grief, fear, or guilt. Sometimes, they lose their caregiver’s protection and support due to the widespread belief that “once a witch, always a witch”. Victims’ unmarried children rarely receive marriage proposals. In one instance, the victim’s children were subjected to harassment and intimidation from the community members during the witch-hunt. As a result, one of the daughters tried to commit suicide to avoid the harassment. During the witch-hunt, the ordeal starts with the inhumane treatment of the accused to force a confession of witchcraft. As mentioned in the above table,

medical treatment was denied to the witch-hunt victims. Their right to education is denied since many parents refuse to send their children to a school where the children of witch-hunt victims are enrolled. In some cases, teachers refuse to accept children of the accused in their classes. In some cases, the family abandons them to escape from the criticism of the community. Their “abandonment by family, church, community, and even some government systems causes such children to roam the streets where many of them fall victim to drug and alcohol addiction, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, or trafficking for forced labour or sexual exploitation” (Secker, 2012; Cimpric, 2010). However, such consequences are not observed with the children of witch-hunt survivors in Sikari Gaon.

Disruption to social life and family

The social life of a community is generally disturbed by the charges of witchcraft, resolution mechanisms, and witch-hunts. Witches are viewed as a significant threat to the community in various circumstances since they are thought to harm relatives or neighbours rather than strangers (Hutton, 2006; Nyaga, 2007; Kgatla, 2007). Because people usually seek culprits responsible for their misfortune first and foremost in their immediate environment (Mencej, 2015; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015), it creates fear in interpersonal interactions, even among close friends. Sometimes, they are suspicious of their close family members and those whom they are most dependent on as having the power to bring them bad luck (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015, p. 23). There have been instances where people have gone as far as to harm or even kill the parents they believed to be the cause of their problems (Dovlo, 2007, p. 72). The witchcraft accusations in Sikari Gaon created a tense situation, as people feared being accused or suspected their family members, neighbours and friends. People avoided visiting other houses or talking to anyone about the issue. As more people were declared witches, especially from the same families or neighbourhoods, the tension increased, as people believed their evil power could kill them. This hampered social integration and trust and generated suspicion and mistrust among the villagers.

Witch-hunt victims are often expelled from their homestead and forcibly relocated to another area. In Sikari Gaon there were seven cases where entire families were thrown out of the village into utter poverty due to the expulsion, which disrupts their way of life and livelihood. The victims live in complete isolation and are routinely barred from neighbourhood meetings and social events. Losing access to public amenities like hand pumps, neighbourhood shops, markets, and community centres is common in these circumstances. Lalung, a victim of witch hunting, was expelled from Sikari Gaon and moved to Koilung village, where he had a relative. However, the villagers of Koilung opposed his presence. They denied him and his family and relatives access to village facilities such as the pond, the hand pump, and the community prayer hall. Another victim, Dumiwala, and his family were forced to build their house in an isolated location, where they had no contact with the villagers. The villagers who tried to reach out to him were also threatened, creating a barrier to any social bonds with him or his kin (Kuli, 2015, p. 85).

In Sikari Gaon, some of the accused men along with their women are driven from their communities out of fear of being considered as their accomplices. Ratika, the wife of a victim, was forcibly evicted from the village as people accused of assisting her husband in his witchcraft practice and of dancing and offering pujas with him on *amabhaisya* night. The consequences of accusations and witch-hunts are known to extend far beyond what happens to the suspected witches and frequently impact the immediate relatives, even after the punishment is meted out to the alleged witches. Due to their inability to socialise with their children after being accused of witchcraft and banished from their community, parents lose their essential parental responsibilities (Dovlo, 2007, pp. 81- 82).

Financial crisis

The charge of witchcraft has serious economic ramifications for the victims and their families. Eleven of the victims and their families experienced a loss of property or income, as shown in the above dataset (table 6.1). The victims must pay significant sums of money to the local healer/priest or the villagers. Their

houses and shops were damaged during the witch-hunt. The accusers cut down the trees in their backyard. The victims sell the livestock to clear debts. Others occupy their fishing ponds. As discussed in Chapter Four, jealousy arising from the victim's economic success sometimes triggers the accusations. Hence, the loss of livelihood, financial resources and ensuing impoverishment appear to be deliberate results. In certain instances, victims and their families were forced to pay a fine.

The forcible exile of alleged witches results in the loss of valuable human resources, depriving communities of essential assets that can contribute to growth and development (Sanou, 2017). The productivity of the household is affected by the marginalisation of male members, who usually take care of the children while their wives participate in economic and domestic activities. Missing women are more industrious and diligent in the field than their husbands. In response to the fear of witchcraft, this attitude unquestionably prevents people's endeavours for productivity and socio-economic growth. In certain situations, people are afraid to invest in a comfortable house, expensive vehicles, or even dress better than average. Some younger generations avoid returning to their village after achieving success in urban centres.

In addition, due to forced exile, those accused of practising witchcraft lose their social and economic status. When a person is accused of being a witch, they are frequently driven to leave their houses immediately. Hence, they hardly have time to pack anything, and their homes are frequently burned and their businesses are looted (Mgbako & Glenn, 2011, p. 389). A similar situation is observed in the context of Sikari Gaon. Depending on the severity of accusations, the accused are summoned by the *kebang* to evict the village immediately, and the crowd at the council meeting burns the house in the process of a witch-hunt. Hence, the fear of witchcraft, associated with its practises, undermines people's initiatives in productivity and socio-economic development, as the economically capable and socially active are frequently restricted from developing their full potential due to witchcraft accusations.

Coping strategies: Victim's response to trauma

The process of victimisation does not end with the witch-hunt. Trauma affects the victims on how they view themselves, their world and their relationships. Trauma can threaten one's sense of meaning in life and the assumptions one holds about the comprehensibility and meaningfulness of events. Furthermore, the psychological effects of trauma can be long-standing and potentially debilitating. Victims of witch-hunt experience shock, disbelief, anger, fear, guilt, shame, helplessness, hopelessness, or numbness. They may also develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance, hyperarousal, or negative mood and cognition. These responses and symptoms may affect their functioning, well-being, and quality of life.

Coping strategies are the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and the external demands of a stressful situation (Stephenson et al., 2016). In the context of the witch-hunt, coping strategies refer to how people accused of witches and subjected to witch-hunting deal with the trauma and violence. The central function of coping strategies is the reduction of tension and the restoration of equilibrium. The literature often distinguishes between negative coping that does not focus on the stressor (e.g., blaming others, withdrawal, resignation, self-criticism, aggression, wishful thinking) and positive coping strategies that focus on self-change or changing the problem (e.g., social support, problem-solving efforts, seeking information). Dempsey (2002) found that using negative coping techniques and exposure to violence was predictive of PTSD, anxiety and depression. The research emphasised positive coping behaviours and strategies employed by victims. Everly et al. (2000) indicated that helpful social support could provide information, companionship, emotional, and instrumental support. As Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis (1999) pointed out, receiving positive social support after trauma results in better adjustment.

In Sikari Gaon, the victims develop positive coping strategies to move on. Babakanta recollects, "The day I became a victim of witch-hunt, my life turned upside down. I felt terrible shame and humiliation and wanted to end my life.

However, my love for my wife and daughter and their love and support kept me going. Presently, the excellent academic performance of my daughter, scoring good marks in her exams, contributed to the betterment of my condition. My neighbours, who otherwise wouldn't engage with me socially, started visiting my house to congratulate me and my daughter on her success. To bear the expenses of my daughter's education, my wife has been weaving and selling clothes. My wife and daughter are also using their limited leisure time to learn sewing and embroidery in the village, and I try my best to help them by sharing the load of household chores. Their hard work, love and unwavering belief in me helped to survive against all the odds. The violence and humiliation meted out to me in the name of the witch-hunt haunts me to this day, and I often feel the urge to run away from this village, but at this age, it is almost impossible for me to migrate to a new place. I have no choice but to live here till my last breath."

Another victim, Gopal, migrated to a different village after the incident and never considered returning. He said, "I lived in that village for years and did all I could for its sake, but what did I get in return except humiliation, defamation and torture? Right after that incident, I moved with my family to a nearby village and took refuge in an uncle's home. My uncle approached the *kebang* and managed to get me a piece of land near his house to live in the village, and I shall always be grateful to him and the villagers for that". Shifting to a new village helped him to cope with the suffering of with-hunt. He did not suffer discrimination in the new village. The people of the village said that Gopal had embraced their village as his own, and he actively participated in all activities. They also spoke of his helpful and amiable nature. Gopal got married in the new village and has a daughter. He is surviving with his wife, daughter, and mother. However, his father had passed away.

Kashinath, a victim of a witch-hunt in Sikari Gaon, was accused of performing *muini baan* (love magic) on a girl who lived nearby. As a result of this accusation, he faced punishment and humiliation from his community. He left the village and sought refuge in his relative's house in Guwahati, a city in Assam. He never returned to his village after the incident. In Guwahati, he married a Nepali woman and started a vegetable business. He has a happy family

with a baby girl born in 2021. Although his parents wanted him to come back to the village, he refused to do so.

Likewise, Bibison Panging, a teacher by profession, attempted to restore his prestige (which he had lost when he was identified as a witch and forced to swallow human excreta). He has constructed a rehabilitation centre for victims at his present house. Despite all odds, Bibison ploughed a path entirely unique and different from the other victims. Every Sunday, they would gather and discuss various matters, which aided them in rebuilding their self-esteem and confidence, partaking in activities that helped bring joy and relaxation. He also helped the wives of the victims in opening a Self Help Group (SHG). He has involved other like-minded people in the village. The rehabilitation centre imparts educational and vocational training to the young girls and women of the victim's families. It involved teaching skills like sewing and stitching, making plates from leaves and making incense sticks. He supervises the activities of the centre. It is a ray of hope in a dark, gloomy path for a witch-hunt victim.

Responses from the families, neighbours and authorities

This section examines the responses of various groups to the cases studied. These groups include the family, the kin group, the neighbours or the community, the local authorities, and the police. The local authorities in this study refer to state and non-state organisations holding leadership positions with some degree of authority, command and respect within the community. They include local governance bodies such as Panchayat, Village Defence Party (VDP), and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Majuli.

Family response

It refers to all the members of the victim's household: spouse, kids, and parents, in some cases, in-laws who reside in the same home. The case studies show that, in most cases, the victims' immediate families are on their side. In each case, the nuclear family offered the victims every form of protection during and after the

with-hunt. Such relatives are frequently subjected to attacks while protecting the victims. The general reactions to victimisation are displayed in the table below.

Table 6.3: Types of family support to victims of witch-hunts.

Sl. No.	Family response	Nos. of cases
1.	Spouse is the primary support	19
2.	No support from spouse	2
3.	Spouse is threatened not to support the victim	1
4.	Victim's offspring supports but were too young to help	6
5.	Victim's son in law/daughter in law supported	3

In 19 of the 47 cases, the victim and their spouse always stood by one another while being victimised. In six cases, the victim's immediate family could not assist despite their support for him because they were either absent during the attack, too weak, or under threat from the attackers. There have also been instances where the victim's family was not supportive, yet certain members were not present when they were attacked. However, in most cases, they are the primary source of support to the victim in a helpless condition.

Kin group response

The kin group is not fully involved in safeguarding victims in all the cases. However, sustaining the hope of living among the victims is vital. The kin members help in providing employment and livelihood support to the victims.

Table 6.4: Kin-group support/involvement concerning the victim

Sl. No.	Kin group response	Nos. of cases
1.	Kin group supported the victim	6
2.	Kin group is neutral	21
3.	Kin group supported accusers	8
4.	Affinal relatives initiated violence	5

Strong support from the kin group was observed in a few cases, as mentioned in the above table. Only in six cases, the victims are successful in mobilising the support of the kin members to cope with the crisis. In 21 cases, kin members are neutral. However, they have not acted against the victim. However, in eight cases, the kin members are supportive of accusers. There are diverse reasons. In such cases, the accuser and the accused belong to the same clan/sub-clan. The cases where affinal relatives initiating violence due to the unacceptable elopement of the daughter or an attempt of son-in-law to marry for the second time. Hence, the kin group is not dependable for coping among the Misings. Instead, the support depends on the clan identities of the accuser and the accused and their economic relations.

Community response

Besides the kin group, the neighbours and village community stand out as the most antagonistic group, as discussed in the previous chapter. They actively participate in victimisation (Chaudhuri, 2008, 2014; MacDonald, 2004; Kelkar & Nathan, 2020). Hence, the community is not a significant source of coping for the victims. Nevertheless, in 29 cases, neighbours are not a threat to the victim, which indirectly helps the victims to cope with witch-hunt trauma.

Table 6.5: Support/involvement of neighbour with regard to the victim

Sl. No.	Community response	Nos. of cases
1.	Neighbour mourned the death of the victim and advised his family to report the matter to the police	1
2.	Neighbour is the accuser	19
3.	Neighbour is the witness in the <i>Kebang</i>	11
4.	Neighbour did not participate in the violence but kept quiet	29

In most cases, as indicated in the above table, neighbours are suspicious of the victim and join the accusers in the witch-hunt. Even in neutral cases, neighbours support the exclusion and ostracisation of the victims. The *kebang* never reconsiders the accusations in support of the victims. Hence, the neighbours and

the village community are not the potential sources of support in the coping of victims.

Response of the local authorities and the police

This discussion in this section reflects on the response of state and non-state actors. Here, the word “local authorities” refers to the state and non-state organisations and leaders who hold positions of power and respect locally, with the police serving as a substitute for state actors. The Panchayat, *dolung kebang*, and influential villagers whose opinions count due to their social and economic standing are examples of village bodies that make up the local government. Human rights organisations and the Village Defence Party (VDP) are significant in helping victims to develop coping strategies. The responses of the police and the legal system are vital in the contemporary scenario.

Overall, the local authorities—particularly non-state ones- like the Brothers organisation, intervened quickly to support the victims. Besides, they help victims file a case at the police station and follow it up. Subsequently, the police and other state authorities respond to the case and help the victim cope with the trauma. However, a few victims observe that the police are persuaded to do nothing or turn against the victim. MacDonald (2021) rightly points out that law enforcement was sluggish, vulnerable to manipulation, or careless in such cases. On the one hand, it is widely understood that the police organisation is dominated by patron-client relationships “in which ties of personal connections are stronger than loyalty to the general public” (Sharma, 2002, p. 217).

There are instances where the victim did not contact any organisation or obtain assistance or support. In such cases, the victims are afraid of the accusers. Hence, they refrain from approaching the authorities. They are demotivated to file any complaints if there was no action on their previous complaints. In the latter instance, the victims alleged that the village people had paid the cops to forgo any intervention. In one case, police visited the village after ten days of witch-hunt and arrested a few suspects. However, later, they did not find any evidence against the suspects. Thus, no charges were filed. During this process,

an NGO named ‘The Brothers’ played a significant role by actively participating and playing an essential part in assisting the police with their investigation, negotiating with the community for the victims’ rehabilitation, and providing them with assistance to rebuild and restore their lives. They are creating awareness in the community and among the victims to speak about the violence and identify the individuals who committed violence against victims. They are enabling victims to register cases against accusers. However, as the organisation observes, the victims fear consequences in the community. Hence, the response is poor.

Some victims alleged that the local authorities are silent and do not report such incidents to the state authorities. Instead, they would try negotiating with the victims. Local political leaders and the VDP tried to negotiate the issue with community members and the victims. In another instance, a local politician offered financial support to the victim’s family in exchange for staying quiet about the crime.

Amidst all these happenings, it has been observed that the police, as far as possible, tried to maintain a distance from the internal matters of tribal villages. “When such incidents (witch-hunts) happen in the village, the police always arrive late, and when they visit the place for their enquiry, they arrest random people from the village,” said Ratul, a resident of Sikari Gaon. He also said that “due to the law’s sluggish operation, the interrogation procedure takes longer. The police also arrest many people during that process who have no part in the witch-hunt, which discourages the villagers from reporting such events to the local police station”. A TMPK (Takam Mising Porin Kebang) leader, Provin Doley, said, “The police are responsible for keeping peace and security in the villages. However, they do not interfere in the life of the village community. Typically, they only get involved after the witch-hunts. Since keeping peace and order in the village should be their top priority, they do not appear to be doing a good job preventing the hunts. The cops are also feared in the village because of their reputation for brutality. The villagers refrain from speaking to the police about the incidents out of fear of arrest. By claiming they were not present for the event, they prefer to avoid such disputes.”

The Assam Police launched the Project Prahari program in 2001 to educate the villagers about the depraved practice of witch-hunting. A coalition of various societal players, including women's organisations, was formed to create awareness. Health awareness camps were conducted in the village under Prahari programme. The villagers are taught about health and hygiene through qualified specialists, and the local women are given training.

The initiative was started in Kokrajhar district by Kula Saikia, the former DIG(P) of Western Range, as a campaign among the village chiefs and elders to step up the fight against witch-hunts with a goal of social transformation and empowerment. The programme was implemented in more than fifty villages in the Goalpara district with the help of the village chiefs. Currently, this initiative is extended to other parts of the state.

While these steps are unquestionably beneficial, addressing the cases of witch-hunt victims by the police will have significant ramifications. Do they take into account the viewpoint of the locals' perspective of witch-hunting or just the victims'? How long will the agency be able to provide the survivors with protection? Does it compel the people to change their attitude and prohibit them from participating in witch-hunts? Or Does it compel the people to change the methods of conducting witch-hunts? To answer these questions, the following quote from a villager summarises the general sentiments expressed by the respondents: "Villagers fear the police. I never want to register a case because they ask too many questions. If you are rich, they will extort money from you; if you are poor, they will ignore you. They should prioritise people's safety, but they are corrupt, abusive and violent." The villagers also reported that the police were often late, indifferent or dismissive of witch-hunting cases, especially if the officer in charge was from a non-tribal background. They perceived the tribal as barbaric and violent, and did not want to intervene in their affairs. Sometimes, the police would advise the victims to settle the matter within the village rather than registering a case against the accusers. They would advise them not to risk being killed or ostracised by their community and wasting money and energy on legal proceedings.

Sinha (2007:1674) cites David Hardiman's observations on the role of the police in perpetuating witch-hunting among the Adivasis of Chhotanagpur. He contends that the police treated the Adivasis as violent and primitive, and often inflicted brutalities such as violence, rape and torture on them under the pretext of suppressing witch hunting during the colonial era. He also asserts that the colonial laws failed to eradicate witch hunting but forced it to become clandestine because of the police's apathy and animosity towards the Adivasis. The Adivasis, however, felt obliged to protect their society from harmful supernatural forces and continued to take action against witches through local authorities. They devised methods to conceal their practice from the police and other colonial agents. For instance, a respondent revealed the covert nature of witch-hunting in the area. The respondent said: "We believe in witchcraft, but people are afraid to talk about witch hunting. That is why we do it secretly." Hence, the decline in reported cases of witch-hunting in recent years may not reflect a decrease in the actual practice but rather an increase in its secrecy.

Some important laws against witch-hunt in India

Bihar is the first state to act legally on with-hunting with the legislation "Prevention of Witch (Dain) Practices Act, 1999". Under this legislation, a person who calls a woman or man a witch faces a three-month prison sentence and/or a one-thousand rupees fine, and a six-month prison sentence and/or a two-thousand rupee fine for doing so in a way that intentionally causes physical or mental harm to the victim. In 2001, Jharkhand adopted the "The Prevention of Witch (Dain) Practices Act". The Act intended to protect women and men from cruel treatment and give victims a legal avenue for redress. To prevent crimes committed in the name of witchcraft, the Chhattisgarh government passed the "Chhattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act, 2005". According to the Act, anyone who falsely labels a woman or man as a "Tonhi" or "Dayan" faces a three-year jail sentence, and anyone who physically harms such a woman faces a five-year sentence.

The state of Odisha passed the Odisha Prevention of Witch-hunting Act, 2013. This Act, gives the government the authority to organise different anti-superstition and anti-witch-hunting awareness campaigns in order to equip the legal system and the public with the skills necessary to stop the pervasive practice.

In 2015, the Rajasthan government passed “The Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act.” The Act outlines safeguards against the threat of witchcraft prosecutions and steps to stop witch-hunting in the state. A person who engages in witch-hunting (a serious offence) faces a sentence of strict jail time of at least one year and up to five years, as well as a fine of at least Rs. 50,000 or both.

Assam witch hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015

The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention, and Protection) Act, 2015 is critical in the present context, where communication technology is being used to magnify superstitious beliefs, black magic, and social prejudices. Such practices are primarily affecting the lives of marginalised groups. This Act is intended to provide adequate measures to prohibit witch hunting, prevent and protect people from such heinous crimes, and eliminate torture, oppression, humiliation, and killing of people in the name of witchcraft. The Act also provides guidelines for the relief and rehabilitation of victims of such offences.

Every offence under the Act is cognisable, non-bailable, and non-compoundable, according to the law. According to the Act, calling someone a witch is punishable by up to seven years in jail and a fine of up to Rs. 5 lakh. It also includes provisions for Section 302 of the IPC (punishment for murder) if anyone is murdered in a witch-hunt. Leading a person to commit suicide after intimidating, stigmatising, defaming, and accusing him/her of witchcraft may result in life incarceration and a Rs 5 lakh fine. The Act also prescribed various measures that the administration and police, in collaboration with NGOs and civil society, should undertake to educate people about witch hunting. It also stipulated that any fine imposed due to an offence be given to the victim or his or her next of kin as compensation. This Act aimed to enable the individuals to

recover from the crisis and trauma they suffered from witch-hunting. However, in Sikari Gaon, the victims did not benefit from the Act as they were reluctant to approach the police and legal procedures. An NGO also came forward and tried to help the victims get justice, but they showed no interest and refused to disclose the atrocities during the hunting or name the accusers involved in punishing them.

Even though the Act mentioned above enacts numerous measures, there is no national level legislation that criminalises witch hunting. As a result, the sections of the Indian Penal Code 1860 (Section 302, which charges with murder, Section 307, which charges with attempted murder, Section 323, which penalises for rape, and Section 354, which deals with outraging a woman's modesty) are used as an alternative to providing justice for the victim.

Mission Birubala

In 2011, Birubala Rabha, who was labelled a witch and subjected to a witch-hunt, launched Mission Birubala with the aid of several Organisations, including the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS). She started the campaign in Goalpara, in the western part of Assam, and carried it to Tinsukia, in the eastern part. People from many professions, such as social activists, teachers, and doctors, participated in the campaign. An international organisation called “1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize, 2005” nominated Birubala Rabha for the “Nobel Peace Prize, 2005”. This was done as an appreciation for the tireless efforts of Birubala Rabha and other AMSS Goalpara Sangha members to end the long-standing tradition of witch-hunting in the Rabha community of the Balijana Block.

Some organisations, including AMSS, TMPK (Takam Mising Porin kebang), NE Network, The Brothers, Sah Mozdur Santha, ABSU, and All Bodo Women Justice Forum Assam Network are engaged with the communities with their field-based interventions to end this discriminatory practice so that the accused men and women can fight for their justice under IPC/CRPC. These organisations, as discussed in the previous sections of the chapter, are not only a

vital source to cope with the scary scenario after victimisation and the witch-hunt but also help prevent the frequent occurrence.

Role of Takam Mising Porin Kebang to curb witch-hunt

Mising student leaders formed an association named Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) have been engaging in specific actions to find a long-term solution to this issue. A coalition of various societal players, including women's self-help organisations, student organisations, science clubs, and development and law enforcement authorities, is created due to their work. They frequently set up medical clinics in the afflicted areas and accommodate the victims whose homes are forcibly removed. Villagers are taught about health and cleanliness by certified specialists, and local women are given training. The organisation also constructed rehabilitation centre for the victims, and the centre is meant to impart both educational and vocational training, especially to young Mising girls and women to make them self-reliant. This is a significant organisation that aids in the coping process of the victims from Sikari Gaon and the entire Majuli district.

Today, many other organisations like Help Aid India; Action Aid and OXFAM are joining hands to rehabilitate witch-hunt victims. However, it requires rehabilitating Ojhas (the witch doctors) and rehabilitating victims. Mr. Bhaskar Pegu, TMPK president, explains: 'We have already conducted a meeting of the *mibos* at Koraibari, Majuli, and some confessed that along with treating patients, spreading superstitious beliefs about witches and their craft among innocent villagers has been their age-old business. We are considering opening a training institute for them, where the young and the old will be taught about herbal medicine and treatment. This will not only help the villagers but also be beneficial in dealing with various rural health problems at a low cost.'

Conclusion

Witch-hunting is a phenomenon that has existed for centuries in different parts of the world and has often resulted in violence, torture and death of the accused.

While witch-hunt can be seen as a form of social control that regulates the behaviour and beliefs of the population and discourages dissent or resistance, on the other hand, it creates rupture and disorder by dividing communities, spreading fear and violence, and undermining trust and cooperation. A victim's situation in the aftermath of witch-hunt violence can vary depending on the context, the severity of the attack, the support available, and the coping strategies employed by the individual. Coping strategies are employed to manage the problem causing distress and to regulate the emotional response to the problem (Hagemann, 1992).

The most important component of witch-hunting is the existence and efficiency of many institutions to address witch-hunting in terms of prevention, redress, and restoration of the victim's everyday life. The most significant problem, assuming that there will be witch hunts for various causes, appears to be how far institutions at the local level, which are closest to the victims, respond to the events. The results imply that the nuclear family and the household unit act as a source of primary support, protecting the victim even if that leads to their annihilation. The kin group response differs depending on how they contributed to the violence. In a few instances, the kin group of the married couple emerges as a significant aggressor. The neighbours develop mistrust for the victim, aid in the abuse and exploitation of the victim, or covertly aid in isolating the victim and their family.

The local authorities are in a position where they can intervene and take action against these crimes, but in reality, it does not happen. In most cases, they help the accuser with the support of villagers and avoid reporting the case to the police. The local authorities should have played a proactive role by helping the police, but usually, they do not cooperate. In some instances, influential people from the community manipulate the police. Hence, in most witch-hunt cases filed in police stations, the result does not favour the victim. The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention, and Protection) Act, 2015 will aid the victims in coping with the stigmatisation, violence, and trauma if police, local authorities, and NGOs work together to create awareness and curb the practice.

Chapter VII

Summary and Conclusion

The study aimed to understand the witchcraft beliefs, accusations, resolution process, and witch-hunt among the Misings of Majuli, Assam. The study explored the causes and consequences of witch-hunts, traumatic experiences of victims, and coping strategies. Witch hunting has existed for centuries in different parts of the world and has often resulted in violence, torture, and death of the accused. This study documented folklore on witches and witchcraft, influencing contemporary witch-hunt practices. The witchcraft-related folklore has considerably impacted the arrangement of social and economic relationships among the inhabitants of Majuli. Thus, it can help to explain the social, economic, and political factors that led to the witch trials and witch hunts. While most studies have shown that victims of witch-hunting have been women, the current study focuses on male victims. The current study reveals how a few individuals are often made scapegoats for social problems, such as illness, death, famines, and conflict, identifying witchcraft as the causal factor. Hence, witchcraft is often used as a pretext to eliminate rivals. The narratives of the accusers and witch-hunt victims offer insights into the intimate space of personal fear, anxiety, and victimization. Using violence in witchcraft accusations as a strategic tool to resolve conflicts and restore order produces social ruptures and disorder. In addition, the process of victimization does not end with violence. Traumatic experiences can affect the victim's social relationships. Coping strategies are adapted to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful situation through social support.

A few pertinent questions explored in this context include: Who is a witch? Why do people believe in witchcraft? Who are the accusers and accused? What are the factors associated with accusations? What is witch-hunting? How does society resolve the conflict? The term 'witch' has been associated with the malevolent power that can cause harm with their evil gaze. In the Mising community, a witch is known as *buttu oné-tani* or *marune-tani*, and the process/ritual involving

magic and mantras is called *marunaam*, which is witchcraft. The Mising believe that a witch rears an evil spirit which makes him/her powerful and enables him/her to use it on a target. The witches or *marune-tani* can cause harm to humans through illness, death of livestock, and crop failure. The *marune-tani* must regularly provide the spirit with a human soul, or the spirit will kill the practitioner.

The literature on witchcraft and witch hunting in anthropology, sociology, history, and gender studies, analysed the phenomenon in its intersectional nature of existence. Each of these subjects has identified categories of gender, power, class, and identity to understand the phenomenon of witch-hunting in different parts of the globe. Scholars have tried to understand the problem of witch hunting, primarily from a gender perspective, by identifying females as witches, with little emphasis on male witches. Thus, there are fewer studies by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists on witchcraft accusations against male members of a community, witch-hunt, and its consequences.

The present study aimed to understand witchcraft and witch-hunt practices from male victims' perspective. Concepts such as social control, persecution, and violence and theories such as dual deviance, scapegoat, and social stigma are applied for the analysis. The dual deviance theory postulates two groups, a deviant group (the accused and family) on one side and the moral entrepreneurs (the accuser) group on the other. The accuser group aims to enforce their norms and values on the deviant group, leading to sanctions and punishments such as violence, ostracism, or even death (Becker, 1963). The scapegoat theory describes how the accused men are blamed for the misfortunes and problems of society, such as illness, death, crop failure, or natural disasters. The accuser uses the accused person as a convenient outlet for their frustration and anger and as a way to divert attention from the real causes of their difficulties, such as poverty, lack of development, or poor health infrastructure (Douglas, 1995; Chaudhuri, 2012). The theory of social stigma explains how the accused men are marked as different and inferior by the dominant group, which uses stereotypes and prejudices to justify their discrimination (Goffman, 1963). The accused men are labelled as witches. The stigma attached to the label of witchcraft reduces the

social status and dignity of the accused men, who are often isolated and excluded from the community.

The socio-cultural profile of the Mising community reveals the history, migration, and social structure, including clan organisation, family, marriage, traditional dispute resolution system (*kebang*), religious beliefs and practices, land and economy, housing pattern, food habits and indigenous medicinal practices, and festivals to list a few significant aspects. The history and continuity in social organisation, socio-cultural practices, and the community's economic life were crucial to understanding the social relations within and beyond their locality. While tracing their history, it is also essential to understand the shifting social practices and the construction of different social identities in response to the change. Besides, the lifestyle, infrastructure, and development projects are explored since they have become significant causes of accusations.

Analyzing folklore on witches and witchcraft and the meanings people attribute to such stories is significant in locating contemporary beliefs. The folklore reveals the non-human existence of witches with supernatural characteristics. However, the human becomes a witch by emulating the characters described in the folklore. These folk stories have made an everlasting impression on the minds of the old and young Mising community members.

The folk stories prevalent among the Misings are male-centric, which expose the usual causes behind the protagonist taking the form of an evil spirit, such as jealousy and quarrels over property or women. For instance, in one story, the protagonists, Robo: and Nibo, are brothers. Robo: turns into an evil spirit because of his quarrel with his brother over property. Similarly, in Banji-Bote and Do: Bom's story, the reason behind their quarrel was a woman. These stories continue to have a considerable bearing on the belief system of the Misings since the causes behind witchcraft accusations in recent times can also be attributed to feuds over property, jealousy, conspiracy, unrequited love, and revenge. Along with such stories, the folklore about the Mising witch doctor,

known as *mibo*, is explored. The *mibo* plays a vital role in identifying and controlling evil spirits.

Mising believe in two types of spirits- benevolent (*agam uyu*) and malevolent (*pomjur uyu*). The Mising community believes unnatural death caused by an accident or an unknown infection or disease is the work of *pomjur uyu* or evil spirit. It happens when an evil spirit takes away the lifeline or *yalo* of the person. Then, the affected family members call *mibo* to examine the problem. The *mibo* performs *Mibo-Dakgam* (for identification of malevolent spirit and subsequently the witch) and *Yalo-Gognam* (regeneration of soul) and bargains the needed offering in exchange for releasing the patient's *yalo* from suffering.

Belief in witches or spirits is central in Mising spiritual and moral life even today. Kuli (2014) wrote that it formed an integral part of the religious and cosmological world of the Misings. According to him, "there is no genuine Mising who does not believe in witches" (Kuli, 2014, p. 83). Mising community describes 'witches' as the 'human embodiments of the evil eye' meaning that they are ordinary humans who are capable of supernatural powers which involve raising and deploying of evil spirits (Kuli, 2014), or a wild ghost known as *buttu* and keeps it at home like a pet in order to attack a person, potentially resulting in the latter's death (Pegu, 2019, p. 271).

The Misings believe that the practice of *marunaam* and the housing pattern are related. As Misings reside near rivers, living in a distinctive *taleng okum* or *chang ghar*, an elevated house constructed using bamboo stilts. The space below *taleng okum* is known as *kitik*, considered a family's private space. Entry into *kitik* is known as *kitik ginam*, which is restricted to family members. The *marunaam* is a secret magical procedure carried out in the dark, ideally on a new moon (Amabhaisya) night, which requires placing a talisman in the *kitik* precisely beneath the place where the target sleeps in the house. The *marune-tani* gathers a small portion of the material possessions, such as hair, nails, clothing, bed linens, and mosquito nets of a girl in case of love magic. He applies *sindoor* (red vermilion) to those items, keeps them in a *tabeez* (amulet), and buries them in the *kitik*. Due to the proximity of the

residences, inhabitants frequently interact with one another, making it easier to acquaint themselves with every aspect of the intended target that the accusers often invoke witchcraft as a cause of misfortune. Whenever a person is ill, they believe it to be a witch's spell. Thus, Mising's "construction of diseases or health and illness" is related to their belief system, particularly witchcraft. It is used against rivals, perceived oppressors, or to rouse the passion of love in the person who is the object of desire, to invoke the dead, or to cause the death of some loathsome person.

The socio-economic profile of the accusers and the accused reveals their relative positions in society. In particular, the victim's profile reveals their vulnerability in village society. It was observed that men aged 20-30 years form the most vulnerable group, followed by those aged 50-60. Out of the 47, 19 victims are married, 23 are unmarried, and five are widowers. Most victims in the age group 20-30 are unmarried. They are targeted because of earlier conflicts with family members, other community members, or marriage-related conflicts with affinal kin. Unmarried men are accused of witchcraft if they go to the *kitik* of the girls' house whom they love and want to marry. Most often, victims are from a particular clan in every village. Sikari Gaon has four clans: Panging, Mili, Taye, and Yein. Panging is the dominant clan. There are two Panging sub-clans: Chiru and Koktak. Most of the victims of the village belong to the Koktak Panging sub-clan (35 out of 47), followed by the Chiru sub-clan (6), Mili (3), Yein (2), and Taye (1). It reveals the vulnerability of the Koktak Panging sub-clan and the history of clan relations in the village.

In Sikari Gaon, economic and environmental stress create scarcity, insecurity, and uncertainty, making people more inclined to blame others for their misfortunes and seek supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. Flooding, drought, and erosion have resulted in the displacement of many families residing near the flood-prone areas. Therefore, most of the victims of witchcraft accusations are landless poor with no alternative income source. The lack of employment opportunities in flood and erosion-ridden Majuli creates frustration and resentment among people who struggle to meet their basic needs and aspirations. Witchcraft accusations and witch hunts can serve as a way of

venting anger and aggression or competing for scarce resources or opportunities (Miguel, 2005). In addition, poor healthcare services, lack of infrastructure, outdated equipment, and shortage of doctors and nurses add to people's suffering. Doctors and other staff are not willing to travel to remote locations because of the geographical conditions and poor communication facilities.

The significant number of accusations, fourteen in this context, are related to the illness or death of a human or an animal, which have been attributed to the act of a witch. The limited medical knowledge about illnesses combined with a cultural belief system that every problem in life has a supernatural origin "predisposes people to look for scapegoats who are responsible" (MacLean, 2014; Douglas, 1995). The poor healthcare services offer conditions for witchcraft accusations and witch hunting in Majuli.

The conflict over romantic love within families and with village members is the cause of the highest number of accusations. Fifteen such cases reveal its significance. The community often stigmatizes romantic relations if the girl's family disapproves. In such cases, it is believed that the young men either possess the power to control women's minds and bodies or take the help of a witch. Generally, it is believed that in cases of unrequited love, the boy uses *Muini Baan*, which requires them to place a talisman in the *kitik* precisely beneath the place where the girl sleeps in the house. Such kinds of magical practices, which Goffman (1959) called "defensive practices," according to which the performer avoids a direct proposal with the fear of rejection. Nevertheless, most often, Misings consider the *muini baan* as a *marunaam* (witchcraft) performance if used with malicious intentions.

Property disputes are a significant cause of accusations. It served as a primary reason for accusations in nineteen cases. The personality of the victim, particularly his assertiveness and non-conformity to community decisions, results in labelling him as a witch. Eleven of such cases are noticed in Sikari Gaon. The conflict arose between families when two ponds which were situated in the land of the Koktak Panging were identified by the *kebang* as a community resource. These ponds were a significant source of livelihood for the Koktak

families. Upon the non-payment of compensation by the *kebang*, many members of the Koktak Panging clan voiced their disagreement against the decision of the *kebang*. They believe that it is biased in the favour of the Chiru sub-clan. As a result, eleven male members of the Koktak Panging clan were accused of witchcraft by a local healer (*mibo*). They are blamed for causing problems for the people of the village, ranging from crop failures to the deaths of several people.

The *kebang* is a traditional institution of self-governance or village council that regulates the social life among the Misings of Assam. It is a collective body of elders, leaders, and villagers participating in decision-making. It resolves the issues relating to their village, such as social, economic, political, and judicial matters. A *kebang* is headed by the chief or *Gam*, who has the confidence and esteem of the *kebang abus*, the council of elders. The *Gam* may belong to any clan but typically represents the most influential one. The position of *Gam* is not passed down by inheritance, but the *Gam*'s eldest son has a chance to become the next *Gam* if the *kebang abus* agree. The *Gamship* is a prestigious and influential position in Sikari Gaon, which a member of the Chiru Panging has always held since the establishment of the *kebang*. The *kebang abus* are the key members of the *kebang*, who deliberate and decide on matters of significance. In Sikari Gaon, the Chiru Panging sub-clan claims to be the original settlers and holds most of the *kebang abus* positions. Three of the 19 *kebang abus* are from the Koktak, while the rest belong to the Chiru sub-clan.

The *kebang* settles any disputes without involving the police or the courts. This practice has been followed for a long time, even for serious crimes such as kidnapping and murder. The *kebang* members strive to reach a consensus through deliberation and dialogue, even if they have differences of opinion. Ideally, the *kebang* aims to respect all the villagers' views and rights and foster harmony and consensus. However, it may sometimes act as an authoritarian body to resolve disputes and maintain peace and order. Moreover, the *kebang* has traditionally excluded women and minor clans from participation, resulting in unequal representation and marginalization of their issues.

Kebang can be classified into two types: social *kebang* and judicial *kebang*. A social *kebang* is an assembly or council of villagers who manage the development projects of the village, such as community fishing and upkeeping of *murang okum*, which is limited to the village.

A judicial *kebang* consists of elderly male village members such as the *Gam* (village headman), *kebang abus*, and persons or families involved in a case. The judicial *kebang* handles civil and criminal cases involving political, social, and economic conflicts among the villagers. It follows a tradition of mediation, conciliation, and punishment, providing a platform for the parties to reach a satisfactory settlement. The *kebang* depends on customary laws, which are acceptable to Misings.

The Judicial *kebang* generally has three levels to dispose of judicial matters based on the jurisdiction in which it operates:

- *Dolung kebang* (village council),
- *Bango kebang* (inter-village council), and
- *Bane kebang* (tribal level council).

The most powerful and smallest administrative institution is the *Dolung kebang*. It manages the village's administrative, educational, judicial, and welfare functions. *Murong okum* (Community Hall) is where a *Dolung kebang's* proceedings occur.

The *kebang* is usually convened by the *Gam* when a complaint is lodged against a suspect. The council bases its identification of the alleged witch on the complainant's suspicion and the opinion of experts such as healers, priests, or astrologers. These experts use various techniques to confirm or deny the presence of witchcraft, such as observing the suspect's behaviour, inspecting animal organs such as examining the chicken or pig liver or conducting rituals with pebbles, rice grains, or *yakcha* (a sacred object) (Koyu & Singh, 2020). In some cases, the local priest may influence the council members and the villagers

to label the suspect as a witch, especially if the suspect has a family history of witchcraft practices. The family's reputation and the community members' distrust can put them at risk of a witch-hunt. If the council is not persuaded by the evidence presented by the complainant, it requests the *mibo* to perform a ritual called *Mibo Dagnam* to ascertain the guilt or innocence of the suspect. The council then summons the accused and announces and enforces the penalty. The accusations are often based on vague assumptions. Hence, the accused's position is precarious in the community and vulnerable to persecution.

In Sikari Gaon, the family background, economic conditions, and power relations between the clans and sub-clans are vital in accusations and identifying the witches. The social and economic status of the accused and the accuser are crucial in accepting or rejecting *marunaam* accusations and decisions on punishments. The village council meeting, the arguments, and the decisions reveal the status differences and power relations in the Mising community. The accused of witchcraft lack social and financial capital and rarely receive support from the village council. In a village where supernatural forces are blamed for misfortunes, crises, and diseases, people rely on the *mibo*, a person who claims to have divine or supernatural powers, to identify and punish the alleged witches. The *mibo* from the dominant Chiru sub-clan decides the fate of the accused, who often belongs to other clans. The *kebang* members usually follow the *mibo*'s views to award the punishment. The punishments are often brutal. They torture, lynch, mutilate, or burn the accused to eliminate the perceived threat and protect themselves and their community. These violent actions terrify the victims and the witnesses of the witch-hunt. The council creates a climate of fear and distrust, where anyone could be accused of being a witch and face mob violence without any legal protection (Yasmin, 2018). Hence, violence to resolve conflicts is a problematic strategy that often leads to more harm than good (MacDonald, 2004).

The *kebang*'s attempts to bring resolution and reconciliation to the parties involved in witchcraft accusations generally lead to witch hunts and violence. The term "witch-hunt" has become a metaphor for any unjust or irrational persecution of a group or individual based on false or exaggerated accusations.

A range and continuum of violations, with physical violence, was witnessed in each of the case studies. It results in ostracising, isolating, or shunning the accused and their relatives from the community or village. It affects their access to social support, resources, services, and opportunities. Economic exploitation and dispossession are common, including extorting, looting, confiscating, destroying property, land, livestock, and other assets. Economic violence can affect access to basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, health care, and education. It sabotages one's financial resources or discriminates against one's inheritance, property rights, or use of communal land. Physical assault includes beating, flogging, burning, stabbing, mutilating, or forced consumption of excreta or other substances by the accused. Torture and systematic methods of inflicting pain and suffering, such as waterboarding, electric shocks, hanging by the limbs, sleep deprivation, or sexual violence, are prevalent. These forms of violence are often used to extract confessions and punish or eliminate the accused (MacDonald, 2004; 2021). Long after the first attack, the victims continued to experience shame, anxiety, and social isolation. A variety of explicit and implicit forms of violence cause these long-term effects. Victims are often denied access to their family or community life, as they are rejected or abandoned.

The process of victimization does not end with the witch-hunt. Trauma associated with such incidents affects how a person views himself or herself, his or her world, and his or her relationships. Trauma can potentially threaten a person's sense of meaning in life and the assumptions he/she holds about the comprehensibility and meaningfulness of events. Coping strategies are the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and the external demands of a stressful situation (Stephenson et.al. 2016). In the context of witch hunt, coping strategies refer to how the accused or those who witness witch hunting deal with the trauma and violence they face.

The existence and efficiency of the institutions are essential to address witchhunting in terms of prevention, redress, and restoration of the victim's normal life. The nuclear family acts as a support system for the victim, even if that leads to their annihilation. The kin group response differs depending on how

they contribute to the violence. The neighbours are often hostile; participate in witch-hunts and exploitation of the victim and his family. In most cases, the atrocities are not reported to the police. The traditional authority often influences the formal authority to avoid probing on with-hunt cases.

Witchcraft is a prevalent phenomenon among the Misings and is believed to be transmitted through family line. Folk stories influence the practices. In many cultures, witchcraft skills are believed to be nurtured and inherited within families, and this shapes the witchcraft accusations that are often based on the interpersonal relationships and reputation of certain families. Thus, witchcraft is not only a personal attribute but also a collective and inherited one. Because of such belief systems and fear of witchcraft attacks, people resort to healers or religious leaders who can offer protection, diagnosis, and treatment. The *mibo* is a male priest with the highest rank among the Misings. He can locate and control evil spirits and prevent epidemics by using his specialized knowledge or abilities. The *mibo* also plays a crucial role in legitimizing witch-hunting, a common practice among the Misings. He confirms the presence of witchcraft, identifies the accused witch, and justifies the witch hunting.

As mentioned, *marunam* (witchcraft) is performed under the space below the *taleng okum* (elevated platform house), called *kitik*, a private area for the family. The entry into the *kitik* is called *kitik ginam*. The *kitik* serves as a site for two distinct practices: witchcraft and romance. Witchcraft is performed by a *marune-tani* (the witch), who secretly collects a piece of the target's belongings and buries it in the *kitik*. The *marune-tani* can easily get the item because of the proximity of the dwellings and the frequent interactions among the residents. Witchcraft accusations are not only made by outsiders but also by close kin members. In most cases, the accusers and accused know each other, and most of the accusers are from the same village. They are family members, neighbours, or related through marriage. In a study of a Kwahu lineage, Bleek (1975) observed that most of the accusers and accused are related by blood or marriage. Among the Misings, the witchcraft accusations act as a means to express and resolve the latent hostilities in the kin relationships.

The Mising community prohibits pre-marital relationships between boys and girls from the same village, as they are considered siblings irrespective of their blood ties. However, in some instances, such relationships develop, and they convene in *kitik* at night to engage in private conversations. If the girl reciprocates the boy's interest, they may marry with their parents' approval. Due to the dual function of the *kitik* as a locus for witchcraft and romance, unmarried men in illegitimate affairs are often implicated as indulging in witchcraft. They suffer from accusations when they are suspected of intruding into the *kitik* (private space) of others. The suspicion arises especially when a family experiences illness or death. In such cases, pre-existing conflicts between the families of the romantically involved partners may lead to revenge through witchcraft accusations. The family background, economic conditions, and power relations between the accused and the accusers are crucial factors in the identification and persecution of the accused. These factors influence the resolution process and the punishments. The village council meeting (*kebang*) is a site where status differences and power relations are exposed through arguments and decisions. The dominant clans possess the land and enjoy the support of the tenant families. They actively participate in village politics as the *kebang* members and exert control over the village. On the other hand, most of the victims belonging to the Koktak sub-clan are migrants to the village due to erosion of their lands. Their representation is poor in the village council. Hence, their opinion is ignored by the *kebang* while making the decisions.

The traditional tribal council attempts to preserve its authority and legitimacy by resorting to customary forms of power, even when modern institutions, such as the court, police, and other state mechanisms, exist. Witch-hunting victims suffer from violence, social stigma, exclusion, and harassment. However, if they try to flee, hide, or seek police protection, they face severe torture from the villagers and sometimes lose their lives. The only option for the victims is to abandon their homes and family and escape to an unknown place.

Witchcraft accusations have lasting consequences for the victims and their families, who are stigmatized and ostracized by society. Therefore, coping strategies and social support are essential for their well-being. One possible

strategy is to seek legal or social protection from authorities or organizations that can assist the victims of witchcraft accusations. For instance, India enacted several laws to ban witch-hunting and provide compensation and rehabilitation for the victims. Most of the victims in rural India are illiterate and vulnerable. They do not have the awareness and education to challenge the false accusation or seek legal help. Moreover, some activists and NGOs conduct awareness campaigns and workshops to challenge the myths and stereotypes about witchcraft and empower the affected men and women. Another possible strategy is to find emotional support from family, friends, or community members who can offer information, companionship, and instrumental support, such as legal aid, that can reduce the stress of the accused and facilitate resilience. Furthermore, some victims join support groups or networks of survivors who share their experiences and offer mutual help. A final possible strategy is to practice self-care and positive affirmations to cope with the psychological trauma and stigma.

There is a significant relationship between clan politics and witchcraft accusations. Clan politics refers to the role of clans in political organization and decision-making (Collins, 2004). Clans are informal organizations based on kin and fictive kin ties that profoundly impact the decision-making process. Witchcraft accusations are often made against members of other clans because they believe in “witchcraft substances” that can be used to harm others (Pritchard, 1976). These substances are believed to be inherited from one’s ancestors and passed down through the generations (Dysa, 2013). Witchcraft accusations can also be used to challenge the authority of clan leaders and undermine social cohesion, leading to inter-clan conflict (Nadel, 1970; Hermkens, 2015; Sanou, 2020). However, it is different in the case of the Mising community. For instance, the Chiru and Koktak are sub-clans of Panging. The Chiru sub-clan members often accuse the Koktak sub-clan members and consider them as “outsiders.” Conflicts between Koktak and Chiru result from unequal (social, political, and economic) distribution of resources. The Chiru used witchcraft accusations as a social control mechanism against the ‘deviant’ members from other sub-clans.

The relation between social control and deviance is significant. The dual deviance theory explains the interaction of two groups: a deviant group (the accused and family) and a moral entrepreneurs group (the accuser). In this case, the Chiru members are seen as the moral entrepreneur group, and the Koktak members are seen as the deviant group. The theory suggests that the moral entrepreneurs group is responsible for creating and enforcing social norms and values defining deviant behaviour. The deviant group is then labelled as such by the moral entrepreneurs group, which leads to the implementation of social control mechanisms to regulate their behaviour (Becker, 1963).

The people rely on local healers and medicine men from the Chiru sub-clan. *Mibo*, the local priest, also plays the role of a moral entrepreneur. The *mibo* identifies Koktak members as responsible for spreading diseases and deaths. With the help of *mibo*, the village council scapegoats Koktak members and blame them for misfortunes such as illness, death, crop failure, disruption of marital alliances, natural disaster, and all other problems arising in the village. The belief system that connects every problem in life to a supernatural origin predisposes people to look for scapegoats who are responsible (Maclean, 2014; Douglas, 1995). The witchcraft accusations made by Chiru against Koktak members can be seen as an attempt to maintain their dominant position in the village. Such stigmatization results from a social control mechanism used by the Chiru Panging sub-clan to maintain their power and authority over other clans in the village. Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma is also relevant to this discussion. Stigma is an attribute that conveys devalued stereotypes. For Goffman, stigma is a general aspect of social life that complicates every micro-level interaction (Goffman, 1963). The accusations of the dominant clan aiming at legitimization of its actions using social control mechanisms stigmatize the accused family. Such stigmatized identity haunts the family members for generations despite their innocence. They become easy targets for accusations.

According to Sinha (2015), persecution is often caused by economic and social subjugations, where the less privileged are made scapegoats in the process (Roy, 1998; Chaudhuri, 2014). In such cases, the state can delve into the causes of economic subjugation to empower the vulnerable sections of society. It can be

achieved through various means, such as providing education, healthcare, and employment opportunities to the marginalized sections of society. By doing so, the state can help to reduce the economic and social disparities that often lead to persecution and discrimination. Roy (2018) highlighted the culturally sanctioned nature of witch-hunts in the tribal region of south Bihar, emphasizing its dynamic and layered characteristics. The decisions made by the *kebang*, a self-governing indigenous institution of the Mising tribe in Assam, are deeply rooted in cultural legitimacy. This cultural legitimization poses a significant challenge for the state in effectively responding to the dire consequences associated with witch-hunts. The community may perceive the state's opposition to traditional practices as an imposition of the majority culture.

Addressing the grave repercussions of witch-hunts requires the state to exercise caution when dealing with traditional practices that perpetuate societal injustices. It is crucial to consider the cultural context and potential consequences of these practices. While it is essential to safeguard human rights and promote justice, the state must also respect cultural diversity and avoid imposing the majority culture on marginalized communities. By adopting a nuanced approach that balances these considerations, the state can work towards eradicating societal injustices without undermining cultural identities and traditions. The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015, was enacted to ensure human safety and dignity. However, the effective implementation of this act requires the active involvement of the police and civil society in creating awareness among the people. The police play a crucial role in enforcing the law and taking strict action against individuals involved in witch-hunting activities. They can conduct awareness campaigns, organize workshops, and engage with local communities to educate them about the provisions of the act and the importance of respecting human rights. Moreover, they strive to build trust among tribal people by fostering a sense of belongingness and demonstrating their commitment to their well-being. By doing so, they aim to dispel any perception of being an outsider and establish themselves as allies in the fight against witch-hunting activities. Civil society organizations also have a significant role in creating awareness and promoting social change. They can collaborate with local communities, religious leaders, and other stakeholders to

organize events, seminars, and discussions on witch-hunting. These initiatives can help challenge deep-rooted beliefs and practices that perpetuate violence against individuals accused of witchcraft. Striking a balance between respecting cultural diversity and safeguarding human rights is crucial. It can help foster an environment of peace and dignity for everyone.

The Mising people firmly believe in witchcraft and its negative impact on society. Hence, they attribute any adversity to witchcraft. They resort to witchcraft to trace the cause of any event they fail to explain. Such belief results in conflicts that destabilise the community. The community resolves the conflicts through a traditional dispute resolution mechanism. The resolution process segregates the accusers and the accused. The resolutions often favour the accuser, crystallizing the dominant's role in social control. It results in violent witch-hunts. The victims suffer social ostracisation and stigma, forming two rival factions in village society. The scarcity of economic opportunities amplifies the differences in clan identity, social relations, and power dynamics. Hence, the efforts to restore order often result in disorder in village society and favours the beholders of power.

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APPENDIX I

Glossary of Mising words

Mising	English
Agam uyu	Benevolent spirit
Apong	Traditional local rice beer
Baan-mara	Invisible arrow
Butu-onam	Rearing of evil spirit
Donyi-Polo	Sun-Moon
Dogne	A sacred tool of local priest
Gam	Traditional village council head
Kebang	Village council
Kebang Abus	Council of elders
Kitik	The space below an elevated house
Kitik-ginam	Entry into the space below the elevated house
Marune-tani	Witch
Marunam	Witchcraft
Mibo	Traditional local priest
Mibo-Dagnam	A type of ritual conducted by local priest
Mi:ro	A local priest
Midang	Marriage
Muini-baan	Love magic
Murong okum	Community hall
Opin	Clan
Pomjur-uyu	Malevolent spirit
Tabeez	Amulet
Taleng-okum	Elevated house constructed using bamboo
Urom	Soul
Yakcha	A sacred sword of local priest
Yalo	Shadow/soul/lifeline
Yalo-ginam	Loss of longevity
Yalo-gognam	A ritual conducted by local priest to repossession of the temporary lost soul of a patient



Witch-hunt Accusations and Violence against Women among Misings of Assam, India

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KEYWORDS

Witchcraft, Witch-hunt, Women, Mising, Patriarchy

ABSTRACT

Witchcraft and witch-hunt cases are frequently reported in the news media from Assam, India. Most often, women are the victims of witch-hunts in this region. They identify a witch based on suspicion without any evidence of harm being done. Upon identification as a witch by a mibo (a ritual specialist), they are subjected to severe punishments such as physical abuse, humiliation, social boycott, and even death. In several cases, the witch-hunt victims go through severe psychological trauma from which they could never recover. There is no social support mechanism as the community disowns them. In this context, the present study inquires into the belief system of the Mising society of Assam and the role of witchcraft. It further explores the accusations causing the witch-hunt and the implications on the witch-hunt survivors from a feminist perspective. In doing so, the paper analyses the power struggle in the Mising community and its operation in stigmatising women and making them the victims of violence.

Introduction

One of the most important impediments to research on witchcraft in India is its extreme sensitivity. Fear of retaliation and exclusion from society makes it difficult for participants to disclose their experiences. The community maintains secrecy during actual witch hunts. In a few cases the accused are murdered in ‘public trials’ by a traditional conflict resolution system. There has been little or no information on how the accused feels. The present paper is based on the experiences of witch-hunt survivors. The ethnographic study was conducted in Borduwa luit Chapori village of Majuli, an island district of Assam. The researcher attempts to understand the issue using the feminist research methodology. The data collected primarily employed the case study method. Besides, personal interviews and group discussions were conducted to triangulate the data collected using case studies and to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

The Assam state, located in the North-Eastern region of India, has been a significant hotspot of witch hunts, with deep and strong roots, primarily among the tribal communities (Bhattacharya, 1994). Witch hunting, which involves executing a “witch”, is a widespread, superstitious, and malicious activity found among the indigenous tribes of Assam, such as the Rabha, Hajong, Mising, and Bodo. In the name of punishing witches, victims are beaten, tortured, raped, set on fire, lynched, and sometimes ostracised. The present study delves into witch-hunting among the Misings of Assam, India.

The Misings are one of the major tribes of Assam. This tribe is Mongoloid in race and traces

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its origin to the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The Mising and the Adi claim to have a common progenitor named Abotani, who is known as the “Father of Mankind” or “Father of the Human Race” (Nyori 1993:2). The Misings are also known as Miris, meaning middlemen were originally hill tribes living in North-West of China. They came down to Arunachal Pradesh and settled in Assam centuries ago. They inhabit the mountain regions of Subansiri, Siang, and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) before they came down to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam (Gait, 1907), where they established their villages in and around the undivided districts of Lakhimpur, Drang, and Sivasagar (Pegu 2019:28).

The present study was conducted in Majuli, the world’s largest river island primarily inhabited by the Mising population. As per the 2011 census, they comprise 43 percent of the island’s population. In the Borduwa luit Chapori village, all the residents are from the Mising community. The island experiences flood almost every year. Hence, they construct houses with a raised platform, four to five feet above the ground, known as Taleng Okum.

Spirits and witchcraft

The religious and cosmological universe of the Misings includes a firm belief in *Uyu* (spirits) and *marune tani* (witches). They are deeply ingrained in folklore which has a considerable impact on how social and economic relationships have been arranged and a more significant impact on how people perceive illness, death, and medicine. Fear of the *taleng uyu* (upper abode spirits) plays a significant role in their economic activities, such as agriculture, hunting, and food gathering. It also underpins the celebration of all festivals and religious observances. The *taleng uyu* are considered adversaries, and one of the primary purposes of the Mising celebration is to win over them and counteract their harmful intentions. *Pomjvr Uyu* (malevolent spirits) and *Agam Uyu* (benevolent spirits) are different kinds of taleng uyu. *Pomjvr Uyu* spirits are viewed as dangerous, violent, destructive, jealous, and vindictive of humans. They cause diseases, kidnap children, and destroy crops to harm humanity. As a result, sacrifices and offerings must be made as frequently as desired to appease these spirits. *Mibo* is the chief priest of Misings. His ancestor is Sirki Nane, the closest relative of Donyi-Polo, who physically descended from heaven (Regy Regan) to bestow upon him a scapular with the sacred thread and a holy sword of the order. *Mibo* possesses extraordinary abilities that allow him to transform his soul and connect with spirits, and he uses these abilities to communicate with spirits. Through *mibo dagnaam* (steady footwork) and chanting with *ahbangs* (hymns), *Mibo* can transform his soul and communicate with the spirit causing the illness, thus serving as a bridge between the spirit and the human world. On the other hand, the good spirits, or *Agam Uyu*, are only concerned with defending the natural and human worlds. In addition to showing mercy and defending family members from *Pomjvr Uyu* (evil spirits), they care for the welfare of the living children. Nevertheless, sacrifices are not necessary for *Agam Uyu*.

The patriarchal nature of the Mising community was inextricably linked to the formation of witches. Even while men and women can become witches, the terminology has maintained the gender difference. Thus, the terms commonly used to characterise witches are feminine. Frequent usage of *daini* (female) to refer to a witch over *daina* (male) reveals dominant social constructions of witchcraft, a phenomenon identified as evil. The traditional witch doctors are all men, which highlights the significance of gender preference in the development of witchcraft (Sinha, 2015). It is reinforced in many myths regarding the genesis of witchcraft among the Misings). The healers, such as *ohjas*, *deodhai*, and *mibo* are men. It reveals the community’s identification of malevolent with a female and benevolent with a male.

The Mising claims that Pedong Nane, the first human mother, gave birth to millions of animate and inanimate objects, malevolent spirits, and demons, including Biri botou (the spirit of rivers and ponds), Nomgu botou (the spirit of disease, poverty, and misery), along with benevolent spirits. Thus, the idea

of witches and spirits widely spread among the Misings over time. Although women play a crucial role in the creation process, oral histories about the genesis of witchcraft suggest that women are held accountable for all sources of negative power since all demons or evil spirits sprang from Pedong, the first mother of humans. Such constructions of society have significant components of gender inequalities and perpetuated the stereotypes of men as witch doctors (*mibo*) and women as witches.

Role of priests: The Mibo and the Mi:ro

A witch doctor, or *Mibo*, is significant in locating and controlling evil spirits. According to Borah and Das (2019), *Mibo*, the leader of all Mising priests, is believed to have supernatural abilities. *Mibo* is the son of Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon), according to the Mising belief system, and he was sent to Dong Amang (earth) in human form to execute religious ceremonies to fend off human suffering like disease and illness. The terms *Mi*, which means man, and *abu*, which indicates a father figure or protector, are combined to form the word *Mibo*. Sirki Nane gave him a special ordination (*uirnam*). Sirki Nane's choice for *mibo* is always a man who oversees the duties and other ceremonies carried out by subordinate priests. For these reasons, he is a significant religious, political, and social figure in the Mising community. *Mibo* is identified as a psychic, fortune teller, and doctor who can heal anyone and direct and guide a person in the right direction due to his magical abilities.

Older *Mibos* identify potential future *mibos* through a rigorous process. They identify young boys with exceptional abilities and keep them under close observation. Such boys possess natural abilities to foresee the future from an early age. The *mibo* nurtures them from an early age on how to put their innate skills into practice. Younger boys work as apprentices under experienced *mibo* to enrich their skills. They are known as *Mi:ros*. The *Mi:ros* responsibilities include memorising the *Aa:Bang shlokas*, learning about medicinal plants, remembering the items needed for religious ceremonies, learning the symbols used in spells, remembering the habits and behaviours of various spirits, remembering offerings and sacrifices required to satisfy spirits, and lastly remembering the rules of the offerings and sacrificial ceremony.

According to Padun (2005), the *Mibo*'s innate abilities determine their capacity to contact the spirits. In order to take possession of the bodies of the *mibo* after identifying parallels, trainee *Mi:ros* practice the habits of the spirits (Padun 2005:139). As the community believes, the trainee *Mi:ro*'s natural skills enable him to practice the habits of spirits. Through their familiar spirit, *Mibo* reaches the world of spirits and seeks out the causes of illnesses or bad luck and remedies for them (particularly with the aid of benevolent spirits). *Mibo* uses magical powers and chants *Shlokas* of *Aa:Bangs* to call upon the benevolent spirits for a visit. The spirit enters into the body of the *mibo* and helps locate the spirit causing harm to the victim. It tries to convince the evil spirit to mend its ways or resolve its anger by sacrificing domestic animals. The familiar spirit leaves the body of the *mibo* once all work is complete, and the *mibo* returns to his normal state from unconsciousness. The *mibo* uses his *Dokne*: (a stone-like tiny object with the colour and size of a corn kernel) to speak with his familiar spirit, and he sings *Mibo Aa:Bang* to convince the evil spirit while swinging a long sword called *Yoksa* in his hand.

Mising people regard the *mibo* as a religious leader or priest who actively participates in preventing epidemics by using his specialised knowledge or abilities. Female members cannot become *mibo*; only male members are permitted as the community identifies them as possessing such abilities. It is vital to note the difference among the Mising priests. *Mibos* are superior in the system, followed by *Mi:ros*. *Mi:ro* serves *Mibo* as a junior assistant and learns how to recognise the traits of evil spirits, memorise *Ah:bang* hymns, remember various foods used in religious rituals, and learn about numerous medicinal properties.

Mibo, in contrast to *Mi:ro*, possesses supernatural abilities and can communicate with spirits. *Mibo* keeps an eye on *Mi:ro*'s work. *Mi:ro*, who must be a male member, can become *mibo* after completing

the training. A few trainees succeed in the rigorous process of becoming a mobo. *Saraniya bhakat* and *Kesa bhakat* are the lowest rank priests. When Srimanta Sankardeva introduced Neo-Vaishnavism and founded the twin institutions, *Satra* (monastery) and *Namghar* (prayer hall), to disseminate Neo-Vaishnava principles in Assam in the early 15th century, these two priestly groups emerged when the Misings entered the Hindu fold. The idol of God and the sacred text are maintained in the Namghar, and the *Satra* is led by a *Satradhikar* who is regarded as the keeper of the institution.

Other priests

The skills and knowledge of *Saraniya bhakat* and *Kesa bhakat* are distinct from those of *Mibo* and *Mi:ro*. They lack any superhuman abilities. *Mangolik bhakat* is another name for *Saraniya Bhakat*. *Saraniya Bhakat* must seek *Satradhikar*'s blessing before engaging in religious rites or purity rituals. They are not allowed to perform any rituals without the prior approval of *Satradhikar*. *Saraniya Bhakat* participates in religious activities such as *urom posum*, *dodgang*, and *nojaniya ui*, following a set of rules and regulations. They are invited to all religious occasions by the community. They frequently sing devotional songs called *Nam-Kirtan* in the *Namghar*. On the other hand, *kesa bhakat* engages in animal sacrifice and carries out *yumrang ui* (religious ceremonies and rites in the woods). *Kesa bhakat*, in contrast to *Saraniya Bhakat*, does not seek *Satradhikar*'s blessings and does not adhere to any guidelines when participating in religious activities. *Kesa bhakats* are prohibited from performing rituals of purity and are not permitted to enter *Namghar*. Males and females can both serve as *bhakats* (priests). Nevertheless, women are not allowed to receive *Satradhikar*'s blessings. Therefore, they usually choose not to become priests. Some women can be found as *kesa bhakat* as it is not required to seek the blessings of *Satradhikar*. Additionally, this group offers specialised care using medicinal forest plants to treat illnesses and eradicate epidemics. They mainly offer local treatment for urinary problems, problems with the bones, stomach aches, backaches, and other types of bodily aches. They also make *tabeez* (amulets) for individuals without children and those seeking prosperity.

Witches and witch-hunters

In the Mising language, witchcraft is referred to as *marunaam*, and the experts are called *marune tani* (witches), which refers to a male or female who is thought to have magical abilities that have the potential to bring harm to the community (Kuli, 2014; Payeng, 2014; Pegu, 2019). The *marunaam* is also referred to as *buttu onaam*. *Buttu onaam*, according to Peter Pegu (2019), is a magical practitioner known as *marune tani* who raises evil spirits or a wild ghost known as *buttu* and keeps it at home like a pet animal to target a person, potentially resulting in the latter's death (Pegu 2019:271). According to a common misconception, "witches" are women who harm others with their alleged evil powers. In reality, most of those accused of witches are vulnerable people, such as older people, mentally ill people, men, and children. Hutton (2002) identifies five crucial characteristics of the witch. To begin, a witch appears to utilise supernatural powers to cause misfortune or evil to others. Second, a witch harms known members of society, such as neighbours or relatives, rather than unknown people. Third, the witch is fundamentally evil and engages in malicious behaviour. Fourth, the witch follows a tradition, which implies he or she learns from others and is not an isolated individual. Fifth, other people can eliminate or defeat witches using counter magic (Hutton 2002:19).

Witch hunts begin when someone is charged with practising witchcraft and held accountable for the misfortune, disease, or death of others due to paranormal activity. Witch hunts typically begin with an accusation: someone accuses a neighbour of being a witch, alleging that she or he caused harm, killed livestock, destroyed crops, or sowed discord in families using supernatural powers. The primary actors in the witch hunt are the accuser, the accused, and the local priest *Mibo*. Typically, *Mibo* will locate the witch and oversee the punishment. People who are convicted of practising witchcraft are subjected to

a succession of hearings and trials, followed by harsh punishments, including various forms of physical assault and even murder. Thus, the use of violence becomes inevitable during the witch hunt. Most witchcraft prosecution cases in patriarchal Mising society involve females, with male members serving as priests. Women are not accorded the same standing as men in society because they are considered inferior, and their choices are not respected in the home. In many facets of social life, they rely on male family members. Women hold the lowest position in the hierarchy and are only granted a few duties. Women have a lower status in a society since male authority controls their social and religious roles; as a result, they are frequently used as scapegoats when witches are identified and punished. Nathan and Kelkar (1993) have argued that categorizing women and men as witches and witch hunters is essential to establishing men's authority. The authors claimed a connection between women's land rights and witch-hunting. These two phenomena most frequently occur when "women have a comparatively higher economic status, which poses a threat to the male-dominated society." As stated, "witch-hunt provides a convenient opportunity for men of dominant lineage to eliminate any woman who is politically opposed to them" (1993:117). Nevertheless, identifying women as witches is prevalent in Mising society regardless of the weakening of women's land rights. Hence, myths and tales associated with Mising's witchcraft beliefs have been used to support the claim that the targeting of women was simply the outward sign of a profoundly ingrained gender struggle in which the patriarchy of the dominant Hindu society had an impact on indigenous culture (Nath 2016; Mullik 2000).

Gender, power and witch-hunting

Anita (pseudonym), a 40-year-old woman from Borduwa Luit Chapori, was the victim of witch-hunting in 2019 and 2020, and she currently has a mental illness. She was said to be involved in *marunaam*. Previously, she worshipped Lord Shiva twice a week (on Tuesday and Saturday). Her nephew died in his sleep in October 2019. Anita came from a family of priests and traditional medical practitioners. However, Anita's grandmother was known as a witch. Her family and the neighbours believed that Anita performed witchcraft and invoked malevolent spirits on her nephew which resulted in his death. According to Mising's belief, the witch must sacrifice members of his or her own family in the early phases of witchcraft. To satisfy his or her *buttu*, one must do *pujas* in which human and animal blood is sacrificed. A *buttu* can kill the owner if not fed with blood.

A meeting was scheduled in the *murong ghar* (community hall) upon identifying Anita as a witch causing harm. A *mibo* was invited from Jonai, the easternmost region of Majuli. *Mibo* conducted rituals (*Mibo Dagnaam*) and concluded that Angsu's death was unnatural. After chanting mantras, he proclaimed Anita's name and emphasized the existence of an evil spirit that had to be exterminated as soon as possible; otherwise, the people would face disastrous problems. Anita was persecuted in the name of physical purification and exiled from the village. Her in-laws forcibly took her movable property. Furthermore, the locals forbade Anita from using the village road, Namghar, water pump, village pond, and so on. People feared making contact with her. Apai, her husband, abandoned her, believing she was a witch. His family was unwilling to help her. Besides, the data indicates that Apai wanted to marry another woman. He cannot do this as he is married. He took this event as an opportunity to desert her. Therefore, he supported the trial against Anita. Her mental health deteriorated rapidly. She lives at her natal home with her parents, and Apai (pseudonym) has remarried.

The narrative of Anita has opened up different aspects associated with identifying a witch, trial, and witch hunting. The narrative highlights the intricacy of the witch-hunting phenomena and its relation to gender, power, and identity. Witch hunting is used as a strategy by the dominant sections of society to maintain power. Poverty, lack of modern healthcare facilities, and patriarchal norms are closely associated with witch-hunting. In this case, the family members stand out as the most antagonistic group, actively participating in the victimisation of the accused. Most importantly, the victim was related

through marriage. Even her husband, who was supposed to support did not help. His family members did not like Anita and advised him to get rid of her so that they could arrange another marriage. They got to accuse Anita of practising *marunaam* when a family member died suddenly during sleep. This case illustrates the subordination of women in the Mising society.

The pre-existing conflict within the family and the presence of a member whose family member identified as a witch triggered the charge against Anita. The community believes that such malevolent behaviour is inherited in a family line. Anita's worship of lord Shiva and her grandmother's reputation as a witch, and the death in her husband's family resulted in the accusation. *Mibo* played a crucial role in legitimizing the witch-hunt by confirming the act of the witch. The conflicts in a family contribute to the witch accusations. The inter-family conflicts in a village can also act as a source of witchcraft accusations against women. Typically, women from a rival family are labeled as witches, and they are then held responsible for accidents or deaths. Excessive reliance on *mibo* contributes to establishing male dominance by dismissing women from higher positions in society or by demeaning their knowledge and labeling it as malicious. Women healers are seen as a threat to male healers and male dominance (Chaudhuri, 2014; Kelkar and Nathan, 1993, 2020). So they try to get rid of the women healers by any means. It often results in leveling witchcraft charges against women. Leigh Whaley (2011), in *Women and the Practice of Medical Care in Early Modern-Europe, 1400-1800*, discussed how a conscious effort was made to shift the medical profession from the hands of women to men in order to establish superior male authority by stigmatising the women healers through accusations of witchcraft (Whale, 2011). According to Ehrenreich and English (1973), witch trials against women were aimed at expanding the institutional medical system in the hands of male experts trained under the surveillance of the State and Church.

Conclusion

The witchcraft accusations against women reveal the profound patriarchy in the Mising society. Women and other marginal members of society are often victimized due to their subordinate position in various institutions of society. Women cannot argue, resist, protest, or raise their voices against injustice. Moreover, society is unwilling to recognize the atrocities against women in the name of witchcraft. Instead, it prefers to legitimize the identification, trial, and witch-hunt using unquestionable traditional authorities such as the *Mibo*. Such practices of society weaken women to act upon any adversaries. In the process, they become docile, submissive, and economically dependent on their husbands or parents. Soma Chaudhuri (2008) described a dependency on men as women's "bargain to get social security." However, Nathan et al. (1998) observed a change in gender roles in establishing patriarchy as the men assure to retain power over women. Hence, impoverished women fail to cope with the accusations and violence due to a lack of social support. Society offers no resilience strategy. They become destitute if the natal family denies support. However, they offer support depending on the position of their family. It is challenging to get the support of the natal family if the parents are not alive or landless or from a low-status clan of the community. The monopoly of men as priests (*Mibo*) deteriorates the position of women as it frequently charges women with accusations, except in a few cases where men are accused. While the *Mibo* performs elaborate rituals to ward off witches, the victim faces severe punishment, including beating, flogging, forced to swallow human excreta, mental torture, and even death. If she survives faces a social boycott. At times, she is banished from her village. As Hartsock argues, "the gender related to power associates masculinity with dominance and, through this connection, fuses sexuality, violence, and death" (Hartsock 1987:233). In her view of power, one party is constantly exercising power at the expense of the other (Komter 1991:48). It is similar in the case of the Mising society, where men manipulate various traditional authorities and institutions in their favour to sustain power.

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