



A Death Every Third Day

One woman confronts superstitious and opportunistic witch-hunting in India

HER SON WAS OFTEN ILL WHEN HE WAS YOUNG. ONE NIGHT, BIRUBALA Rabha’s boy, Dharmeswar, took a dagger and injured himself near his neck. “There was blood everywhere,” she recalls. Some people said he was possessed.

Rabha and her husband consulted doctors, but the mental health of her son did not improve. “He often couldn’t sleep properly, and the mental illness continued for months. ... He wasn’t getting better,” she says. “Then someone recommended that we should take him to a *deodbani* [‘quack doctor’] in a nearby village.”

Seeing no other option, her husband took their 15-year-old son to this charlatan, who told them that young Dharmeswar had impregnated a fairy who had possessed him. “The *deodbani* said the fairy would give birth to a child in a few days and my son would die in three days,” Rabha says. Her household was devastated.

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◀ Speaking before an audience of mostly women, Birubala Rabha (standing in front) denounces the practice of witch-hunting.

When her son didn't die, she realized that the prediction wasn't true. Decades later, Dharmeswar is mentally disabled and hospitalized, but he is still alive.

In Rabha's village in the mid-1980s, people were superstitious and there wasn't proper access to quality education and health care, which left them vulnerable to such fraud. For Rabha, this incident with her son was a turning point in her life—the beginning of her activism on behalf of women accused of witchcraft, often by *deodhanis* like the one who took advantage of her family.

Superstition, illiteracy, imposters and quacks—these, as well as personal rivalries and other grudges—have contributed to the menace of witch-hunting in India, women being the most frequent targets. More than 2,000 women were killed—mercilessly beaten, hacked or burned to death—between 2001 and 2014, and many more cases have gone unreported. And the practice continues: A death from witch-hunting is reported every third day in India.

Witch-hunting is prevalent in several Indian states, including Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, Rajasthan, Assam and Haryana. Many of these cases are fueled by superstitious beliefs. However, jealousy and/or land-grabbing disputes are also motivators. *Deodhanis* and other con artists spread rumors that brand women as witches so as to chase them away from their lands. Women, especially widows, are accused of bringing misfortune to their families when crops fail or of causing illness among family members.

Rabha is poor. Born in 1949, she grew up in a remote village in Assam and never finished primary school. Around 1985, she was an active member of the local Mahila Samiti chapter (a women's empowerment organization), and when she saw women being falsely branded as witches and chased away or killed, she decided to fight this evil practice. Initially, Rabha protested alone. In 2011, she founded an organization called Mission Birubala in Assam's Goalpara district, which works to eradicate witch-hunting and helps rehabilitate women who have been branded as witches.

"We held meetings in several districts across Assam to create awareness among the village people. Everyone believed in witches in the past, and even now some people still think they exist," Rabha says. "But I always tell people there are no witches anywhere. The quacks have destroyed our society through fake beliefs."

Through her awareness campaigns, she says, she has saved the lives of more than 250 women. "I was chased away and beaten with sticks. I didn't worry about dying because we have to die anyway one day," she says. "When I was young, my mother said that working for people is true worship. I have great love and respect towards people and my society and so I kept working for them."

But after a while, Rabha felt that creating awareness alone wouldn't help. She believed a strong law was necessary to discourage people from branding women as witches and harming or killing them. Through the combined efforts of Mission Birubala, Project Prahari and women's organizations like the North East Network and the Assam Mahila

Samata Society, in 2018 the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act of 2015 finally went into effect.

"Now, people will feel scared and be discouraged from committing these crimes," Rabha says proudly, "and there is a sense [that] the law will also create awareness about witch-hunting." The law mandates that perpetrators be sentenced to three to seven years in prison and fines extending from 50,000 rupees (nearly \$700) to 500,000 rupees (nearly \$7,000).

In recognition of her work, Rabha has been honored with several awards. She has an honorary doctorate from Gauhati University; she was invited to speak on the panel at the Witchcraft and Human Rights Experts Workshop at the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2017; and the Women's World Summit Foundation recognized her with a cash award in 2018. This year, the Indian government awarded Rabha with one of the highest civilian prizes, the Padma Shri.

"People do not get awards without efforts, and I feel honored and happy to receive them. Most people find it hard to speak against the norms for the common people, but I love working for people because I deeply respect humanity," Rabha says.

Combined efforts by Rabha and other organizations have led to mass awareness and a change in attitudes. But Rabha feels she has much more to do. "Witch-hunting incidents and superstitions have now lessened somewhat. But incidents of child marriage, domestic violence and general injustice against women are still common," she says. "I'm trying to work on these now."

—ARUNDHATI NATH