

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A QUINQUENNIAL EVALUATION OF THE ASSAM WITCH HUNTING (PROHIBITION, PREVENTION AND PROTECTION) ACT 2015 AND PROJECT 'PRAHARI' IN BTAD, ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act 2015 and the project 'Prahari' are dedicated legislations and community policing program respectively aimed at curbing the societal menace of witch hunting. Thus a quinquennial evaluation is emphasized to evaluate the deficiency in the execution of it, so that effective and efficient steps could be undertaken to eradicate such societal practices. The research gap of dearth of quantitative research on the subject also needs to be addressed and thus the utility of this study. Thus a quantitative approach have been adopted in this research paper and samples were collected from all the four districts of BTAD using structured questionnaire to examine the awareness of the people about the Act of 2015 and explore to the outreach of the project Prahari among the people in BTAD, Assam. The finding reveals that partial of the respondents are aware of the Act of 2015 and a mere part of it are aware of the project prahari. This research further advocates for innovative ways to make people aware of the Act of 2015 and the community policing good practices. It also contends that overburdening of the subordinate judiciary of the four districts of BTAD relating to offences against women further escalates the issue, which results in repeated number of cases of witch hunting.

**Key words:** Witch-Hunting, BTAD, Assam, Crime Against Women, Prahari.

## INTRODUCTION

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Report 2020 reveals that the state of Assam topped the Chart for the highest rate of crime against women in India for the third consecutive year<sup>1</sup>. Witch hunting is a form of crime against women which is the least concerned acts of violence on women in India and in particularly Assam. The escalating trend in the number of witch hunting in Assam is reported from Bodoland Territorial Area District<sup>2</sup>. The Government of Assam enacted The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act 2015 and it received the assent of the President on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018 to provide effective measures to prohibit witch hunting and protect persons from witch hunting and also to eliminate torture, oppression, humiliation and killing of such persons by a section of the society by providing punishment by trial of offences relating to the offence and for relief and rehabilitation of the victim of such offences<sup>3</sup>. The Act of 2015 defines 'witch hunting' as identifying, calling, stigmatizing, defaming or accusing any person as a witch by any another person's by

words or signs, or indication, or conduct or action or in any other manner, thereby causing or abetting physical or mental harm or execution of a witch which may involve mass hysteria, lynching or any other activities<sup>4</sup>. Further, the Act of 2015 defines 'witch' as any person who has been supposedly identified, called, stigmatized, defamed or accused by such name by person or group of person under the grip of unrealistic and unfounded impression that such person has the power to harm anyone or society at large or in any manner<sup>5</sup>.

**Statement of the problem:** Bodoland Territorial Council, is one of the largest autonomous council in Assam which was established under sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution on 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2003. The territorial area of the council is called Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) and it comprises of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri districts. A brief profile of Bodoland Territorial Area District is as follows:

District	Area in sq.km	Population	Town	Block	No. of Villages
Kokrajhar	3296	887142	4	11	1068
Chirang	1923	482162	3	5	508
Baksa	2457	950075	2	10	690
Udalguri	2012	831668	3	11	800

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<sup>1</sup><https://cutt.ly/NzkSthU> (As retrieved on 9.3.2021 at 12:11 Pm)<sup>2</sup><https://cutt.ly/dzkScfS> (As retrieved on 9.3.2021 at 12:11 Pm)<sup>3</sup> Preamble to The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act 2015<sup>4</sup> Section 2(h) of The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act 2015<sup>5</sup> Section 2(g) of The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act 2015

As per 2019 report concerning witch hunting, 22 cases were reported from Kokrajhar district, 11 cases from Udalguri district, 19 cases from Chirang district and 2 cases from Baksa district<sup>6</sup>. The practice is prominent among Rabha, Hajong, Mishing, Bodo adivasi community and in common parlance the witch is called a 'daini' and is believed to cause ailment to people, destroy crops and other livelihood and it results in murder or mob lynching of the women<sup>7</sup>. The mechanism of Community Policing by Assam Government Project "Prahari" was also launched in 2001 with the objective of prevention of social conflict, delinquencies, and eradication of superstitions and prejudices like witch hunting, black magic, and etc.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the specific legislation and community policing, in October 2020 similar incidents were frequently reported<sup>9</sup>. Thus this study focuses on the impact of the Act of 2015 and the project 'Prahari' in BTAD and to detect the ground reality and to forward a policy mechanism to control this societal menace.

**Objective**

The objective of the present study is as follows:

- ) To examine the awareness among the people in BTAD about The Assam Witch Hunting(Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015.
- ) To explore the outreach of the project 'Prahari' among the people in BTAD.

**METHODOLOGY**

A quantitative approach has been adopted in this research paper. Four districts of BTAD Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri have been selected and structured questionnaires were employed to arrive at the findings. Ninety-five percent confidence level with margin of error five percent is utilized for sampling and four hundred responses were recorded as hundred responses were recorded from each districts. Basic statistical methods were used to evidently depict the ground scenario and the intervention required from all the stakeholders associated with this social threat.

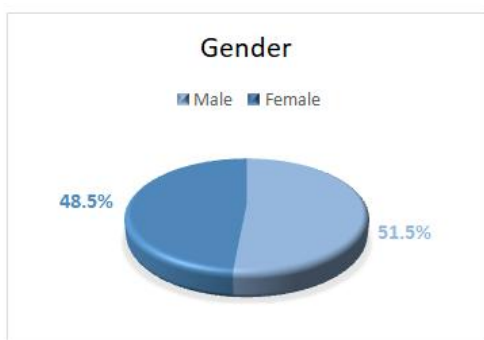


Figure 1. Gender of the respondents

<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary Affairs Minister Chandra Mohan Patwory in November 2019 presented the data in Assam Legislative Assembly that 107 persons were killed in witch hunting since 2011. Similar data was reported from 21 district out of 34 in Assam.

See more: <https://cutt.ly/dzkScfS> (As retrieved on 9.3.2021 at 12:11 Pm)

<sup>7</sup> Joya Chakraborty, Anjuman Borah, Witch hunting in Assam: Strategizing Alternative Media for Women Empowerment and Overcoming Superstition, Journal of North East India Studies Vol. 3(2), Jul.-Dec. 2013, pp. 15-24, ISSN 2278-1455 / ISSN 2277-6869

<sup>8</sup><https://police.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/project-prahari> (As retrieved on 11.3.2021 at 2:20 Pm)

<sup>9</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/getting-to-the-roots-of-decades-old-problem-of-witch-hunting-in-assam/articleshow/78731380.cms> (As retrieved on 11.3.2021 at 2:20 Pm)

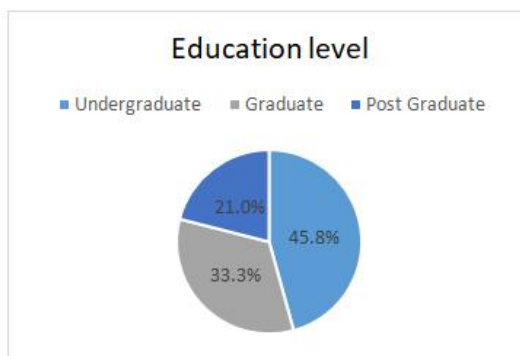


Figure 2. Education level of the respondents

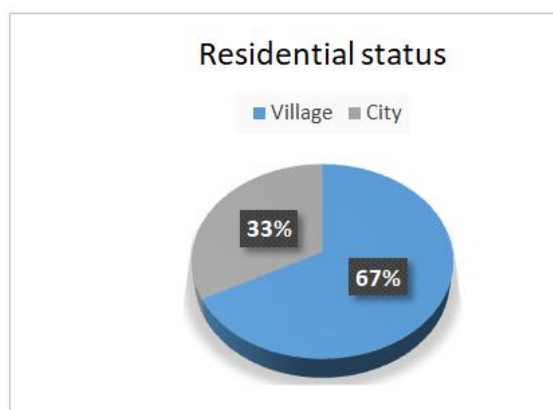


Figure 3. Residential status of the respondents

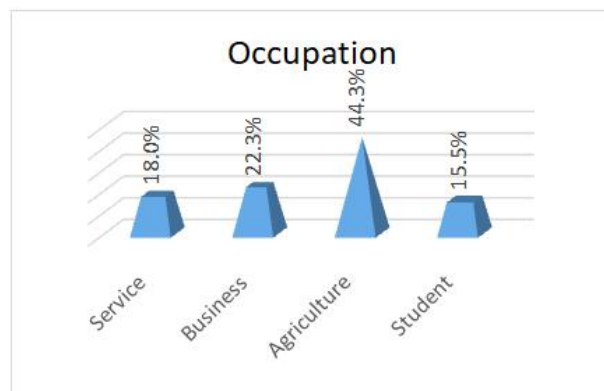


Figure 3. Occupation of the respondents

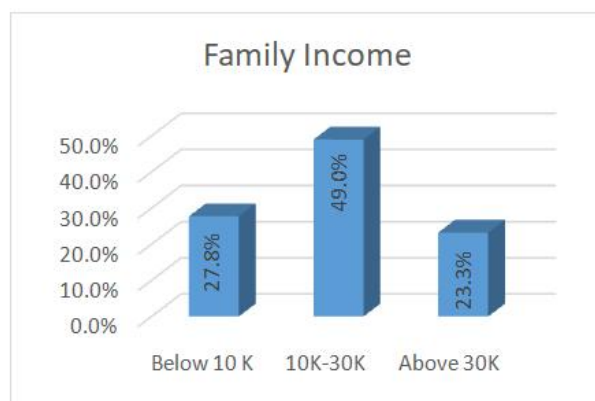


Figure 4. Family Income of the respondents

**FINDING**

- ) The analysis of the respondents data received reveals that while 81.5 percent (326 out of 400 responses) of the total respondents have some acquaintances with the victim of witch-hunting, a mere 50.3 (89 out of 177) percent of the total respondents are aware of the Act of 2015 and 48.8 percent (195 out of 400) of the total respondents were aware of the project Prahari.
- ) A mere 49.7 (97 out of 195) percent of the respondents were associated with the project Prahari.
- ) The awareness regarding this societal menace were 37.1 percent (76 out of 205) from education sector, 25.9 percent (53 out of 205) from community participation and 37.1 percent (76 out of 205) from media including social media.
- ) The awareness about the Act of 2015 and the Project Prahari could not reach the people at the ground level and it is limited only to the headquarters of BTAD, Assam, i.e., Kokrajhar

**DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the above graph (Fig 6,7) depicts the widespread area and magnitude of the issue of witch hunting in BTAD, Assam. As per 2019 report concerning witch hunting, 22 cases were reported from Kokrajhar district, 11 cases from Udalguri district, 19 cases from Chirang district and 2 cases from Baksa district<sup>10</sup>. The overall data analysis reveals that 81.5 percent people of BTAD have some acquaintances with any victim of witch hunting. In Kokrajhar 73 out of 100 respondents were associated with any of the victim, and in Chirang 80 out of 100 respondents were associated with any of the victim. In Baksa 85 out of 100 respondents were associated with any of the victim and in Udalguri 88 out of 100 respondents were associated with any of the victim. The analysis of the above graph (Fig 8, 9) depicts that in spite of the respondents have acquaintances with the victim of witch hunting, but the awareness of about the Act of 2015 is comparatively near to the ground. It highlights the root cause of the issue that at ground level, the awareness about the Act of 2015 is not rampant. In overall data analysis, 49.7 percent of the people of BTAD are unaware of the Act of 2015. In Kokrajhar only 18 out of 56 respondents were aware about the Act of 2015, in Chirang mere 23 out of 54 respondents were associated with Act of 2015. In Baksa also only 32 out of 46 respondents were aware of the Act of 2015 and in Udalguri mere 16 out of 21 respondents were aware about the Act of 2015. In Kokrajhar, the awareness is comparatively higher but lowest in Udalguri, where 11 cases were registered of witch hunting as per 2019 data<sup>11</sup>.

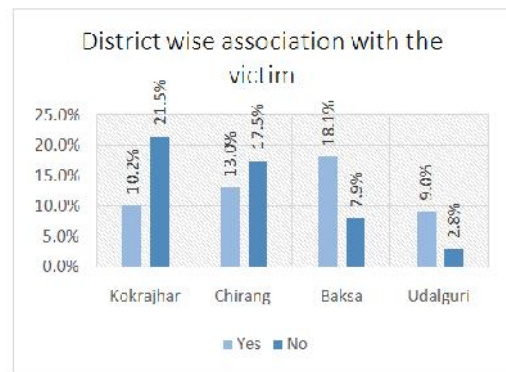
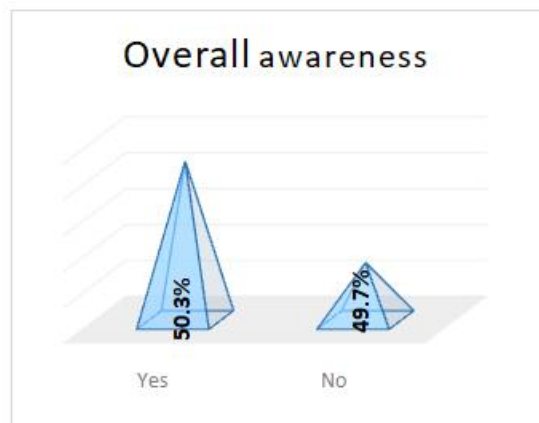


Figure 5. Overall Association with the Victim of witch-hunting



**Question Number 1:** Are you associated with any of the victim of witch hunting?

The analysis of the above graph (Fig 10, 11) depicts that though the respondents are aware of the project Prahari, which is a flagship Programme for community policing specifically

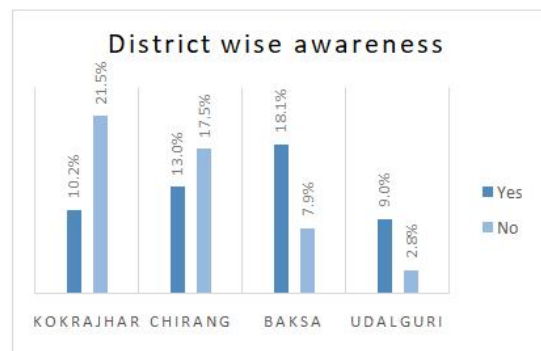


Figure 8. Overall awareness of Act of 2015

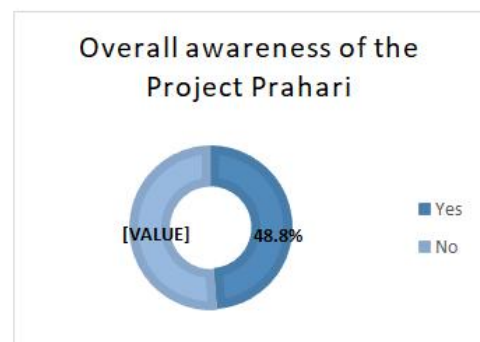
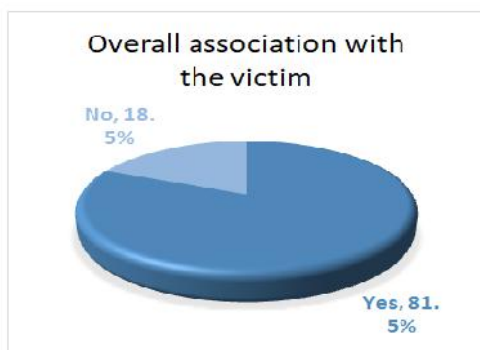


Figure 9. District wise awareness of Act of 2015 Value is 51.3%

<sup>10</sup>Supra foot note no.7  
<sup>11</sup>Supra foot note no. 7

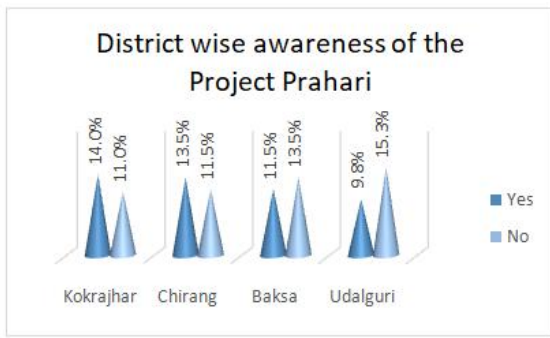


Figure 11. District wise awareness of the Project Prahari

dedicated to curb the societal menace of witch hunting very less number of respondents are associated with it either directly or indirectly. It further highlights the root cause of the issue that the community policy strategy could not make an effect at the ground level as the strategy of community participation could not be utilized at its optimum level. The overall data analysis reveals that 48.8 percent of the respondents are unaware of the project prahari.

In Kokrajhar 38 out of 56 respondents were aware about the project prahari, in Chirang 16 out of 54 respondents were aware about the project prahari, in Baksa 22 out of 46 respondents were aware of the project prahari and in Udalguri 21 out of 39 respondents were aware about project prahari. Most of the respondents from Udalguri are not aware of project Prahari and in Kokrajhar most of the people are aware about it.

**Question 4: Were you in any means associated with the project Prahari?**

The analysis of the above graph (Fig 12,13) depicts that in spite of the respondents have acquaintances with the victim of witch hunting, but they are not aware of the project Prahari,

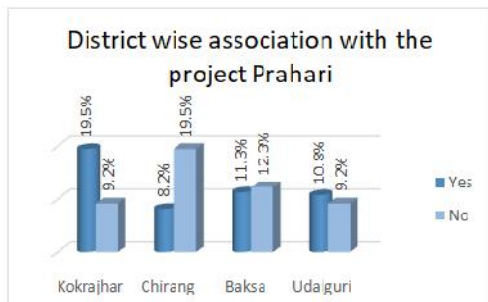


Figure 13. District wise association with the project Prahari

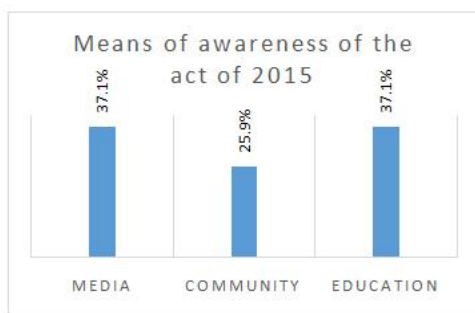


Figure 14. Means of awareness of the act of 2015

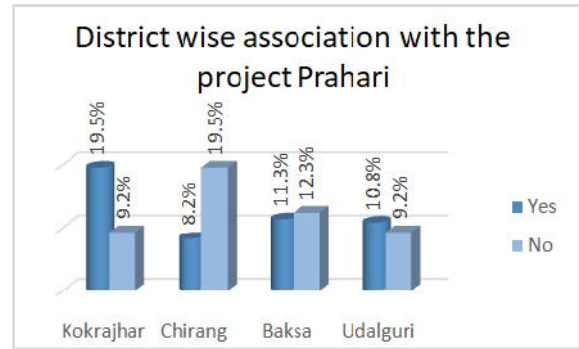


Figure 15. Means of district wise awareness of the act of 2015

which is a flagship Programme for community policing specifically dedicated to curb the societal menace of witch hunting. It further highlights the root cause of the issue that the community policing strategy could not make an effect at the ground level in BTAD Assam. In Kokrajhar 18 out of 56 respondents were either directly or indirectly associated with the project Prahari, and in Chirang 23 out of 54 respondents were either directly or indirectly associated with the project Prahari, in Baksa 32 out of 46 respondents were either directly or indirectly associated with the project Prahari and in Udalguri 16 out of 21 respondents were either directly or indirectly associated with the project prahari. Most of the respondents from Chirang opined that they were neither directly or indirectly associated with the project prahari. The analysis of the above graph (Fig 14, 15) depicts the source from which the people acquired awareness about the Act of 2015. In Kokrajhar, out of 60 respondents 11 opted for media, 8 opted from community participation and 41 opted from education. In Chirang, out of 55 respondents, 30 opted from media, 15 opted from community participation and 10 opted from education. In Baksa, out of 45 respondents, 15 opted from media, 10 from community participation. In Udalguri out of 45 respondents, 20 opted from media, another 20 opted from community participation and 5 opted from education. Kokrajhar holds the highest number of respondents who opted that from education, they received the highest awareness about the specific legislation addressed to curb witch hunting, while the respondents from Udalguri opined that media and community contributed toward widespread awareness regarding specific legislation addressed to curb witch hunting.

**Suggestions and Recommendations**

- As of 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021, the data available pertaining to pendency of cases (both civil and criminal) in Udalguri<sup>12</sup> district judiciary is 2,026, in Chirang<sup>13</sup> it is 2,548, in Baksa<sup>14</sup> it is 3,819 and in Kokrajhar<sup>15</sup> it is 5,306. The majority of the cases dates back to pendency for more than five years. The pendency of cases have a direct impact on the law and order situation and it diminishes the public faith in not only the institution of Judiciary as such, but it also raises demanding question to the functioning of our democracy. Thus, effective and efficient steps should be taken to reduce the backlog of cases.

<sup>12</sup><http://udalgurijudiciary.gov.in/> (As retrieved on 18.3.2021 at 12:19 pm)

<sup>13</sup><http://chirangjudiciary.gov.in/> (As retrieved on 18.3.2021 at 12:22 pm)

<sup>14</sup><http://baksajudiciary.gov.in/> (As retrieved on 18.3.2021 at 12:28 pm)

<sup>15</sup><http://kokrajharjudiciary.gov.in/> (As retrieved on 18.3.2021 at 12:36 pm)



- ) The registered cases of witch hunting are not specifically categorized in the data maintained by district judiciary and as such policy intervention by government is also deficient. Thus, a distinct categorization of such cases is required to be maintained for policy analysis and effective outcome.
- ) The district of Udalguri specifically lacks awareness about witch hunting in terms of education and the project prahari has not been able to reach to the commonalities of the district. Thus the mode of awareness in Udalguri should be focused on educating the commonalities.
- ) The project prahari has also not been able to make an impact in Chirang district, thus it should be specifically directed to address the awareness situation in Chirang district.
- ) Primary level education in the BTAD district needs to focus on sensitizing the masses about the societal evil of witch hunting.

**Scope for further research:** There are several aspects of expanding the scope of this research as to considering the components of the sample used. Witch hunting is also prevalent in various other districts of Assam and the scenario prevalent over there can also be studied. Advanced statistical methods is also a scope for further research in this perspective.

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