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Of vultures and woes of witches

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Activists have found out that the death of widows in rural areas across Western Assam had a correlation with the decline in the population of vultures.

Across Western Assam's tribal belt, the vulture has a humane reason to survive veterinary steroid Diclofenac's effect—it has to save the witches.

Women in rural areas inhabited by the Bodos, Rabhas and Adivasis (tribals) are often branded witches and held responsible for epidemics, fatalities and collective misfortunes. They end up being burnt, impaled or beheaded.

Over 350 witches have been killed during the last 15 years. Many of these so-called 'witches' were widows, indicating they were victims of schemes to deny them their share of property. And, as activists have discovered, their deaths had "something to do" with the decline in the population of vultures.



Some 'witches' who survived to tell their horrid tale. (Pic courtesy: UB Photos)

Explains Modaram Basumatary of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) that has been waging a war on witch-hunting, "Earlier, a woman branded a witch would undergo a so-called purification process. She would be forced to ingest excreta of human beings, dogs and vultures. But as

vultures started becoming rare, the practice of killing witches gained ground."

Locals say there's a logic, albeit yucky, behind the use of vulture droppings as a de-witching process. The droppings of a bird that lives on dead meat kills the witch in a person who eats it!

According to avi-fauna expert Anwaruddin Choudhury, two species of vultures—white-backed and slender-billed—were found extensively across Western Assam until the early 1990s. Rampant use of Diclofenac and felling of the scavengers' nesting trees are the factors re-

sponsible for the numerical decline of these two species.

"It's difficult to even hazard a guess as to how many of these two vulture species remain. But the vulture that is usually spotted these days is the Himalayan Griffon that returns to higher altitudes as winter ends,"

says Choudhury.

Terrible trends

That could explain why 'witches' die mostly during summer and monsoon, also in seasons of malaria and gastroenteritis. "These two diseases are the biggest killers (of ordinary people) in these

parts," says Dr D.N. Das, posted at a community health centre at Dotma in Kokrajhar district, bordering West Bengal. But villagers invariably find a witch to nail the blame on. Like 45-year-old Romila Narzary from Nandipur village in Kokrajhar district, who was bludgeoned to death for unknowingly fetching fake medicines that did not work on a malaria patient in her village last year.

Incidentally, the vulture population began dwindling at a time when armed separatism by Bodo tribal groups was at its peak and the migration and resettlement of non-tribal people on tribal blocks and belts led to land scarcity. While the militants plundered forests and felled trees to fund their insurrection, resultant ethnic clashes forced over 5,00,000 people into relief camps. There are still some 60,000 left—Adivasis, Bodos and migrant Muslims—in 20 relief camps.

The witch-hunting zone has also borne the brunt of displacement owing to various government projects that uprooted over 19,00,000 indigenous people between 1947 and 2000 across Assam. "Our studies show that marginal farmers have become landless and medium farmers have become marginal," says Walter Fernandes, North Eastern Social Research Centre, an NGO.

The pressure on land has had a debilitating effect, particularly on tribal widows. "Superstition powers witch-hunting," says Kuladhar Saikia, Inspector General of Assam Police, who had launched Project Prahari in 2001 to combat the witch-hunting menace.

Unfortunate widows

Saikia believes at least a third of the widows killed in recent years were branded witches. "But it is difficult to know for sure since Assam has no law against witch-hunting and all such killings go into police diaries as murder cases". Many women in the 'vulnerable group', thus, live in fear. Kananbala Basumatary, President, All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABBWF), says, "Our girls are usually strong, but they may become victims of witchcraft once they come of age. It often starts with attempts to break marriages and carries on if a fatal disease strikes a village or a locality. We are combating this evil practice, but it is not easy to root it out." For the time being, ABBWF and ABSU are on a re-greening and anti-Diclofenac mission in order to bring the vultures back. The idea is to save the 'witches' from being killed until the superstition itself is annihilated.

Women's Feature Service