



BIRUBALA RABHA

Standing Against Superstition

“The tale of this woman in the field of social work for the downtrodden is a journey from being a near victim of witch hunting to a rebel to root out this evil.”

Believe it or not, witch hunting is a major threat to the physical survival of womenfolk in our superstition driven society. Women are strategically kept at the margins in every field of activity in our society with the aim of suppressing her mental, intellectual development, but witch hunting is such an evil practice that is designed and motivated with the horrifying purpose of eliminating the very existence of women from the face of the earth. Unlike the other troubles, its target is the weakest section in our society, the real gendered subalterns, those who are poor, illiterate and are considered to be inferior to men in a male-dominated society. Since only very few can raise their voice of protest for the safety of these helpless victims of superstition, the name of those who have been fighting singlehandedly and heroically for them deserve appreciation without reservation. The pioneer in this untrodden path in the remote corner of Goalpara district is Birubala Rabha whose name might

be unfamiliar for many because media has so far not created any hype about this silent worker. The tale of this woman in the field of social work for the downtrodden is a journey from being a near victim of witch hunting to a rebel to root out this evil. None but Birubala can tell the people from her own experience that there is nothing but inimical grudge fuelling this malpractice. Once her own son was so begrudged by a village 'tantrik' who practised black magic that the latter said that her son would marry an evil angel and would die an untimely death after the birth of his first child. Birubala's first son is still alive nullifying the authenticity of the soothsayer's blood-chilling predictions. Birubala has been consistently narrating the tale of her own son to convince her village folk that the society must stand unitedly against such evil practices. She has seen with her own eyes how many women's lives have been sacrificed mindlessly in the name of witch hunting. While the 'witch' is no more than a horrifying myth, 'hunting' is not, it is a stark example of gender disparities of the low to which human beings can degenerate themselves invalidating all the tall claims of a modern society.

Birubala was born in 1949 in a very poor family at Thakurbhila village at the foothills of Goalpara. Her father Kaleyaram Rabha was a farmer and her mother Sagarbala Rabha was a woman who had to discontinue her education at the primary level of class two. Birubala, too, could continue her studies only upto class five because at the age of fifteen she had to get married to Chandicharan Rabha. She became a mother of three sons and one daughter. In the year 2000 Birubala came into touch with Assam Mohila Samata Society as she attended one of the meetings held by the organization with the purpose of generating awareness among the women victims of inequality. Birubala came to know that the Society had been actively engaged in the project of fighting witch hunting in the rural areas of Assam. From her own experiences in the family she could tell the people how a 'tantrik' (soothsayer) predicted the death of her own son after his marriage with a wicked fairy and becoming a father to the fairy's child. Her son Dharmeswar is still alive. But Birubala knew that hers one was not the only story of witch hunting because she had seen with her own eyes many women either killed or ostracised by their own villagers on the pretext of being stamped as witches by the same soothsayer. Birubala got rebellious. She became an active member of the Assam Mahila Samata Society to extend her full cooperation for eradicating this evil from the society. She had to face stiff opposition from her opponents but the rewardings of her struggle was that she saved a number of families from the shadow of death looming large over their heads. Birubala's name was selected for the 1000 Women Peace Project of Switzerland in recognition of her peace efforts. Her name was also nominated for 2005 Nobel prize for peace along with a few other glittering women like Mahasweta Devi, Medha Patkar, Kiran

Bedi and Sarada Devi. Her photograph also got published in the book '1000 Peace Women Across the globe' in Switzerland. '1000 Peace Women,' also known as 'Peace Women across the Globe,' is an organization based in Switzerland that aims at increasing the visibility of women promoting peace all over the world. A woman who studied only upto class five is now a source of inspiration for many educated women in the present-day, strife ridden society. This lone crusader's life is a perfect example of life lived for others. □□