

## **Understanding the Relationship between Dreams and Witch-beliefs**

**Dina Swargiari**

Research Scholar,  
Tezpur University, Assam  
**Email:** dina02@tezu.ernet.in

*Dreams play an active role in constructing the idea of witchcraft. Almost 50% of the witch-hunting cases prevalent among the Bodo community of India have an association of dreams as an important factor. So, this paper concentrates on studying about dreams related witch-hunting cases that seems common among the Bodos living in Chirang, Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts of Assam. Besides secondary data, the study is supported by cases related to witch-beliefs and dreams which are collected as primary data from the field by applying semi-structured interview method of Social Science research.*

**[Key Words:** *Dreams, psychology, witch-beliefs, oral-tradition and Bodos*]

### **Introduction**

There are innumerable studies done on subjects related to dreams in the fields of Anthropology and Psychology. But literatures on dreams that are closely associated with witch-beliefs are extremely rare. It is observed that in formation of beliefs in witchcraft, dream plays an active role; and, in formation of dreams also, witch-belief plays an active role. Now the question arises- Which is the most appropriate one, witch-belief follows dreams or dream follows witch-beliefs? And what are the different aspects that are associated in witchcraft related dreams? These are the topics of concern that I'm going to discuss in this research paper.

Dreams here, is referred to the dreams that belong to one's sleep. In dreams we often see faces and places that we recognize; or we feel ourselves again in situations we experienced; or perhaps we repeat actions that we have recently performed. Sometimes there is a mysterious figure, which seems strangely familiar and central in the dream. We find ourselves, at times, face to face with a difficult situation and though the factors in the problem are changed and unfamiliar, we feel that the problem is in real life and we are actually facing it. Such a dream shows clearly the significance of dream symbols, the personal reference in dreams, and their truly representative nature, and it disproves the opinion that dreams are meaningless (Barrett 1923). Sigmund Freud describes three main types of dreams which are mentioned here for justification: 1) Direct

prophecies received in the dream; 2) The foretelling of a future event; and 3) The symbolic dream, which requires interpretation (Freud 1913).

Belief is the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without there being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with factual certainty. Another way of defining belief is that it is a mental representation of an attitude positively oriented towards the likelihood of something being true (*Schwitzgebel, 2006*). The belief that I am going to discuss about here is the belief in witchcraft or the belief that witches exist. It is a traditional belief that the person who practices witchcraft, causes harm to his or her community through abuse of magical power has been existed around for millennia. In the cultural milieu of Assam, the traditional belief in witchcraft is prevalent in many communities. According to Brahma, in most tribal communities of Assam, religion and magic are often treated together and regarded as complementary to each other (Brahma 1992). For instance, among the Bodo community of Assam, '*dayna*' i.e.- 'witch' is believed to possess special spirit of animals that perform services for them. They are thereby considered harmful to the society as it is believed that they can bring harm, illness and diseases to people. The suspected person is hunted down, physically tortured, driven out of villages, socially excluded and in some cases even killed on the alleged charge of being 'witches' and practicing 'witchcraft'.

#### **Objectives of the study-**

- a) To study whether witch-belief follows dreams or dream follows witch-beliefs
- b) To explore the different aspects of witchcraft associated dreams

The fieldwork was done for present study of dreams and witch beliefs amongst the Bodos of Assam, are particularly the people residing in the districts viz. - Kokrajhar, Chirang and Udalguri from where the primary data have been collected. Besides that, secondary data ranges from the readings of materials related to the branches like folklore, witchcraft, witch-hunting, psychology of dreams and witch-beliefs. As a tool of the study, semi-structured interview method of Social Science research has been applied and the ideas and theory of some parts of 'Interpretation of dreams' by an Austrian psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud are been used.

#### **Why is dream believed to be real?**

E. Boyd Barrett clearly says that "No one has, I think, ever questioned the fact that dreams are the result of the working of the mind that they belong to the mind; but a very common theory has for a long time held the field, that dreams have no meaning or significance. It has been held that dreams do not represent any fact or truth, that they are a meaningless images and stories. Such a theory is quite out of keeping with the mind's constant habit of self-expression. The work of the mind is to represent something. If dreams were mere nonsense, the mind would have represented nothing by them." (Barrett 1923).

Sigmund Freud used to mention the dreams as "The Royal Road to the Unconscious". Dreams are a completely valid psychological phenomenon, specifically the fulfilment of wishes; they can be classified in the continuity of comprehensible waking mental states; they are constructed through highly complicated intellectual activity. An extraordinary achievement can be attained through dreams. In Freud's words, "The unconscious is the real psychic; its inner nature is just as unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is just as imperfectly reported to us through the data of consciousness as is the external world through the indications of our sensory organs." (Freud 1913).

Dreams are regarded as showed by God and not meaningless. As classified by Sigmund Freud under the type of dream "Direct prophecies received in the dream", there are instances where dreams assist an individual to hold up life realities and strengthen their economic stability. The fact that a family in Udalguri district have experienced for the last forty years shows the justification for it as discussed below.

BinaBasumatary is an *Ojah* (traditional medicine women) who is popularly known as a *Guru sikharnai* (Person being re-birth by holy spirit) in her local area, continuing this social service since 40 years. She lives with her husband, RupnathBasumatary and their four siblings in a village called Bwigriguri in Udalguri district of Assam.

It is surprising to believe that BinaBasumatary is an illiterate woman who does not know to write her name even in her mother tongue, has a vast knowledge of medicinal plants and have a record of curing many serious diseases that were left unidentified by modern doctors. When she was 17 years old, she saw a dream that her *Dev-Devi* (male and female God), took her in a far off place in the middle of forest and mountains. There the *Dev-Devi* showed her different plants that make medicine for different diseases when mixed and grinded together. Every night she has been taken there for the training, along with some other people whom she could not recognize till today. During her initial stage, she was scared to try those medicines in real life, but with time, she got promoted to higher learning in dream and got adjusted in implicating them in real life practice. She said that it is very hard to recall all the lessons taught in dream and to apply them in real life, some lessons are left untouched due to forgetting. Many tough rituals had been done by her in order to get promotion and it was recommended by their teachers that no any lessons be disclosed with anyone during the initial stage, strictly prohibited to reveal, otherwise the knowledge would have been taken back.

Another thing is that, in the dream training, the *Dev-Devi* even taught her to read and write but unfortunately she could not learn them at all, and she still believes that in the real life too she is left illiterate; she feels that if she could have learned in those dreams, she would have now remain literate. Bina made an important point while talking about the rituals that she has been practicing since 1970s. In the society she follows '*Bibar-Bathou*' (*Bathou* religion that worships by offering flowers) religion which falls under '*Bathou*'

the traditional religion of the Bodos but holds all religious rituals as holy and significant. Whenever, the *Dev-Devi* demands her of the rituals of *Boli-Bathou* (*Bathou* religion that worships by sacrificing animals/birds) religion or *Brahma dharma* she offers and devote. These depend on what the disease is all about, whether physical or supernatural powers working behind the patient. For physical disease, the rituals are not much tough, but for any disease acquainted by supernatural powers, the rituals are very time and effort consuming. Sometimes the *Dev-Devi* enters into her body, takes the form of *Doudini* (devine human being, behaving as the God who works in the body) and interact with the patient or instruct the *Douri* (helper of *Doudini*, who is with normal human behavior) the whole night in empty stomach, in order to get in deep conversation for curing the disease. BinaBasumatary who becomes the *Doudini* instructs the message and words uttered by different entered *Dev-Devi* like *Mahadev*, *Bwiswmuthi*, *Bhogomothi*, *AfaBathouBwrai*, *Durga*, *Parbati*, *Bishnu*, *Krishna* and many more; on the other side, RupnathBasumatary, the husband of Bina becoming the *Douri*, prepares the variety of the medicines and maintain the patient simultaneously, under the instruction given by her in this kind of ritual. She is not able to say or recall anything about the words, message or instruction while the spirits of *Dev-Devi* left, and turned to a normal human being. It is only the *Douri* and patients who could remember the episode.

In some cases, different *Dev-Devi* demands for different sacrifices depending on the level of the disease. Sometimes they demand for sacrifice of birds and animals; offering of land, milk and fire worship. In one case narrated by her, it was the ritual done by chanting mantras and touching the patient with *Bisdinkhiyabilai* (a kind of fern), *Khifibendwngbilai* (a kind of climbers) and raw cow milk for three days, as instructed by her *Dev-Devi* during her prayer. And when the patient was taken back home, BinaBasumatary held a *Jaiga* (sacred fire arranged for some rituals) worshipping the Lord Brahma in the name of the patient who suffered by having been mistakenly footed on the *Bisourithaan* (the house/place of God of Snake). This ritual was done at her house, and the reaction continued in the patient's body at his home which is about 6 km far away. Lastly, when the Dev filled with satisfaction by all the rituals, he lowered down his anger and the disease got cured. Bina said that this kind of disease is unidentifiable and incurable by the doctors and *Ojajs*.

Identifying the power of supernatural powers is easy for a *Guru-Ojahlike* BinaBasumatary. Even the witch can be identified by using this kind of ritual process. But it is important to note that, even if the patient enquires about the witch, they ignore by saying that they do not know. It is because, their Bwigriguri village society has signed an agreement that witch should not be hunted or pointed; stealing of jewels and cows should not be known in the society. Bina and Rupnath said happily that, it is good for them to not reveal the name of the witch because this made their life a secured one.

## **Illustrative cases of how witch-beliefs follow dreams**

### **Case No.1**

In a village in Kokrajhar, there lives a family whose members had a strong belief in witch-craft. The old father (67 years) lived in depression with his one son (38 years) and two daughters (41 years and 36 years respectively) after the death of his wife. Their family survives depending on agriculture. In spite of hard economic conditions, having only a small plot of land and a kitchen-garden, they manage everything for their survival. The two daughters could not complete their schooling, left schools after class-VII and the son after higher secondary education. One day in 2010, the elder daughter got sick. They took her to the local doctor, who said that she was suffering from gastric and prescribed some medicines. Day by day the sickness grew more serious and the lady grew very thin; she vomited frequently and was unable to eat food. They consulted to the traditional healer or local traditional medicine man, the *ojha* who informed that there was a witch who lived close to their house and that this witch had a strong hand in the suffering. This belief was set in her mind and could even see the suspected person (witch) laugh aloud with curly untied hair in her dream. One early morning they saw the suspected witch and her husband coming towards their house and went back from the gate. In the evening, just an hour before the patient died, a black dog came near them and played in the walls of their house. These facts stood as proof for spreading or branding the nearest neighbour as 'witch'. The younger sister who is still living said, "Witch-craft is not a superstitious belief because what we have seen is not untrue".

### **Case No. 2**

Another case important to be discussed here is that, in Chirang district, there lives a family whose members are mother (64), son (37 years), and three daughters (35, 33 and 31 years respectively). They have enough land for agriculture, and the son is employed as a teacher at a school. Since the death of their father, the mother took all the responsibilities of her children's needs and education. But suddenly, the mother suffered from fever and could not manage anything for them. So, the eldest brother was handed over with all the responsibilities for the family. Soon after some days, they were affected by some diseases one after the other, from mother to eldest sister and then to youngest sister. They strongly believe that, only because of the witches their family members are always ill, affected by different diseases, turning thinner and too unhealthy. When I asked them about how they could assume that their illness and physical sufferings are the work done by witch, they go straightly narrating their dreams. All the proofs are in front of them in the form of stories and experiences in dreams. Then I asked whether they have been taken to doctors when they were ill. They replied, the doctors could do nothing but only prescribed medicines for gastric ulcer and fever. They believe that it is the *ojha* who help them survive till date. The *ojha* according to them has the knowledge and power to identify who is working behind the illness. And interestingly, they

told me that, the name of the witch identified by the *ojah* and the witch that came in the dream were the same person.

Dreams are regarded as evidence in such cases. The patient narrates the dream in such a way that what has been shown in her dream is true and final. And others believe it in the same way. There is a strong belief in witchcraft because they have seen and experienced the witch in their dream. Dream is an active factor here as we can say, though dreams are known to be unreal and inactive after sleep, the witch that came in their dreams are regarded as a 'true witch' who has all the supernatural powers to harm the others, especially the enemies. This is how the belief in existence of witches is reinforced through dreams in the society where they live.

### **How does dream follows witch-beliefs?**

Truth, knowledge and beliefs are the three elements that play a major role in formation of witch-beliefs. The society and geographic area where a group of people lives experiences and share common belief system. In a way they are familiar to certain beliefs regarding witchcraft and the existence of witches. These beliefs are social constructs that holds the unity and ethnicity of a group or community. The study on formation of witch-beliefs as carried out in the three districts of Assam reveals the three elements mentioned below:

- 1) Truth: It is referred to the illness of a person or physical suffering with diseases. It is personal in nature but the family members and society are concerned about his or her suffering and health.
- 2) Knowledge: It is referred to the knowledge and power of the *ojah* that are accepted by the society. Relationships between *Ojah* and Ill person are crucial concern here.
- 3) Belief: It is referred to the witch-belief that is firm in the society's everyday life. The society deals with the issue of witchcraft and witch-hunting that are prevalent in their community. So, the belief can be regarded as ethnic because societal becomes personal here. It means, the societal belief system leads to dreaming of witches which is of course personal dream.

To justify the points, let's take into account the above mentioned case no.1 and case no.2. The patients and the family members already had the belief in witchcraft and the existence of witches as an influence of the society where they live. The truth is that their family members had suffered from some diseases for which they have to take for treatment to the person having knowledge on the disease. Instead of relying on modern doctors, the best option according to them is to go to *Ojah* for treatment of their diseases. The society believes that the *Ojah* has all the knowledge required for the local people on the subject of medicines and supernatural powers. Then, the belief which is already existed in the society gets the way to confirmation by the word of *Ojachs*. Such type of confirmations affected their mind and life as a whole because they deeply rely on the knowledge of *Ojachs*. As a result, the dream part becomes active in strengthening their beliefs in witchcraft or existence of witches.

## **Aspects of witchcraft related dreams**

Dreaming is a private experience recalled upon awakening, and the question arises as to how often dream are shared with others (Schredl 2010). The frequency of sharing dreams about witches is very common in the field area I have chosen. The dreamer of such dreams are very serious and conscious about how to narrate the dream with full interest and gain the attention of the listener just to make him/her believe that what was seen in the dream might be true in real life too. If we analyze case no.1, we find that, even though the patient/dreamer is dead, the witch that came in her dream is still an oral narrative in the society where she lived. There is only one dreamer but many narrators of a particular dream that is related to witch. The dreamer is no longer remembered but the many narrators are remembered at the same time. Dreams continue as a tradition in their life in order to blame someone as witch.

Morgan says, "It is almost impossible to get an experienced observer to narrate a dream without interpolating explanatory and organizing material. The difficulty of remembering dreams suggests, of course, the impossibility of an exhaustive enumeration of their peculiarities and any positive conclusions from the figures." (Middleton 1933). So, the narrators most often combines line of other stories, combine motifs and episodes, shift characters and settings, use immediate environment and exercise his/her creative freedom which can be understood from the narrators of case no.2. The things that were remembered all throughout without any changes is the name and identity of the witch.

For Dilman, "there is a difficulty about past emotions, motives, etc., especially if they are in the distant past and I have forgotten what I then felt like, or if I was not aware of my feelings at the time. The case of dreams is even more peculiar, and perhaps, as Malcolm suggests, there is a break altogether between the logic of mental objects and that of dreams." (Dilman, 1961). Narrating a general dream is undoubtedly an unexpected phenomenon. But narrating a dream that is related to witch is narrating one's own private experiences/stories, repeatedly in public. However, it is not an easy task for a researcher to collect the past memories of someone's dreams, be it related to witch, witchcraft or other matter.

## **Conclusions**

Dreams are the result of what goes on in the unconscious mind of a person and it is an instrument for wish fulfilment. So, in the case of dreams regarding witches, there is the possibility that as soon as the *oajah* suggest the illness as the work of a witch nearby their house, the patient and the family members assumes and observes somebody as witch in their unconscious mind. At that moment, they do not disclose with anybody since it works unconsciously, but as they experience/see the witch in the dream, the wish is fulfilled and in the real life they hold the story as untrue but the person as witch for true. As a result narration of dreams regarding witches becomes more popular than other dreams even though there is no accuracy and authenticity in them. Just because there exists the belief of witchcraft in the society, they dream

and just because they dream the witch-beliefs become stronger. It can be said that dream follows witch-beliefs is the most appropriate one for that matter.

Family members and relatives regard dreams as a serious concern and ultimately the whole society that surrounds their family tries to safeguard the family with both mental and physical support. However, the fact that dreams represents real life activities and experiences are nevertheless an acceptable one but there are nuisance that creates confusion and disturbances in society when one does not observe and interpret well or in the right direction. So every dream cannot be taken as real but perhaps symbolic.

Dreams are generally inactive until and unless narrated orally. Though dreams are believed to contain important information emanating from the spirit world, it would be false to assume that most people regard dreams in a positive light, or that dreams are freely and easily communicated with others. In fact, dreams are regarded as intensely private matters, and are rarely communicated to anyone outside one's immediate family or closest friends. But in the case of dreams about witches, it is found that, one cannot keep it as a secret dream. The dreamer assumes it to be true and share it with others. As a result, the others narrate the same dream by changing almost every storyline and motifs except the name and identity of the witch. Such dreams are shared by the members of a society popularly with no dreamer/author of the dream. There is also no accuracy and authenticity in the dreamer's and other's narration of such dreams. The same dream might be narrated by different person in the society. So, it is dreams that are related to 'witchcraft' and 'witches' carry some characteristics of oral traditions. Now, the thing is- we cannot deny the fact that witch-belief follows dream even though we say that dream follows witch-beliefs. They are like two sides of the same coin.

## References

- Barrett, E. Boyd. (1923). "Dreams". *The Irish Monthly* 51(601): 356-362.
- Basumatary, Deepak. (2011). "The Wizards of Evil: Witchcraft in Bodo Literature." *Bibungthi, the Opinion*, 1(2): 28-34.
- Bhattacharjya, P.C. (1977). *A Descriptive Analysis of the Bodo Language*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
- Boro, Anil. (2001). *Folk Literature of Bodos*. Guwahati: N.L. Publication P.
- Brahma, Kameswar. (1992). *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos*. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.
- Dilman, Ilham. (1961). "Dreams". *The Review of Metaphysics*, 15(1): 108-117.
- Endle, Rev. Sidney. (1911). *The Kacharis*. Guwahati: Bina Library.
- Fischlin, Daniel. (1996). "Counterfeiting God": James VI (I) and the Politics of "Demonologie" (1597)." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 26(1): 1-29.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1913). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Jervis, Robert. (2006). "Understanding Beliefs." *Political Psychology*, 27(5): 641-663.
- Lahary, Manoranjan. (1985). *Haynamuli*. Kokrajhar: Onsumai DTP Centre.
- Lahary, Manoranjan. (2005). *Dayni*. Kokrajhar: Onsumai DTP Centre.
- Matossian, Mary Kilbourne. (1983). "Bewitched or Intoxicated? The Etiology of Witch Persecution in Early Modern England." *Medizinhistorisches Journal*, 18(1/2): 33-42.
- Middleton, Warren. C. (1933). "Nocturnal Dreams". *The Scientific Monthly*, 37(5): 460-464.
- Schredl, Michael and Jollie Alexandra Schawinski. (2010). "Frequency of dream sharing: The effects of gender and personality". *The American Journal of Psychology*, 123(1): 93-101.

- Schwitzgebel, Eric. (2006). The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab.*
- Waita, WanjikuMukabiKabiraNjogu. (2010). *Reclaiming My Dreams: Oral Narratives by WanjiraWaRukenya*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.
- Xaxa, Virginius. (2005). "Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40 (13): 1363-1370.

[The final revised version of this paper was received on 22May 2017]