

MAKE 'WITCH BRANDING' AN OFFENCE, SUGGESTS PANEL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

The Odisha State Commission for Women (SCW) has sought stringent provisions in the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act 2013 while demanding that branding of victims also be treated as heinous crime and punishable in the State.

The State women panel found inadequacy in the existing Act after it went through findings of a research it had commissioned in 12 districts.

Identifying, causing, stigmatising, defaming or accusing any person by words or signs or any actions is witch branding and subsequent abetting physical or mental harm, injury or harassment which may involve mass frenzy, sexual or emotional violence should be punishable, the SCW said.

The women commission wanted both jail and pecuniary punishment for persons found involved in branding and hunting in sorcery related violence. While branding of a person should attract not less than one year of jail term and fine not less than Rs. 1 lakh, persons hurting a person physically should be punished more than one year imprisonment and penalty of Rs. 5 lakh or both. The witch doctors should also be equally treated as complicit in the crime.

Punishment of life imprisonment has been sought for person who drive a person to commit suicide in witch branding case.

The women commission urged the government to make penalty provisions for people attributing misfortune to others. It also wanted more severe punishment for people convicted for second time under the Act.

It recommended State government to set up special courts for providing speedy trial in all cases witch branding and hunting districts. "It shall be the duty of State government to establish adequate number of courts to ensure that cases of witch branding and hunting and offences under the Act are disposed of within a period of 60 days. Every appeal under this Act should be disposed of within a period of 90 days from the date of judgement," the SCW said.

The SCW stressed on the need for government taking responsibility of rescue, rehabilitation, treating and bearing legal expenses of victims. It further emphasised on preventing violence through swift response of police administration.

The study 'Witch-Hunting in Odisha' conducted by State Commission for Women, Odisha and Action Aid Association, a non-government organization, says health concerns was a major underlying reasons behind witchcraft related violence in State.

As many as 102 witchcraft related violences were analysed under the study. Misfortune or attempts of land grabbing were found to be reasons behind these violence.

Police had intervened in 69% of the cases.

In 30% cases, victims of witchcraft were killed whereas victims in 17% cases did not have any

options left, but to leave their villages.

B. N. Durga of Action Aid Association said “single women who were widowed or separated were found to be the most vulnerable groups in witch branding related crimes. Children of the victims face the brunt of the stigma.”

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