



President Clears Bill Against Witch-Hunting

The President has given his assent to the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention, and Protection) Bill, 2015. The legislation is crucial in the present context in which communication technology is being used to magnify superstitious beliefs, black magic and social prejudices with fatal consequences, primarily affecting the life of marginal groups.

Key Points

- The legislation makes every offence under the Act **cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable**.
- The Act prescribes a **prison term of up to seven years and up to Rs. 5 lakh in fine** for calling a person witch.
- It also has provisions to come with **Section 302 of the IPC** (punishment for murder) if someone is killed after being branded a witch.
- The punishment for **leading a person to commit suicide** after intimidating, stigmatising, defaming and accusing her as witch, may be extended to life imprisonment, along with Rs 5 lakh fine.
- The Act also talks about various measures that the administration and police should initiate, along with NGOs and civil society, **to educate people about witch-hunting**.
- It also entails that the fine realized as punishment for an offence shall be paid to the victim or his/her next of kin as compensation.

Background

- Ms. Birubala Rabha and Director-General of Police Kuladhar Saikia are the two people behind the legislation.
- Ms. Birubala Rabha has been campaigning against witch-hunting since 1996. She rescued over 50 women from being branded as witches before launching Mission Birubala against the menace.
- DGP Kuladhar Saikia launched Project Prahari in 2001, which was aimed at fighting witch-hunting by uplifting the socio-economical status of the people. The programme blended normal policing with social campaigns to check the menace.
- The Prahari model has resulted in the formation of a coalition of different stakeholders in society like women's groups, student bodies, science clubs and development and law enforcement agencies.
- Under Prahari, regular health camps are organised. Through qualified experts, villagers are imparted knowledge about health and hygiene and local women are being trained.