Tribal women - Victims of Witch Hunting

What is the issue?

On International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (August 9), a most common form of violence against tribal women i.e branding them as witches, is being remembered.

What is witch hunting?

- Witch hunting involves the branding of victims, especially women as witches, where they are accused of possessing supernatural powers to harm others.
- The victim is subjected to numerous forms of torture, beatings, burns, paraded naked through the village, forced to eat human excrement and sometimes even raped.
- In some cases their hair is cut off and the victim and their children are socially excluded and even put to death.

What are the reasons for victimisation?

- A combination of superstitious beliefs, religious practices and patriarchal norms results in women being accused of witchcraft.
- Witch hunting is often deployed to deprive women of land and property, to take revenge where women refuse sexual advances and to punish women for petty disputes.
- Lack of education and health services have contributed to the continuation of this antiquated practice of witch hunting.
• The complexity of this issue and its punitive dimensions can be found in the blurring of boundaries between protector and perpetrator.
• This is because perpetrators are often members of their own family, neighbourhood and community.
• Women themselves resist challenging the patriarchal norms and superstition.
• Moreover, the identity politics of adivasi vs non-adivasi overtakes the reality of patriarchal violence within the adivasi community.
• Society and governments are hardly outraged over the torture, rape and murders of tribal, rural women in the name of witch-hunting.
• As a result of this lethargic response and action, accused goes unpunished.

Is there a legislation on this?

• NCRB data and police records show that the practise is more prevalent in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Assam.
• There is no specific and particular national level legislation that penalises Witch hunting.
• Hence various provisions and sections under the Indian Penal Code 1860 are being invoked for taking legislative actions.
• Different states have also come up with different legislations.

What should be done?

• The country must recognize that witch-hunting is very real and that it is treated as “business as usual” by adivasi, Dalit and other women in many parts of India.
Strict enforcement as well as implementation of Anti-witchcraft laws by the states will work to prevent witch-hunting practices.

Sensitizing of police and welfare department and establishment of NGO’s for this purpose could prove beneficial.

The issue could be brought into the school curriculum to raise awareness to change the perspective of society and the belief over superstition.

Source: The Indian Express