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Study points to witch-hunt trauma

A STAFF REPORTER

Guwahati, Dec. 23: Survivors of "witch-hunts" in Assam face not only psychological and physical abuse but also economic consequences like being stripped of property and denied access to public resources, according to a study.

The study, conducted by the Assam Mahila Samata Society, jointly with Northeast Network, two local women's rights NGOs and Partners for Law in Development, a New Delhi-based NGO, was released here today. It included case studies of 16 victims, mostly from the Rabha community in Goalpara and tea tribes in Sonitpur district.

Victims and their families face serious economic consequences after being branded witches. In six cases, the victims lost their source of livelihood or property. This can take many forms like having to pay a large sum of money to local *ojhas* or villagers, shops destroyed and trees in backyards slashed, loss of houses or mortgage of land, livestock sold and fishes exploited, the report said.

"A person is targeted owing to jealousy because of economic prosperity. Loss of livelihood and other material resources appear to be the intended consequences. Loss of access to public resources like hand pumps, local shops, markets, community meetings and prayer halls are also common in these cases," it said.

In the 16 case studies, four women were brutally murdered, two of them bore physical violence and 10 faced threats and physical attacks that could have turned serious. The study revealed the victims' families were collateral sufferers. "In five cases, the victim's entire family also suffered. In one case, the children were separated, while in another case, the entire family was murdered along with the victim," the report said.

It included instances of women being brutally attacked with bamboo sticks and daggers, yanked by the hair, slapped, punched and beaten up after being tied to a pillar. "There were instances where the victim was made to undergo agonising 'tests' like sitting on stool of thorny wood, holding iron balls or chewing betel nuts to prove they were not witches. In one extreme case, the deceased victim, daughter and her husband were raped by a group of seven, rods inserted in their private parts following which they were burnt by acid," the report said.

"Superstition was suspected to be the main reason behind the attacks but our study revealed it was a tool to also settle scores owing to personal enmity, jealousy or to grab property. The actions were approved by the community and many victims died owing to the lack of a support system," Anurita P. Hazarika of Northeast Network said.

Sixteen of the 27 Assam districts have reported witch-hunt attacks, in which over 150 people have died since 2002.

Case Studies

Case 1: A Rabha woman in Goalpara district, murdered on suspicion of being a witch, had four sons and three daughters. After her death, her daughters have not received marriage offers from the community

Case 2: A Rabha woman from Goalpara, 45, had married a widower. The instigators were her stepdaughter and husband's nephew, who wanted to grab their property. After the attack, her husband died and she was not allowed to meet her two children. Traumatized, she was evicted from the village

Case 3: An unmarried Adivasi Munda girl, 15, was a school student in Sonitpur district. She was held responsible for her neighbour's illness and branded a witch. The neighbours were jealous of her relationship with a boy and even tried to assault her

Case 4: A widow of the Munda community, 60, in Sonitpur district was branded a witch as she had demanded share of a pig she sold to her neighbour, but he sold it off to a relative. The buyer's daughter fell ill after consuming it. Villagers held the widow responsible, branded her a witch and murdered her

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