

PRESS RELEASE

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National Commission for Women (NCW) has taken cognizance of the complaint and constituted an Inquiry Committee under Sections 8 (1), read with Sections 10 (1) and 10 (4) of the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 to inquire into the media reports titled "Tribal women paraded naked in Odisha for 'witchcraft'" wherein reportedly a bizarre incident in which three women and an elderly man were paraded naked by villagers branding them 'black magicians' indulging in witchcraft in Ampada Village, Sundargarh District, Odisha.

After looking into the facts and circumstances of the present case the observations and recommendations of the Commission are following:

Observations

- i. Overview of the village: It was observed that the villagers are very poor and uneducated, the main occupation being bidi leaf cultivation and making bidis. An Aanganwadi was operating but on loaned premises and the women said they needed a helper since there were many children in the village. The entire village is excluded from any Public infrastructure and facilities. And most importantly it appears to be a no service area for cell phones did not work and there was no land line facility; so the child helpline no. painted on the wall of the local school was meaningless.
- ii. Local quacks/ faith healers/ ojha/traditional healers mushroom and thrive in areas where there is a lack of adequate public healthcare facilities. Due to illiteracy the simple villagers depend on these persons for medical care and their life, leading them to have blind faith in them. When there is a conflict of interest between two groups in order to assert the superiority, then the simple uneducated villagers are incited and provoked to attack the target.
- iii. The problem of 'black magic' is not restricted to any class, caste or religion but is a by-product of illiteracy and lack of medical healthcare. In the present case both the victim and accused belong to minority community and the incident has deeper implications. Funds are being received by the religious groups and the present incident appears to be a spill off of two different groups who want to establish their authority as healers.
- iv. It has been observed that while single women and widows with productive resources / land are most vulnerable to being targeted. The trend also shows that any woman who is assertive, strong minded, educated and fights for her rights is accused of practicing 'tonha (black magic)'. The impact of the labelling and stigma continues for generations and the taint and isolation effects the social and economic prospects of the victim/victim's family. As in the present case, the village only has 30-40 families and the labelling of the victims has resulted in their total isolation and humiliation.

v. The crime in the present case may have been gender neutral with both the old man and women being labelled as practicing 'black magic' but usually it is the WOMAN WHO IS THE TARGET.

vi. There is a need to define "justice" in terms of restoring the victim, in addition to punishing the perpetrator.

vii. The provisions in the Indian Penal Code are not sufficient to deal with the problem effectively. Special laws do exist in Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Jharkhand. Retrograde practices still prevail and like the Sati Pratha wherein the entire community/village participated, this crime also involves the entire village, as reflected in the present case.

viii. The concluding comments of CEDAW Committee on India's 2nd and 3rd Report also recommended that appropriate measures to eliminate the practice of witch hunting, be put in place, prosecuting and punishing those involved. Hence, there is a need for a separate Central legislation to address this issue, since this problem is prevalent in 17 states in the country.

Recommendations

Victim Oriented-

i. To ensure social welfare department in collaboration with local NGOs provides effective rehabilitation for the victims including compensation and counselling.

ii. To ensure that the police and the CDPO make regular visits to the village for the next three months to ensure that the villagers have accepted the victims and they are not being subjected to any further humiliation.

State Government-

Infrastructure. a) To set up a PHC in the village in order to provide basic health care facilities so that the villagers do not take resort to the local faith healers, who encourage such kind of violence in order to establish their domination. Hence, access to adequate public health services is imperative to stop such incidents. b) To ensure that pucca road is constructed in order to improve connectivity to the village

Awareness Programmes. a) To ensure that awareness programmes are held in vulnerable areas in order to educate the simple uneducated villagers. b) To ensure training and orientation of workers in the field and members of the community on the issues relating to 'black magic'. First and foremost orientation of Sarpanch and PRIs, alongwith Aanganwadi workers, ASHA workers, ICDS officers, as the work of these persons is likely to bring them into contact with a large number of women, some of whom are likely to be victims. During the training the patriarchal roots to the belief system which gives rise to labeling of women should be clearly explained, and awareness of the reasons of death be elucidated with statistics and comparative figures.

Police. To develop guidelines or operating procedure for the police, to tackle such cases and for effective implementation of the existing law.