Tribal women - Victims of Witch Hunting

What is the issue?

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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.

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What is witch hunting?

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- Witch hunting involves the branding of victims, especially women as witches, where they are accused of possessing supernatural powers to harm others.
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- 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.
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- In some cases their hair is cut off and the victim and their children are socially excluded and even put to death.
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What are the reasons for victimisation?

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- A combination of superstitious beliefs, religious practices and patriarchal norms results in women being accused of witchcraft.
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- 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.
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- Lack of education and health services have contributed to the continuation of

this antiquated practice of witch hunting.
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- The complexity of this issue and its punitive dimensions can be found in the blurring of boundaries between protector and perpetrator.
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- This is because perpetrators are often members of their own family, neighbourhood and community.
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- Women themselves resist challenging the patriarchal norms and superstition.
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- Moreover, the identity politics of adivasi vs non-adivasi overtakes the reality of patriarchal violence within the adivasi community.
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- Society and governments are hardly outraged over the torture, rape and murders of tribal, rural women in the name of witch-hunting.
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- As a result of this lethargic response and action, accused goes unpunished.
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Is there a legislation on this?

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- 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.
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- There is no specific and particular national level legislation that penalises Witch hunting.
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- Hence various provisions and sections under the Indian Penal Code 1860 are being invoked for taking legislative actions.
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- Different states have also come up with different legislations.
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What should be done?

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- 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.
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- Strict enforcement as well as implementation of Anti-witchcraft laws by the states will work to prevent witch-hunting practices.
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- Sensitizing of police and welfare department and establishment of NGO’s for this purpose could prove beneficial.
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- The issue could be brought into the school curriculum to raise awareness to change the perspective of society and the belief over superstition.
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Source: The Indian Express

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