

# President clears Bill against witch-hunting

## Assam legislation prescribes jail term of up to 7 years

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GUWAHATI

President Ram Nath Kovind's assent to the Bill against witch-hunting that the Assam Assembly passed three years ago has rejuvenated the campaign of a barely literate 65-year-old woman against superstition that has claimed scores of lives.

"We can now tell the people that they cannot get away with killing or maiming people in the name of witchcraft," Birubala Rabha told *The Hindu* from her village



Birubala Rabha

Thakurbhila in Goalpara district on Monday. Ms. Rabha has been campaigning against witch-hunting after a quack almost killed her son in 1996. She stood her ground despite the threat of excommunication by the local shaman and went on to rescue over 50 women from being branded as witches be-

fore launching Mission Birubala against the menace.

On Sunday, Principal Secretary (Home and Political) L.S. Changsan said the State received the President's approval for the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015, on June 13. The State has already notified the Act.

Ms. Rabha's inputs had gone into the legislation, making 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 ₹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.

Another important person behind the legislation is Director-General of Police Kuladhar Saikia. As Deputy Inspector-General in Kokrajhar district, he launched Project Prahari in 2001, which blended normal policing with social campaigns to check the menace. "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," he said.