

## 20 families accused of witchcraft in Madhya Pradesh village, boycotted

Madhya Pradesh urban administration and development minister Narottam Mishra has directed officials to probe the social boycott of 20 families in Betul district for allegedly practising witchcraft. Each family has been asked to pay a penalty of Rs.10,000 to 'get back to the society'.

The incident took place at Hethikhapa village in Multai tehsil in Betul a week ago. Some influential villagers requisitioned the services of a 'faith-healer' from Chhindwara district to find out if someone was practising sorcery in the village because the cattle were dying.

'The 'baba' performed 'khatoli' (a process believed to identify witches) and held 20 families responsible for the misfortune,' Andhvishwas Nirmulan Samiti secretary Sukant Bannerjee told IANS.

'The villagers ordered the 'families' to pay a fine of Rs.10,000 each and announced they would be socially boycotted till the fine was paid. Villagers were told not to visit these families or help them in any way or else they would also be penalised,' Banerjee, who told the minister about the incident, said.

The minister visited the area Thursday and directed the district officials to probe the boycott and provide necessary assistance to the victims.

Betul collector Arun Bhatt has also instructed the officials to ensure protection to the victims and prevent recurrence of such incidents in future. 'Those found guilty will not be spared,' he said.

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