
WITCH-HUNTING AND RITUAL KILLINGS IN INDIA: A SOCIO-LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

Drashti Nayak, LL.M., Maharashtra National Law University,
Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, India

ABSTRACT

Witch-hunting and ritual killings are not just relics of India's past; they continue to claim lives and dignity even today. Behind every statistic is a story of fear, superstition, and social exclusion—most often targeting women, widows, the elderly, and members of marginalised communities. In many villages, unexplained illness, crop failure, or sudden death is still explained through the language of witchcraft or black magic. What begins as suspicion often turns into branding, public humiliation, violence, and sometimes murder. Ritual killings, driven by the belief that human sacrifice can bring prosperity or ward off evil, add another brutal dimension to this reality.

Despite India's constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity, these practices persist in states such as Jharkhand, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Rajasthan. The law has responded through both the Indian Penal Code and special state legislations, and courts have repeatedly condemned such acts as grave violations of fundamental rights. Yet, enforcement remains weak. Many cases go unreported, and survivors often live with stigma, displacement, and trauma.

From a criminological perspective, theories such as labeling, feminist criminology, and social disorganisation explain why these practices continue. From a victimological lens, they reveal the deep suffering of those branded as witches ostracised from their families and stripped of dignity.

This paper argues that criminalisation alone cannot solve the problem. Laws must work alongside social reforms, including education, healthcare, awareness campaigns, and community mobilisation. Victim rehabilitation and a national framework harmonising fragmented state responses are also essential. Ultimately, the fight against witch-hunting and ritual killings is not only about punishing crime but about restoring humanity ensuring that the most vulnerable are not sacrificed at the altar of superstition and fear.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The woman found dead in a small village is not just a statistic; she is a life unpicked by fear, rumour and social abandonment. In late September 2025 a middle-aged woman sleeping with her grandchildren in Ratlam was attacked and killed after relatives accused her of causing misfortune by witchcraft a headline that reads like an anachronism but which, painfully, is all too contemporary. Such incidents whether a single murderous assault, an organised public humiliation, or a ritualised killing invoked as a cure for misfortune reveal an ugly continuity of violence that intersects superstition with material injustice.

“Witch-hunting” in the Indian context denotes a cluster of practices: the public identification (branding) of an individual overwhelmingly women as responsible for illness, crop failure or death through supernatural means; the ensuing social exclusion, torture, forced displacement or sometimes murder that follows; and the involvement of informal authorities (local healers, sorcerers or panchayat brokers) who legitimise the accusation. “Ritual killings” or “human sacrifice” occupies a related but distinct register: organised, often clandestine violent acts framed as appeasement or remediation, sometimes orchestrated or monetised by persons who claim occult expertise. State statutes use these working definitions when they draft offences and protective measures.

Empirical patterns show the problem is geographically concentrated but not confined. Official compilations and human-rights reporting indicate that hundreds of murders each decade have been recorded where “witchcraft” or “human sacrifice” were recorded motives; NCRB-derived summaries show dozens of such murders annually in recent years (for example, 68 murders with “witchcraft” as motive in 2021), and state clusters appear repeatedly in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar and Assam. These raw counts understate the harm: non-fatal abuses banishment, repeated assault, sexual violence, economic ruin rarely appear in central tabulations and many victims never approach police out of fear or local complicity.

Why does this persist? A socio-legal lens shows the phenomenon is produced by an interplay of structural deprivations and local power dynamics. In settings of chronic poverty, poor health infrastructure and low literacy, unexplained illness or sudden death creates anxiety that is resolved through familiar cultural narratives: a scapegoat is named, a ritual or punishment is prescribed, and communal sanction follows. Accusations often overlay other motives land

grabs, revenge, caste hostility, or the discipline of women who transgress social norms so that superstition becomes a readily available instrument for settling secular disputes. Research and field reports from affected states document repeated patterns: elderly or widowed women, or those without strong male kin, are over-represented among victims.

The legal response to witch-branding and ritual violence in India is multi-layered but uneven. Historically such crimes were prosecuted under general penal provisions (murder, assault, abetment, criminal intimidation); but recognising the distinctive dynamics and the limits of general law, several states have enacted special statutes Bihar (1999), Jharkhand (2001), Chhattisgarh (Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act, 2005), Odisha (2013), Assam (2015/2018 notification), Rajasthan (2015/2019 implementation) while Maharashtra (2013) and Karnataka (2017) have framed anti-superstition laws that explicitly target human sacrifice and exploitative occult practices. These state laws create specific offences, enable cognizable action and, in some cases, mandate protective measures for victims. Yet the gap between statutory promise and rural reality remains wide: enforcement is patchy, awareness limited, and convictions slow or rare. A number of central legislative efforts and private member bills have sought to create a national framework signalling recognition at the federal level but as yet central harmonisation remains incomplete.

Courts have not been silent. Several High Court pronouncements have described witchhunting as dehumanising and tantamount to gross human-rights violations, urging the state to respond not merely punitively but preventively. These judicial observations while powerful are only a part of the answer: prosecutions without witness safety, or laws without rehabilitation, can leave survivors as vulnerable as before. Psychological and clinical studies of survivors emphasise enduring trauma: chronic anxiety, social isolation, loss of livelihood and inter-generational stigma, underscoring the need for trauma-informed rehabilitation alongside criminal justice.

This paper intervenes in that overlap between social causes and legal responses. It argues that witch-hunting and ritual killings in India cannot be reduced to superstition or to isolated criminal acts; they are social practices that exploit institutional voids and reproduce gendered and caste-based vulnerability. Effective remediation therefore requires a layered socio-legal strategy: precise criminal prohibitions and prosecutorial rigour; integrated public-health and death-investigation systems to remove the epistemic vacuum that fuels suspicion; survivor

centred rehabilitation (housing, counselling, livelihoods); and sustained community education that builds alternative narratives of causal explanation and dispute resolution. Only when law, public health, and social policy act in concert can the pattern of accusation, humiliation and violence be interrupted and when that happens, the small human tragedies behind headlines will stop multiplying.

1.1 Research problem

Despite constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality, and despite the enactment of special legislations by states such as Bihar (1999), Jharkhand (2001), Odisha (2013), Assam (2015), Rajasthan (2019), and Maharashtra and Karnataka's anti-superstition laws, witch-hunting and ritual killings remain prevalent. The problem lies in weak enforcement, under-reporting, social acceptance of superstition, and inadequate survivor rehabilitation.

1.2 Objective of the study

1. To examine the socio-cultural roots of witch-hunting and ritual killings in India.
2. To analyse the existing legal framework and judicial responses.
3. To evaluate these practices through criminological theories and victimological perspectives.
4. To assess the effectiveness of special legislations and highlight implementation gaps.
5. To propose socio-legal reforms and victim-centric strategies for eradication.

1.3 Hypothesis

The study hypothesises that while criminalisation of witch-hunting and ritual killings is necessary, law alone is insufficient. A sustainable solution requires an integrated socio-legal approach that combines law enforcement with healthcare access, education, awareness, and rehabilitation.

1.4 Research questions

1. What socio-cultural and historical factors sustain witch-hunting and ritual killings in

India?

2. How effective are the existing legal frameworks, including IPC/BNS and state legislations?
3. How have Indian courts addressed these practices within a constitutional framework?
4. Which criminological and victimological insights explain their persistence and impact on victims?
5. What socio-legal reforms are necessary for effective prevention and eradication?

1.4 Methodology

- Doctrinal Research: Analysis of statutes, case law, NCRB data, and judicial pronouncements.
- Analytical Research: Application of criminological and victimological theories.
- Comparative Study: Examining state legislations and their implementation.
- Socio-Legal Lens: Reviewing NGO reports, psychological studies of survivors, and recent incidents.

1.5 Literature review

- NCRB reports highlighting witchcraft- and human-sacrifice-related murders.
- State-specific studies on witch-hunting in Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, and Odisha.
- Judicial rulings condemning witch-hunting as a human rights violation.
- Criminological scholarship applying labeling theory, feminist criminology, and social disorganisation theory.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ROOTS – BELIEFS, CUSTOMS, AND REGIONAL PATTERNS.

2.1 Historical Roots of Witch-Hunting in India

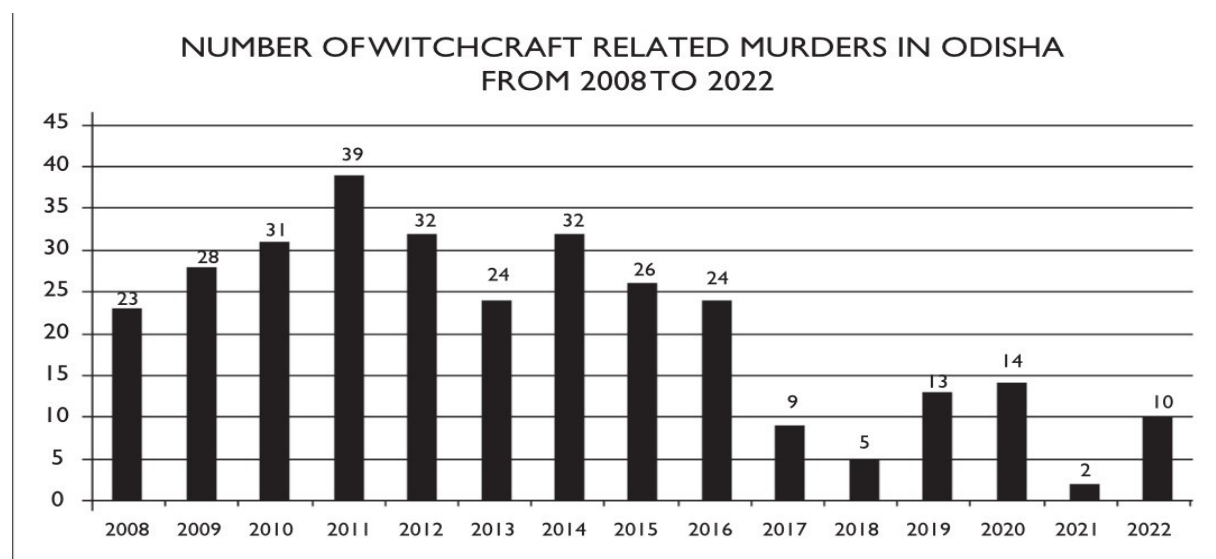
Witch-hunting in India is not merely a vestige of superstition; it is a social phenomenon with

deep historical roots, shaped by centuries of local belief systems, power hierarchies, and communal practices. Unlike the European witch trials, which were often orchestrated by central authorities and church institutions, Indian witch-branding largely emerged from community-driven processes. Historical records and anthropological studies indicate that in tribal and rural societies, sudden misfortunes—illness, death, failed crops, or unexplained accidents—were interpreted through the prism of supernatural causality. In these contexts, women, particularly those who deviated from prescribed social norms, became convenient targets of blame.

Anthropological accounts from Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and parts of Madhya Pradesh describe how local healers, shamans, and ojhas (sorcerers) were entrusted with identifying “culprits” responsible for community misfortune. The accused were often subjected to public rituals meant to “purge” evil, ranging from social humiliation to physical punishment. In many cases, these rituals served dual purposes: they appeared to restore communal order while also reinforcing local hierarchies. Historical patterns show that widows, single women, or those without strong male protection were disproportionately accused, revealing the gendered dimensions of these practices.

The historical continuity of witch-hunting also reflects its social utility. By identifying a “witch,” communities created a tangible target for abstract misfortune, providing psychological relief and a sense of control. Over time, this practice became embedded in local custom, and even in the modern era, villages with weak governance or limited access to healthcare continue to rely on these interpretive frameworks to explain misfortune. In short, witch-hunting in India is less a relic of irrationality and more a socially sanctioned mechanism that has evolved to manage uncertainty, fear, and power relations in vulnerable communities¹.

¹ 1Diwash Saihya, *Beyond Superstition: Addressing the Root Causes of Witch Hunting in India*, INDIAN JOURNAL OF LAW AND LEGAL RESEARCH (Mar. 2023).



Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)

2.2 Social Dynamics: Poverty, Gender, and Caste

The persistence of witch-hunting cannot be understood without situating it within the broader social fabric of rural and tribal India. Poverty, gender inequality, and caste hierarchies intersect to create fertile ground for these practices. In economically marginalized areas, where literacy is low and healthcare is scarce, unexplained illnesses or deaths are often attributed to supernatural causes. Fear, grief, and desperation converge to make accusation appear both rational and necessary.

Gender plays a central role in the dynamics of witch-branding. Women, especially widows, the elderly, or those who resist patriarchal control, are disproportionately targeted. Their social vulnerability makes them easy scapegoats; branding them as witches legitimizes exclusion, abuse, and sometimes murder. Feminist analyses highlight how witch-branding functions as a mechanism of patriarchal discipline, punishing women for transgressing social norms or asserting autonomy. The act of accusation becomes not only a means of explaining misfortune but also a tool to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and silence dissenting women².

Caste and tribal identity further shape vulnerability. Women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are often at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, making them more likely to be accused. Studies from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh reveal that accusations are

² Tanvi Yadav, *Witch Hunting: A Form of Violence Against Dalit Women in India*, 1 CASTE: A GLOBAL JOURNAL ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION, no. 2 (2020).

frequently linked to property disputes, personal vendettas, or attempts to consolidate local social power. Land grabs, in particular, emerge as a recurring motive: labeling a woman as a witch allows perpetrators to appropriate her property under the guise of “purification.” Thus, witch-hunting is not merely superstition; it is deeply entwined with the structural inequalities of poverty, gender, and caste. This social lens also illuminates the broader consequences for victims. Beyond immediate violence, branded women experience long-term stigma, social ostracism, and loss of livelihood. Their children may face barriers to education and marriage, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability. The social dynamics of witchhunting, therefore, extend beyond the act itself, entrenching inequality and reinforcing systemic injustice across generations³.

2.3 Ritual Killings: The Dark Side of Superstition

Ritual killings represent a particularly violent and extreme manifestation of superstition in India, distinct yet closely related to witch-hunting. While witch-branding often involves scapegoating a vulnerable individual, ritual killings are deliberate acts intended to appease supernatural forces, ensure prosperity, or remove misfortune from a community. Such killings are most frequently orchestrated by individuals claiming occult authority—tantriks, shamans, or self-styled spiritual leaders—who exploit fear and ignorance for personal gain.

Documented cases in Maharashtra, Odisha, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and other regions illustrate the chilling logic of these acts. Victims are often children or socially marginalized adults, selected for their perceived purity, vulnerability, or availability. Families or communities, driven by desperation and a belief in miraculous intervention, may participate willingly, providing implicit consent to acts that, in law, constitute homicide. This underscores the complex social psychology underlying ritual killings: acts of extreme violence are normalized through shared belief, ritual authority, and communal sanction⁴.

Ritual killings also reveal the commodification of superstition. Tantriks and ritual specialists often charge fees, promising health, wealth, or protection in exchange for human sacrifice. The economic incentives for ritual practitioners intersect with social desperation, reinforcing a cycle of exploitation. Beyond immediate physical harm, the aftermath leaves families

³ Prabir Kumar Pattnaik & Rubi Talukdar, *Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in India*, PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION JOURNAL (2020).

⁴ Arundhati Patra, *Witch Hunting: A Shocking Reality of Modern India*, 4 JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AND PRACTICE, no. 1 (2021). ⁵ Saibya, *supra* note 1.

traumatized, communities morally conflicted, and social trust eroded. Unlike witch-hunting, which may end with social humiliation or property seizure, ritual killings are final and irreversible, making them one of the gravest forms of superstition-driven violence in India.

The study of ritual killings thus exposes how superstition, power, and exploitation converge. It demonstrates that belief alone does not explain such violence; structural deprivation, social inequality, and human agency all play decisive roles. Understanding this “dark side” of superstition is crucial for any socio-legal analysis, as it highlights the interplay between cultural belief, material interest, and the systemic vulnerability of certain populations.

2.4 Psychological and Societal Impact on Victims and Communities⁵

The consequences of witch-hunting and ritual killings extend far beyond immediate physical harm. Victims frequently experience profound psychological trauma, including chronic anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and a pervasive sense of fear. The branding as a “witch” often strips individuals of social identity and dignity, leading to isolation and marginalisation within their own families and communities. Children of victims face stigma, interrupted education, and diminished marriage prospects, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability across generations.

Communities are also affected. The fear of witchcraft and ritual violence fosters mistrust among neighbours, fractures social cohesion, and normalises a culture of suspicion. In some regions, entire villages may develop rituals or surveillance mechanisms aimed at preemptively identifying alleged witches, embedding violence into everyday social life. This collective impact reinforces both the social legitimacy of the practice and the marginalisation of already vulnerable groups, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that is difficult to disrupt.

Field reports and psychological studies highlight that survivors’ trauma is often compounded by a lack of institutional support. Police inaction, community silence, and the absence of rehabilitation structures leave victims without protection, exacerbating feelings of helplessness and perpetuating social exclusion. These outcomes reveal that the harm of witch-hunting is multi-dimensional: it is simultaneously physical, emotional, social, and generational.

Addressing these consequences requires a nuanced understanding that combines sociocultural awareness with psychological insight. Any effective intervention must not only punish

perpetrators but also provide sustained support to survivors and challenge the social norms that enable such violence. Recognising the profound psychological and societal impact is essential for developing holistic approaches that can break cycles of superstition, fear, and marginalisation.

CHAPTER 3: LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA – BNS, STATE LEGISLATIONS, AND POLICY INITIATIVES.

3.1 Introduction to the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, enacted to replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC), serves as the cornerstone of India's criminal justice system. While the BNS does not explicitly categorize witch-hunting or ritual killings as distinct offenses, it encompasses provisions that can be applied to such crimes. Offenses related to witch-hunting, such as murder, attempt to murder, and voluntarily causing hurt, are punishable under various sections of the BNS. For instance:

- *Section 103⁵: Punishment for murder.*
- *Section 109⁶: Punishment for attempt to murder.*
- *Section 115⁷: Punishment for voluntarily causing hurt.*
- *Section 299⁸: Deliberate and Malicious Acts Intended to Outrage Religious Feelings.*

These sections provide a legal basis for prosecuting individuals involved in witch-hunting and ritual killings. However, the challenge lies in the application of these provisions to cases rooted in superstition and cultural beliefs.

3.2 State-Specific Legislation

While the BNS provides a national legal framework, several states have enacted their own laws

⁵ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, § 103 (India).

⁶ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, § 109 (India).

⁷ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, § 115 (India).

⁸ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, § 299 (India).

to specifically address witch-hunting and related practices:

3.2.1 Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention, and Protection) Act, 2015⁹

Assam's legislation criminalizes witch-hunting, including the identification of individuals as witches and the associated torture, humiliation, and killings. The Act aims to eliminate such practices and provides mechanisms for the protection and rehabilitation of victims. Despite its enactment, challenges persist in its implementation, with reports indicating that the law has not been fully effective in curbing witch-hunting activities.

3.2.2 Bihar Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999¹⁰

Bihar was among the first states to enact a law specifically targeting witch-hunting. The Act criminalizes the identification of individuals as witches and prescribes punishment for physical or mental torture. However, the implementation of this law has been weak, inconsistent, and largely ineffective, with reports of continued witch-hunting incidents in the state.

3.2.3 Jharkhand Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001¹¹

Jharkhand's legislation aims to eliminate the torture, humiliation, and killing of individuals accused of witchcraft. The Act provides for the protection and rehabilitation of victims and seeks to create awareness to prevent such practices. Despite its provisions, challenges in enforcement and societal attitudes continue to hinder its effectiveness.

3.2.4 Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other

Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013¹²

Maharashtra's law specifically targets practices like human sacrifice, black magic, and other inhuman rituals. The Act criminalizes such practices and provides for stringent penalties. While it addresses a broader spectrum of superstitious practices, its application to witchhunting cases has been limited.

⁹ Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015 (notified 2018) (India).

¹⁰ Bihar Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999 (India).

¹¹ Jharkhand Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001 (India).

¹² Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013 (India).

3.2.5 Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013¹³

Odisha's legislation focuses on preventing witch-hunting by criminalizing the identification of individuals as witches and associated practices. The Act aims to protect individuals from such accusations and provides for the rehabilitation of victims. However, challenges in enforcement and societal beliefs continue to impede its effectiveness.

3.2.6 Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015¹⁴

Rajasthan's law criminalizes the identification of individuals as witches and associated practices. The Act aims to prevent such practices and provides mechanisms for the protection and rehabilitation of victims. Despite its enactment, challenges persist in its implementation, with reports indicating that the law has not been fully effective in curbing witch-hunting activities.

3.2.7 Chhattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act, 2005¹⁵

Chhattisgarh's legislation criminalizes the identification of individuals as witches and associated practices. The Act aims to eliminate such practices and provides mechanisms for the protection and rehabilitation of victims. Despite its enactment, challenges persist in its implementation, with reports indicating that the law has not been fully effective in curbing witch-hunting activities.

3.2.8 Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act, 2017¹⁶

Enacted in December 2017, this Act aims to protect individuals from exploitation through inhuman practices, black magic, and other sinister activities performed under the guise of supernatural powers. The legislation criminalizes various acts associated with witch-hunting and related practices.

¹³ Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013 (India).

¹⁴ Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015 (in force 2019) (India).

¹⁵ Chhattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act, 2005 (India).

¹⁶ Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act, 2017 (India).

3.3 Challenges in Legal Implementation

Despite the existence of these laws, several challenges impede their effective implementation:

- Lack of Awareness: Many communities are unaware of the legal provisions protecting individuals from witch-hunting, leading to continued practices.
- Cultural Beliefs: Deep-rooted superstitions and cultural beliefs often overshadow legal deterrents, making enforcement difficult.
- Weak Enforcement: Inadequate training and resources for law enforcement agencies result in poor implementation of laws.
- Social Stigma: Victims of witch-hunting often face social ostracism, discouraging them from seeking legal recourse.

CHAPTER 4: JUDICIAL APPROACH – CASE LAW AND CONSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

Witch-hunting and ritual killings, though outlawed by various state legislations, continue to persist in certain regions of India. The judiciary plays a pivotal role in interpreting laws and ensuring justice for victims of such practices. This chapter explores landmark case laws and examines the constitutional provisions relevant to these issues.

4.1 Landmark cases

4.1.1 Kailash Sethi v. State of Odisha (2025)¹⁷¹⁸

In a significant judgment, the Kujang Court in Jagatsinghpur district, Odisha, sentenced five individuals to five years of rigorous imprisonment for an acid attack on a man suspected of practicing witchcraft. The court's decision underscored the severity of crimes committed under the guise of witch-hunting and emphasized the need for stringent enforcement of laws protecting individuals from such practices¹⁹.

¹⁷ *Kailash Sethi & Ors. v. State of Odisha*, (Odisha Dist. Ct., Kujang, 2025) (unreported).

¹⁸ *Men Get 5-Year Jail Terms in Acid Attack Case*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (June 4, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/5-men-get-5-year-jail-terms-in-acid-attack-case/articleshow/121630631.cms>.

4.1.2 Purnia Witchcraft Killings (2025)

In Purnia, Bihar, five members of a tribal family were burned alive over witchcraft accusations, highlighting the deep-rooted superstition crisis in the state. Despite the existence of the Prevention of Witch Practices Act, 1999, such violence remains rampant, especially in rural areas plagued by low education and limited healthcare. This incident calls for a reevaluation of the effectiveness of existing laws and the need for comprehensive awareness and enforcement strategies¹⁹.

4.1.3 Fatal Faith: Son Kills Mother Over Witchcraft Suspicions in Bilaspur (2025)

In Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, a 38-year-old man, Vishnu Kevat, murdered his 55-year-old mother, Mantora Bai Kevat, under the belief that her alleged witchcraft was causing his children's illnesses. Influenced by a local occult practitioner, Vishnu attacked his mother with an axe. After the crime, he surrendered to the police, and the authorities arrested him. This case underscores the dangers of unverified occult practices and the need for stringent legal measures to combat superstition-driven violence²⁰.

4.1.4 Sister-in-law, 2 Nephews Held for Murder of Woman Over Witchcraft Suspicion (2025)

In Bhimpura village, Ratlam, Madhya Pradesh, a 48-year-old woman, Nanibai alias Narmadabai, was murdered by her sister-in-law and two nephews over suspicions of witchcraft. The accused believed that Nanibai was responsible for various illnesses and deaths in their family. They attacked her with an axe and an iron pipe before throwing her body from the terrace to simulate an accidental fall. The police arrested the trio, and the case highlighted the need for greater awareness and legal interventions to prevent such superstition-driven crimes²¹.

4.1.5 Elderly Man Beaten to Death Over Witchcraft Allegations in Sahibganj District

¹⁹ G. Pandey, *Bihar: The Witchcraft Murders That Shook an Indian Village*, BBC NEWS (Aug. 2, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdjx121w2yxo>.

²⁰ *Fatal Faith: Son Kills Mother over Witchcraft Suspicions in Bilaspur*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Sept. 20, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/raipur/fatal-faith-son-kills-mother-over-witchcraft-suspicions-inbilaspur/articleshow/124020482.cms>.

²¹ *Sister-in-Law, 2 Nephews Held for Murder of Woman over Witchcraft Suspicion*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Sept. 27, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/indore/sister-in-law-2-nephews-held-for-murder-of-womanover-witchcraft-suspicion/articleshow/124187092.cms>.

(2025)

An elderly man was tragically beaten to death in Sahibganj district, Jharkhand, amid accusations of practicing witchcraft. The incident highlights ongoing issues of superstition and violence in certain rural areas, where vulnerable individuals, particularly the elderly or socially marginalized, are often targeted with such allegations. Authorities have launched an investigation, and the case underscores the urgent need for measures to address harmful beliefs through education and community awareness²².

4.1.6 Siwan Couple Killed Over Allegation of Practising Witchcraft (2025)

In Siwan, Bihar, a couple was brutally killed over allegations of practicing witchcraft. The tragic event underscores ongoing issues in rural parts of India where superstitions and lack of awareness can lead to fatal consequences. The case highlights the persistent belief in witchcraft in certain areas and the urgent need for awareness and legal interventions to prevent such acts of vigilantism and violence²³.

4.2 Constitutional Perspectives

Witch-hunting and ritual killings are not merely criminal acts—they are also a direct assault on the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. The Indian judiciary has repeatedly emphasized that these practices violate the core principles of equality, dignity, and personal liberty.

1. Article 14 – Right to Equality²⁴:

Article 14 ensures that every individual is entitled to equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Witch-hunting disproportionately targets women, the elderly, and socially marginalized individuals, particularly from Scheduled Castes and Tribes. By singling out individuals based on superstition-driven allegations, these practices create systemic inequality, undermining the protection that Article 14 guarantees. Courts have increasingly

²² Rajesh Kumar Pandey, *Elderly Man Beaten to Death over Witchcraft Allegations in Sahibganj District*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Sept. 21, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/elderly-man-beaten-to-death-over-witchcraft-allegations-in-sahibganj-district/articleshow/124031557.cms>.

²³ *Siwan Couple Killed over Allegation of Practising Witchcraft*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Sept. 22, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/siwan-couple-killed-over-allegation-of-practising-witchcraft/articleshow/124052343.cms>.

²⁴ India Const. art. 14.

recognized that the state has a responsibility not only to punish perpetrators but also to prevent such discriminatory practices from occurring, thereby upholding equality as a constitutional mandate.

2. Article 15 – Prohibition of Discrimination²⁵:

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Witch-hunting often intersects with gender oppression and caste hierarchies. For instance, tribal women accused of witchcraft are subjected to violence or forced exile primarily due to their gender, social status, or vulnerability within the community. The judiciary has emphasized that state action must protect individuals from such social discrimination, as the law does not merely punish crimes after they occur but also ensures preventive safeguards to uphold constitutional equality.

3. Article 21 – Right to Life and Personal Liberty²⁶:

Article 21 guarantees the right to life, personal liberty, and the right to live with dignity. In cases of ritual killings, human sacrifice, and violent witch-hunting, victims are deprived of their most fundamental right—the right to life itself. Courts have interpreted Article 21 broadly to include physical, psychological, and social dimensions of life. Violence fueled by superstition, which instills fear and restricts free movement or social participation, is thus a violation of this constitutional protection. Several High Court rulings have explicitly recognized that superstition-based violence is incompatible with the right to live with dignity and that preventive intervention is a constitutional obligation.

4. Directive Principles and State Responsibility²⁷:

Although not enforceable in a court of law like fundamental rights, the Directive Principles of State Policy under Articles 38 and 39 emphasize promoting social justice, protecting marginalized groups, and ensuring the welfare of citizens. Witch-hunting and ritual killings represent a failure of these principles at the societal level, especially where state inaction allows cultural and patriarchal structures to perpetuate violence. Courts have often urged the state to implement laws, rehabilitation programs, and educational initiatives to align social practices

²⁵ India Const. art. 15.

²⁶ India Const. art. 21.

²⁷ India Const. arts. 38, 39.

with constitutional mandates.

5. Judicial Interpretation:

The Indian judiciary has, over the years, taken a proactive stance to ensure that constitutional rights are not rendered ineffective by social or cultural practices. In cases involving superstition-driven crimes, courts have emphasized a two-fold responsibility:

- First, to ensure strict enforcement of criminal laws (both central and state-specific) against perpetrators.
- Second, to engage in preventive measures, including awareness campaigns, victim protection, and community sensitization, to uphold the dignity and liberty of at-risk populations.

In essence, the constitutional perspective highlights that witch-hunting and ritual killings are not just criminal violations but are also violations of the fundamental moral and legal fabric of the Constitution. Protecting individuals from such practices aligns with the broader constitutional vision of justice, equality, and human dignity²⁸.

CHAPTER 5: CRIMINOLOGICAL AND VICTIMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS – THEORETICAL INSIGHTS.

Witch-hunting and ritual killings in India are complex social phenomena that transcend mere criminal acts; they are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and psychological frameworks. To understand these practices, criminological and victimological perspectives provide essential analytical tools. Criminology allows us to explore the underlying social, economic, and psychological motivations that drive perpetrators, while victimology emphasizes the experiences, vulnerabilities, and societal marginalization of victims. By integrating theoretical insights with real-world contexts, this chapter seeks to explain why such crimes persist, identify patterns of victimization, and highlight the systemic failures that enable them²⁹.

²⁸ Govt. Notifies Policy to Combat Human Trafficking, Witch-Hunting, THE TIMES OF INDIA (May 17, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/govt-notifies-policy-to-combat-human-trafficking-witchhunting/articleshow/121218778.cms>.

²⁹ See generally *Belief in Witchcraft and Its Social Consequences* (illustrative of the broader literature on the psychology of superstition).

5.1 Criminological Analysis

From a criminological perspective, witch-hunting and ritual killings can be understood through multiple theoretical lenses:

1. Social Strain Theory:

According to Merton's strain theory, individuals may resort to deviant behavior when societal pressures and cultural expectations clash with limited legitimate means of achieving socially approved goals. In rural India, poverty, illiteracy, and lack of access to healthcare or economic resources create strain. Accusing someone of witchcraft becomes a socially acceptable outlet for frustration, fear, and the desire to explain misfortune such as illness, crop failure, or family deaths. The label of "witch" allows communities to project blame onto a vulnerable individual, thereby alleviating collective anxiety while reinforcing social cohesion within the dominant group.

2. Social Control Theory:

Hirschi's social control theory emphasizes the role of social bonds in preventing deviant behavior. Witch-hunting often occurs in communities with weak formal social institutions or where state authority is limited. In such cases, local leaders, shamans, and self-styled spiritual authorities exert informal control, enforcing conformity through fear and superstition. Those accused of witchcraft often violate implicit social norms—intentionally or inadvertently and are subjected to violence as a mechanism of social regulation.

3. Labeling Theory:

Labeling theory, proposed by Becker, is particularly relevant to witch-hunting. Once an individual is labeled as a witch, that designation becomes a master status that shapes how the community perceives and treats them. The accused are often stigmatized, ostracized, and dehumanized, which not only justifies violence against them but also perpetuates the cycle of marginalization. The societal labeling reinforces the myth of witchcraft, making it more difficult for victims to seek protection or for law enforcement to intervene.

4. Cultural Criminology:

Cultural criminology highlights the role of beliefs, rituals, and symbolic meanings in shaping

criminal behavior. Witch-hunting is frequently embedded in local folklore, rituals, and traditional practices, giving it cultural legitimacy. The act of accusing someone of witchcraft or performing ritual killings is often justified as an essential measure to restore cosmic or social order, blurring the line between crime and culture. Understanding these symbolic dimensions is critical for designing interventions that respect cultural contexts while protecting human rights.

5.2 Victimological Insights

Victimology focuses on the experiences and vulnerabilities of individuals who fall prey to witch-hunting. Victims are disproportionately women, elderly, widowed, or from marginalized castes and tribal communities. Several factors contribute to their victimization³⁰:

1. Social Vulnerability:

Economic dependence, illiteracy, and lack of political representation make certain groups more susceptible to accusations. Women, in particular, are targeted because societal norms position them as scapegoats for misfortune, reflecting patriarchal oppression and gendered social control.

2. Psychological Impact:

The experience of being accused of witchcraft is deeply traumatic. Victims often endure physical violence, social ostracism, and psychological abuse, including chronic anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Children of victims may also inherit stigma, facing interrupted education and diminished social opportunities.

3. Institutional Neglect:

Victimological analysis highlights systemic failures, including police inaction, weak legal enforcement, and inadequate rehabilitation measures. Victims often lack access to justice or protective mechanisms, exacerbating their marginalization and reinforcing the cycle of violence. Effective victim support requires integrated interventions, including legal recourse,

³⁰ Pratibha Rani, *Analysis of the Cases of Witch Hunting and Its Reporting in Two Regional Newspapers of Jharkhand*, JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION.

counseling, and community sensitization.

5.3 Intersection of Criminology and Victimology

A holistic understanding of witch-hunting emerges when criminological and victimological perspectives are integrated. While criminology explains why perpetrators commit these acts — through social strain, cultural norms, or labeling—victimology reveals the human cost and systemic failures that allow these crimes to persist. The interplay between societal pressures, cultural beliefs, and individual vulnerabilities creates a perpetuating cycle of violence that cannot be addressed solely through punitive measures. Social reform, awareness campaigns, and targeted support for vulnerable communities are essential complements to legal interventions³¹.

5.4 Theoretical Implications for Policy and Prevention

The theoretical insights discussed in this chapter inform several policy recommendations:

- **Preventive Education:** Programs aimed at reducing superstition and increasing literacy can mitigate the social strain that fuels witch-hunting.
- **Community Engagement:** Empowering local leaders to challenge harmful practices and promoting gender equity can disrupt informal social control mechanisms that perpetuate violence.
- **Victim-Centered Interventions:** Legal frameworks must be complemented by rehabilitation, counseling, and social reintegration for victims.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Interventions must respect cultural contexts while promoting human rights, balancing criminal justice measures with community education.

CHAPTER 6: EFFECTIVENESS AND GAPS IN LEGAL & SOCIAL RESPONSES – EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION.

This chapter evaluates how India's legal and social responses to witch-hunting and ritual

³¹ See generally unpublished theses and dissertations on witch-hunting among tribal communities in West Bengal and Jharkhand.

killings have fared in practice. “Implementation” is used broadly: it includes whether laws are being enforced; whether complaints are recorded, investigated and prosecuted; whether survivors receive protection, rehabilitation and redress; and whether preventive public education, health and social-welfare measures actually reach the at-risk communities. The available evidence shows a mixed picture. On paper, there has been important statutory and policy progress at both state and national levels; on the ground, however, enforcement remains uneven, survivors frequently slip through institutional cracks, and the social drivers (poverty, weak health systems, patriarchal and caste hierarchies) continue to fuel incidents³².

6.1 What the data and recent incidents tell us about enforcement

Official compilations and independent reviews that use NCRB tables repeatedly show that witchcraft and human-sacrifice motives still appear in India’s murder statistics, though numbers vary year-to-year and under-reporting is severe. Long-run tabulations (2000–2021) put total confirmed killings in the thousands, and NCRB annual tables continue to list “witchcraft” as a motive (dozens of killings in recent years). These figures are important because they confirm the persistence of lethal outcomes; they are incomplete because many non-fatal persecutions (banishment, repeated beatings, sexual violence, forced ingestion, property grabs) do not make it into motive-of-murder tables at all³³.

High-profile recent tragedies such as the July 2025 Purnia massacre (five family members killed after witchcraft accusations) dramatise how legislation on the books can fail to prevent communal violence in places where stigma and local impunity remain strong. Similar episodes from 2024–2025 across Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Chhattisgarh show both continuity and geographic clustering of incidents. At the same time there are successful prosecutions: long, painstaking investigations have in some cases produced convictions (for example a 2009 acid attack in Odisha resulted in custodial sentences many years later), demonstrating that criminal accountability can be achieved, albeit slowly³⁴.

6.2 Where laws have helped documented strengths in response

A few concrete strengths are visible. First, a number of states have progressive, specialised

³² See media reports on unconvicted cases, e.g., reported Rajasthan prosecutions with zero convictions.

³³ U.S. Dep’t of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: India* (2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/india>.

³⁴ *Indian Villagers Beat Family of Five to Death over Witchcraft Allegations*, FRANCE 24 (July 8, 2025), <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250708-indian-villagers-beat-five-to-death-for-witchcraft>.

statutes (Bihar 1999; Jharkhand 2001; Chhattisgarh 2005; Odisha 2013; Assam 2015/2018; Rajasthan 2015/2019) and other states have anti-superstition or anti-human-sacrifice laws (Maharashtra 2013; Karnataka 2017). These laws remove any legal ambiguity about the criminality of branding and ritual violence and create aggravated penalties when death results an essential starting point for deterrence. Second, some states have paired law with programs: Jharkhand's "Project Garima" (an explicitly rehabilitative, awareness and livelihood scheme) is a frontline example of attempting to combine rescue, counselling and economic reintegration for branded women; Assam's 2025 policy took the unusual step of formally combining anti-trafficking and anti-witch-hunting measures into an interdepartmental preventive framework. Third, police in several districts have begun to register cases under state special laws (and in Maharashtra police have used the 2013 Act to disrupt ongoing ritual activity). These examples show that where political will, resources and civilsociety pressure converge, law can be used proactively³⁵.

6.3 The major implementation gaps (what goes wrong)

Despite those gains, implementation gaps are deep and multilayered. First, under-reporting and data problems hide the true scale. Many victims do not come forward because of fear, stigma, or local complicity; many panchayats either prefer "local settlement" or actively participate in persecution. District and state police data sometimes show large numbers of "treated as social matters" or "dismissed" cases. The result is poor national visibility and weak evidence-based policy.

Second, police attitudes and capacity are recurrent obstacles. Field reports and survivor testimonies commonly describe police apathy, delays in FIR registration, or pressure to "settle" matters at the village level. Where arrests happen, investigators face weak witness protection and slow forensic work; fragile evidence chains allow acquittals or long pretrial delays. Some districts lack basic SOPs for witch-hunting incidents (scene preservation, medical documentation of injuries, seizure of ritual paraphernalia, digital evidence of public shaming)³⁶.

Third, uneven judicial outcomes and long delays blunt the deterrent value of law. Successful

³⁵ The Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, ODISHA GAZETTE (Feb. 25, 2014), https://prsindia.org/files/bills_acts/acts_states/odisha/2014/Act3of2014OD.pdf.

³⁶ U.S. Dep't of State, 2023 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: India*, *supra* note 34.

convictions exist, but they are slow and often the result of years-long litigation supported by NGOs or persistent victims; many cases either never reach court or collapse for lack of witnesses or intimidation. Fourth, rehabilitation and survivor support are under-resourced. Project Garima is promising, but it covers a fraction of those affected and often faces implementation bottlenecks; many branded women have no access to trauma-informed counselling, secure housing, livelihood support, or legal aid. Clinical studies document severe psychosocial consequences among survivors, who may live for years with anxiety, depression, and social exclusion³⁷.

Finally, policy fragmentation is a structural weakness. State laws are variable in content and punishment, and there is no binding national framework ensuring uniform recording, victim entitlements, cross-border policing or central funding for rehabilitation. A central Bill introduced in the Rajya Sabha in 2022 proposed a national anti-witch-branding statute, but parliamentary progress has stalled; without harmonisation, gaps in enforcement and support persist across state borders.

6.4 Social and institutional causes behind implementation failure

Why do these gaps endure? The answer is not merely bureaucratic incompetence; it lies in a network of social and institutional causes. Remote rural areas often lack quality healthcare and death-investigation capacity, creating an “epistemic vacuum” where supernatural explanations flourish. Low literacy and entrenched patriarchy make women particularly vulnerable; caste and land disputes give local actors an incentive to brand victims as witches. The state’s welfare architecture (health, education, social security) is thus directly implicated in enforcement: poor primary health access and weak social protection create conditions in which branding becomes a low-cost tool for resolving social conflict. Judicially-driven remedies cannot substitute for these structural fixes³⁸.

CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS – TOWARDS A SOCIO-

³⁷ A.R. Alagarsami et al., *Psychosocial Consequences Among Witch-Hunting Survivors: A Qualitative Study from Jharkhand, India*, INDIAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MEDICINE (Aug. 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/02537176241260846>.

³⁸ *Breaking the Chains: Witch-Hunting in Odisha and the Governance Challenges*, 14 JOURNAL OF GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC POLICY, no. 2, at 1 (Dec. 2024), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390052212_Breaking_the_Chains_WitchHunting_in_Odisha_and_the_Governance_Challenges.

LEGAL MODEL OF ERADICATION.

Across the evidence assembled in this paper there is a clear and painful pattern: witchhunting and ritual killings are not episodic outbreaks of irrationality but predictable outcomes of structural weakness, cultural meaning-making, and local power politics. The immediate act of accusation the public naming of a neighbour, a widow, an elderly woman as a “witch” or the staging of a ritual killing is the tip of an iceberg. Underneath lie chronic poverty, avoidable illness, deficient primary health services, low literacy, entrenched patriarchy, caste/tribal marginalisation, opportunistic local elites and an ecosystem of occult entrepreneurs who monetise fear. Law on the statute books (both the BNS and several state special laws) is necessary and has value: it clarifies criminality, enables cognizable action, and in some districts has produced convictions. But statutory existence alone has not stopped the killings or the everyday persecutions because enforcement is uneven, police and local institutions are often indifferent or complicit, victim rehabilitation is patchy, and the social drivers remain unaddressed.

Victimology reveals the human cost: survivors experience physical injury, chronic psychological harm, loss of livelihood, familial breakdown and inter-generational stigma that often condemns children to poverty and exclusion. Criminologically, the phenomenon is best seen as a socially organised mechanism: accusation produces a socially permissible pathway to dispossession, discipline, or revenge. Data problems (under-reporting, “social settlement” closures, inconsistent recording) mask scale and make policy responses ad hoc. Finally, pockets of promise exist district police who adopted SOPs, Project Garima-style one-stop programmes, active survivor collectives and civil society litigation which demonstrate that multi-sector approaches can reduce incidence and provide durable redress when resourced and institutionalised³⁹.

7.1 Principles that should guide a socio-legal eradication model

Any effective model must be rooted in a handful of non-negotiable principles:

1. Victim-centredness: responses must prioritise the safety, dignity and long-term rehabilitation of survivors, not merely punishment of perpetrators.

³⁹ Govt. Notifies Policy to Combat Human Trafficking, Witch-Hunting, *supra* note 29.

2. Integrated governance: criminal justice, public health, social welfare and education must operate together not sequentially or in isolation.
3. Community legitimacy: interventions must work with, not overrun, local institutions and opinion leaders; cultural sensitivity must not become tolerance for violence.
4. Data-driven action: consistent, standardised recording of fatal and non-fatal witch-related incidents is essential to plan and evaluate policy.
5. Sustainability and funding: pilot schemes must be costed, scaled and mainstreamed with clear budget lines.
6. Accountability and transparency: measurable targets, social audits, and independent monitoring will prevent laws from remaining “paper law.”

7.2 A practical socio-legal model architecture and components

Below is a pragmatic, scalable model built from lessons in the field and legal possibilities. Each component is written as practical policy that a state or central agency could adopt and operationalise.

A. Legal and procedural backbone

Harmonised statutory baseline: Either through a central enabling Act or national guidelines, define minimum offence categories (branding, forced ritual humiliation, forced displacement, forced ingestion, human sacrifice) and mandatory victim entitlements (temporary shelter, interim compensation, legal aid). This provides a baseline that state laws can exceed but not undercut⁴⁰.

- SOPs and mandatory FIR rules: Make registration of complaints mandatory within 24 hours in suspected witch-related incidents; prohibit “local settlement” as a grounds to close cases administratively; require immediate rescue orders and temporary shelter placement where risk is identified.
- Fast-track prosecution: Designate special courts (or fast-track benches) in high

⁴⁰ *We Must Build Cultural Sensitivity*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (op-ed on witch-hunting in rural Bihar).

incidence districts with a mandate to complete trial within a fixed time frame; prioritise witness protection and allowance for video testimony from displaced survivors.

B. Policing, investigation and capacity building

- Specialised investigative cells: Create district “Anti-Witch-Hunting Cells” within police, trained in forensic documentation (medical reports, preservation of ritual paraphernalia, mobile/digital evidence), trauma-informed interviewing, and community outreach.
- Capacity building: National modules for police academies and judicial academies on witch-related crimes, covering cultural context, victim needs, and standard evidence protocols.
- Accountability: Performance indicators for police (FIR rates, chargesheet rates, conviction rates, victim satisfaction) tied to state oversight and public reporting.

C. Public health and death investigation

- Rapid death and disease response: Strengthen CHC/PHC capacity in hotspots clinical protocols, diagnostic kits, and mobile medical teams to reduce the epistemic vacuum that allows supernatural explanations to flourish.
- Medicolegal linkage: Ensure every unexplained death has a timely medicolegal postmortem or community death audit; train district forensic units to work with local health workers and police.
- Health education: Deploy ASHA/ANM workers and school health programmes to counter misinformation and teach basic cause-of-disease concepts in culturally appropriate language.

D. Survivor protection and rehabilitation

- One-stop survivor centres: Block/district-level centres offering immediate shelter, medical care, psychosocial counselling, legal aid, and livelihood support. Centres should have mobile outreach teams for survivors unwilling or unable to travel.

- Economic rehabilitation: Fast-track entitlements widow pensions, land-title protection, priority for livelihood schemes (MGNREGA, self-help group seed funds). Micro-grants to start cottage livelihoods reduce economic motives for dispossession.
- Community reintegration: Facilitate mediated reconciliation where safe, and public “restorative rituals” led by credible local leaders repudiating branding practices.

E. Prevention through education and social mobilisation

- Curriculum and media: Integrate scientific temper, basic public health, gender rights and legal literacy into primary and adult education; use local theatre, radio, and mobile media in vernaculars to de-mystify illness and challenge patriarchy⁴¹.
- Engage faith and tribal leaders: Work with religious and tribal authorities to publicly condemn violent rituals and witch-labeling; develop positive local rituals that remove the need for scapegoating.
- Survivor networks: Fund and empower survivor collectives to act as first responders and local advocates; survivor testimony is a powerful deterrent and education tool.

F. Data, monitoring and research

- Standardised reporting: Mandate NCRB (or successor) categories that capture nonfatal witch-related offences and require quarterly district dashboards.

Independent monitoring: Create a small central-state joint oversight group (including civil society and academic representatives) to audit implementation and recommend corrective action⁴².

- Research funding: Allocate grants for longitudinal studies on psychosocial effects, economic impacts, and evaluation of interventions.

⁴¹ Govt. Notifies Policy to Combat Human Trafficking, Witch-Hunting, *supra* note 29.

⁴² See reports by ActionAid and various survivor-support NGOs documenting field cases in Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION – SUMMATION AND WAY FORWARD.

The journey of this research began with tracing the historical roots of witch-hunting and ritual killings in India, showing how ancient fears, gendered stereotypes, and caste-based hierarchies laid the foundation for practices that continue to haunt rural communities even today. What emerges is not the picture of isolated irrational acts but a systemic and socially organised phenomenon. The act of branding someone a witch or resorting to ritual killings reflects much deeper social dynamics: poverty, the absence of healthcare and scientific explanations for disease, entrenched patriarchy, caste exclusion, and the manipulation of superstition by local elites. Thus, witch-hunting in India must be seen as a social crime, an outcome of structural failures that go beyond mere superstition.

The legal landscape has evolved considerably. With the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and a patchwork of progressive state laws like those in Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, the law now recognises witch-branding, ritual violence, and human sacrifice as serious criminal offences with aggravated punishments. Courts, guided by constitutional principles, have reiterated that these practices violate Articles 14, 15, and 21 by depriving victims of equality, dignity, and the right to life. The judiciary has urged preventive and protective measures while condemning such acts as unconstitutional and inhuman. Yet the very existence of state-specific laws and constitutional recognition has not eradicated the crime, because enforcement remains inconsistent, police and local institutions are often apathetic or complicit, and victim rehabilitation is limited in scope and funding.

Criminological and victimological insights enrich this understanding. From a criminological lens, witch-hunting functions as a socially sanctioned mechanism for settling disputes, usurping property, silencing women, or controlling marginalised communities. From a victimological perspective, survivors endure more than immediate violence; they suffer social banishment, psychological trauma, economic destitution, and intergenerational stigma. Children of branded women often inherit exclusion, reinforcing cycles of poverty and marginalisation. These dimensions demonstrate why criminalisation alone cannot suffice. Violence born out of belief and social structure cannot be uprooted merely by punishment; it requires rehabilitation, education, and social transformation.

The evaluation of implementation across states paints a sobering picture. Data remains inconsistent, with NCRB statistics undercounting non-fatal persecutions, while many cases

never reach the justice system due to fear, stigma, or “social settlement” by local panchayats. Where prosecutions occur, they often collapse due to weak evidence, intimidation of witnesses, or procedural delays. Even landmark convictions are exceptions rather than the norm. Rehabilitation schemes like Jharkhand’s Project Garima or Assam’s integrated antitrafficking and anti-witch-hunting policy provide valuable models, but they remain geographically narrow and resource-starved. Survivors in many states are left without safe shelters, trauma counselling, or economic reintegration, living with scars that laws alone cannot heal.

These findings highlight the urgent need for a socio-legal model of eradication. Such a model must combine harmonised laws at the national level with strong local enforcement, ensuring mandatory FIR registration, fast-track prosecutions, and effective witness protection. It must strengthen public healthcare and death investigation systems, so that communities have scientific explanations for misfortune instead of turning to superstition. It must provide survivor-centred rehabilitation through shelters, counselling, livelihood schemes, and community reintegration programmes. It must prioritise preventive education by integrating scientific temper, gender equality, and legal awareness into schools and adult learning, while engaging community leaders and survivor collectives to challenge entrenched beliefs. Crucially, this model must be supported by sustainable funding, standardised data collection, independent monitoring, and accountability measures that track not only prosecutions but also survivor outcomes and community attitudes.

At its core, witch-hunting and ritual killings are a direct assault on the constitutional promise of justice, equality, and dignity. They demonstrate the gap between law on paper and lived realities in India’s villages, where superstition still governs life and death. Eradication, therefore, is not merely a question of crime control but of fulfilling India’s constitutional obligations. It is about ensuring that the most vulnerable widowed women, tribal families, marginalised castes are not condemned to violence justified in the name of belief. It is also about reaffirming India’s moral and legal responsibility to protect its citizens from violence rooted in structural injustice.

The conclusion of this research is both simple and urgent: witch-hunting and ritual killings must not only be criminalised; they must be made impossible. That requires moving from punitive responses to integrated socio-legal transformation where healthcare reduces fear, education dismantles myths, communities reject scapegoating, and the state provides survivors

with safety and dignity. The eradication of these practices will be a true test of India's democratic maturity and constitutional commitment. If the law and state can protect the most stigmatised those branded witches, those sacrificed to superstition then justice in its truest sense is achieved. If it fails, the constitutional promise remains incomplete. The path forward is clear: witch-hunting must be eradicated, not merely punished, so that no Indian ever again loses life or dignity under the shadow of superstition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

1. Kelkar, Govind & Nathan, Dev. *Witch Hunts*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
2. Mishra, J. *Casting the Evil Eye: Witch Trials in Tribal India*. The Daak, 2023.

Articles & Journals

1. Alagarsami, A. R. "Psychosocial Consequences Among Witch-hunting Survivors." *Journal of Rural Mental Health*, 2024.
2. Alagarsami, A. R. "Witch-Hunting Experiences in Jharkhand: Scope for Mental Health Interventions." *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 2023.
3. Yadav, T. "Witch Hunting: A Form of Violence against Dalit Women in India." *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 2020.
4. Borah, L., & Das, M. (trans.). "Witch-Hunting in Assam: Myth or Reality." *Space and Culture, India*, 2019.
5. Hooda, B. "Analysing Modern Day Witch Hunts in Rural India." *SSRN Electronic Journal*.