
FROM SALEM TO SOCIAL MEDIA: REIMAGINING WITCH HUNTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Madhu Ramesh, National Law University, Jodhpur

ABSTRACT

Witch hunts are not a historical relic of the bygone era, but an enduring patriarchal weapon of control that has shape-shifted from the flames of the pyre during the early modern European pyre to the online pixelated network of the contemporary digital sphere, both of which seek to police and subjugate women's bodies. This paper seeks to employ a framework of feminist jurisprudence and Marxist feminist theory to analyse and deconstruct the historical "witch" as a figure created to enforce patriarchal norms and facilitate capitalist accumulation. This framework is then applied to modern India, where intersectional analysis reveals how caste and class dynamics perpetuate physical witch hunts against marginalized Dalit and Adivasi women. The paper further examines the metamorphosis of this phenomenon into digital witch hunts, analyzing social media campaigns against journalists and the 'Sulli Deals' case as examples of technologically-mediated misogyny designed to silence outspoken women, wherein the technology changes, however the target (the transgressive woman) and the goal (her annihilation) remain chillingly constant. The paper concludes by attempting to propose a multi-pronged framework for legal, structural, and digital reform to combat this terrifying continuum of gendered violence.

Keywords: witch hunting, feminist jurisprudence, intersectionality, technologically mediated misogyny, digital witch hunts

Introduction

Witch hunting, generally remembered through the haunting image of a women burning at a stake, condemned by superstition and religious hysteria, appears to belong to a dark, archaic chapter sealed away in history. This paper contends, however, that this practice persists as a patriarchal tool of control, reconstituting itself to suit contemporary forms of persecution in the digital era. The 16th century flame of the pyre finds its echo today in the 21st century glowing pixels of modern screens. This research paper puts forth that ‘modern witch hunts’, evidences by stories of brutal violence in rural India or across social media networks, are a continuation of the historical violence meted out against women.¹ They continue to be used a potent instrument to enforce patriarchal codes, chastise female non-conformity and strip women of social, economic and political standing.² The forms and weapons may change, but the underlying constants of misogyny, domination, and intersectional oppression endures.

This paper seeks to utilize a multi-layered theoretical framework to unravel this phenomenon in three parts. Firstly, through the lens of feminist jurisprudence, it seeks to analyse how legal and religious discourses have historically fashioned the figure of a “witch” to sanction and perpetuate gender-based violence. Secondly, Silvia Federici’s Marxist feminist analysis from *Caliban and the Witch* is used to reframe the European witch hunts as a foundational element of primitive accumulation and the rise of capitalist patriarchy. Finally, it employs Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality to examine how these dynamics are compounded by caste and class in the specific context of India.

The research paper examines modern witch hunting through four chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the foundational theoretical framework, situating the historical construction of ‘witch’ as an instrument of patriarchal and capitalist power. Chapter 2 seeks to extend this framework to contemporary India, analysing how intersectional identities of caste and class, socio-economic dynamics, and a complex colonial legacy shape the continuation of physical witch hunts. Chapter 3 maps the metamorphosis of witch hunting into the digital sphere, using Indian case illustrations to show how social media has become a new site for public surveillance, accusations, and punishment. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes by moving from diagnosis to

¹ Kristine Lunz, Nothing can ever justify a digital witch-hunt: How digital mob justice is destroying people and democracies, *Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy* (Apr. 28, 2025), <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/2025/04/28/nothing-can-ever-justify-a-digital-witch-hunt/>.

² Amit Anand, *Unheard and Unnoticed: Violence Against Women in India – A Study of Practice of Witch-Hunting, Honour Killing and Devadasi System* (Ph.D. dissertation, Lancaster University 2022).

prescription, proposing a multi-pronged framework for legal, structural and digital reform to combat this entrenched form of gendered violence.

The Enduring Patriarchy: A Feminist Jurisprudence of the ‘Witch’

The historical witch hunts in early modern Europe were not an outburst of mass hysteria. They were a planned, organized campaign against women. This chapter argues that targeting women as witches was a key part of patriarchy. It was backed by a legal system that punished women's independence and played a crucial role in the shift to capitalism.

Deconstructing the “Witch” As A Tool of Patriarchal Control

From a feminist jurisprudence point of view, the “witch” is neither a magician nor a “controlling image”, a stereotype invented and used by a hegemonic group to naturalize and legitimate oppression.³ The witch stereotype was carefully designed to attack women who were outside, or were a challenge to, the patriarchal family model. These were the main victims, women who had evinced social or economic autonomy: widows who had inherited property, unmarried “spinsters”, and post-menopausal women who were no longer performing their assigned reproductive role.⁴ Women’s presence beyond the direct supervision of male authority figures, the father or the husband, was construed as a destabilizing threat to the exclusive hold men maintained over all realms of life, which includes social, economic, and cultural domains. The archetype of the witch, cast as a poor, elderly, unattractive, and quarrelsome (derogatorily labelled as “scolds”) was deliberately aimed at pathologizing and marginalizing women who failed to conform to traditional gender sanctioned roles.⁵ This operated to legitimize gender-based violence, as a sanctioned and justified measure of social cleansing, obscuring its reality as systemic oppression. This persecution was generally interpreted as stemming from intrinsic male apprehensions and fears. Echoing US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis’ remark that “*Men feared witched and burnt women*”, the violence was directed not at sorcery but at women’s power and authority derived from healing practices, herbal medicine, midwifery, and reproductive care, all forms of knowledge that enabled them to exercise influence beyond

³ Justyna Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (Purdue University Press) (2008).

⁴ Bente de Koeijer, *Witch hunts and the intersections of gender, age and class* (Ph.D. dissertation, Linköping University 2022)

⁵ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (3rd ed. Routledge) (2013)

emerging state and capitalist systems.

The Malleus Maleficarum and the Architecture of Femicide

Misogynistic ideologies were institutionalized into state-backed violence through formal legal and religious frameworks of persecution. The earliest scaffolding of such design is Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches") of 1487. The work provided the Church and the Courts with ecclesiastical and juridical "evidence" to fuel witch craze asserting that women were naturally and innately vulnerable towards evil because they were the "weaker sex", supposed intellectual inferiority, excessive sexual appetite, and descent from Eve, portrayed as the archetypal "first witch".⁶ The report armed a legal system that solely comprised of men with the means to prosecute an offence perceived as almost exclusively female. This framework established a judicial procedure where women's legal agency was systematically diminished and their testimonies were persistently discredited. The turning point that made possible the "Great Hunt" was the intersection of medieval folk magic (*maleficium*) with the crimes linked to heresy and Satanism. Papal bulls, as in the issue by Pope Innocent VIII of the *Summis desiderantes affectibus* in 1484, claimed all magic was being practiced using the help of demons, thus transforming neighbourhood feuds and local grievances into an inherent threat to Christianity. In doing so, it justified an avid and large-scale persecution by the ecclesiastical as well as the secular courts.

Silvia Federici on Witch Hunts Fuelling the Formation of Capitalist Patriarchy

As an extension of this feminist argument, scholar Silvia Federici asserts in her seminal work *Caliban and the Witch* that the witch hunts in Europe were not the relic of the declining feudal order but an indispensable violent moment in the transition toward capitalism. In this Marxist-feminist frame of understanding, the witch hunt is reconceptualized not just as a cultural phenomenon but as an important politico-economic moment.⁷ The development of capitalism required an organized and flexible workforce, the very necessity for which demanded state control over reproductive processes, an area hitherto exclusive to women as midwives and healers. Here, the witch hunts provide evidence of an organized campaign of terror for the elimination of female autonomy over their own flesh and reproductive processes. Then-existing

⁶ Morgan L. Stringer, *A War on Women? The Malleus Maleficarum and the Witch-Hunts in Early Modern Europe* (Honors Theses, University of Mississippi 2015).

⁷ Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (PM Press) (2018).

folk knowledge of measures such as birth control and abortion were condemned as maleficent, resulting in the brutal reduction of the female body as an active participant in workforce reproduction.⁸

Additionally, the move towards capitalism required a new sexual division of labour that separated the production of commodities (waged labour by men) from the reproduction of human beings (unpaid domestic work assigned to women). The hunts for witches facilitated this transition. In demonizing women's traditional economic activities, like curing, subsistence farming, and the provision of goods for local exchange, and relegating them to the domestic sphere as unpaid labourers, the state effectively abolished a non-capitalist female-centred economy. In doing so, it rendered invalid the value of women's labour and instituted the "patriarchy of the wage", where the male wage included the unpaid labour of his wife. Hence, the hunts for witches may be seen as an expression of the conflict between the classes and primitive accumulation.⁹ Through the extermination of the women who possessed ancient lore and the seizure of their belongings, the ruling elite appropriated the reserve of non-capitalist wealth and power held by women, thereby forcefully clearing the way for a rationalised, male-dominated, capitalist social order.

Chapter 2 – The Indian Cauldron of Intersectionality, Caste, and Colonial Ghosts

The essential precepts underlying the practice of witch hunting, *viz.* the subjugation of the female agency and the marginalising and exploiting the powerless, resonates powerfully in contemporary India. What unfolds here is far from being reducible to mere "superstition", rather a layered socio-economic phenomenon embedded and interwoven within caste hierarchies, class relations, and the remnants of the colonial legacy.

Socio-Economic Drivers of the Enduring Practice of Witch Hunting in India

In present-day India, the practice of witch hunting is closely linked with material deprivation and social vulnerability. This is most widespread, and rather thrives, in impoverished rural and tribal communities where access to healthcare and education are severely limited. In these communities, unexplained illnesses, epidemics, crop failures, or livestock deaths are often

⁸ Gordon Napier, *Maleficium: Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in the West* (Amberley Publishing 2017).

⁹ Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge University Press 2009).

ascribed to evil witchcraft (*dayan pratha*) in the face of lack of scientific reasoning or medical support. Jharkhand, where almost 40% of the population lives under the poverty line, tragically illustrates this correlation, having the nation's highest number of murders related to witch-hunts in the country. Data from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that from 2001 to 2021, 593 women have been killed in Jharkhand on the alleged pretext of witchcraft.¹⁰

Nonetheless, belief, as in many cases, functions as a convenient façade for deliberate, material interests and agendas. Charges of witchcraft most often are used as a socially legitimized pretext for land and property appropriation/grabbing. Widowed, single, or childless women property owners are especially at risk. Labelling a woman a “witch” (*dayan*) disenfranchises her social position and renders her dispossession socially acceptable, so that her properties and assets can be seized by relatives or powerful community members. Beyond disputes over property, accusations of witchcraft also serve as a potent instrument for settling of personal scores, penalization of women for refusing sexual favours, or silencing assertive women who go against or challenge the local patriarchal power control.¹¹

Targeting Dalit and Adivasi Women as an Example of Intersectional Oppression

A detailed examination of the practice of witch hunting in India, specifically rural regions, shows that it is not merely an isolated, indiscriminate practice, rather a potent weapon of intersectional oppression. The two most marginalized groups – the Dalits (formerly “untouchables”) and the Adivasis (tribal communities) – form an overwhelming majority of its victims. Dalit women, situated at the nadir of India's brutal caste-gender hierarchy, face what scholars and activists call a “triple discrimination” based on their caste, class, and gender, rendering them highly and uniquely susceptible to violence.¹²

Consequently, witch hunting serves and operates as a mechanism of “Brahmanical patriarchy”, a system that employs gender-based violence to sustain practices of caste purity and uphold patriarchal dominance. The accusations of witchcraft levelled against a women belonging to the Dalit and Adivasi communities serves as a calculated act of persecution seeking to reinforce

¹⁰ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2021*, (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India 2021), available at <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-india-2021>.

¹¹ Samantha Spence & Amit Anand, *Ending Witch-Hunts in India with Dr. Samantha Spence and Amit Anand* (End Witch Hunts), available at <https://endwitchhunts.org/podcast-episodes/podcast-episode/>.

¹² Tanvi Yadav, *Witch Hunting: A Form of Violence against Dalit Women in India*, 1(2) Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion (2020).

caste hierarchies, regulating community resources, and inflicting violent punishment for any perceived social or economic infraction. This practice constitutes a form of caste-based atrocity, masquerading as a response to cultural beliefs. The lived experiences of these women that such accusations arise directly from complex intersectional power relations and structures, where gender, caste, class and religion cross over and intersect to create conditions of extreme vulnerability and social disposability.¹³

The Colonial Legacy of Misunderstood Laws and Entrenched Practices

The contemporary landscape of witch hunting in India is additionally influenced and shaped by the paradoxical heritage of the British colonial rule. While the practice predated the colonial era, the efforts of the British administration to suppress it often proved to be contrary and counterproductive in its consequences. Viewed as a “barbaric” practice through the lens of colonial superiority, the British exacted legal prohibitions on the practice from the 1840s onwards. These laws were aimed at the *Bhopas* or *Ojhas* (witch doctors or shamans), who were responsible for the identification and naming of accused witches in society.¹⁴

However, this intervention represented a quintessential failure of legal centralism. The British administrators failed to comprehend that the belief in witchcraft was deeply “socially embedded” and played a crucial, albeit violent, role in explaining misfortune and regulating social tensions within communities that had no other resources. The colonial laws treated witch hunting as a simple matter of criminal superstition and failed to address the underlying socio-economic forces, consequently driving the practice underground.

More cynically, when British courts began acquitting suspected witches for lack of “scientific evidence”, it was widely seen by local communities not as an act of justice, rather as the colonial state actively shielding evil forces. This gave rise to the narrative that witches were flourishing under British patronage. As a result, at times of anti-colonial resistance, like the Indian Revolt of 1857, there was a theatrical surge in the practice of witch hunting. It became an exercise in “symbolic retaliation” against the British, a means by which rebel leaders could “clean sweep” the witches who had supposedly accumulated under colonial rule and reclaim indigenous sovereignty in the face of an imposed and delegitimized legal order. This historical

¹³ Meena Kumari & Shamsheer Alam, *Witchcraft and Witch-Hunting: Perceptions, Interventions and Resolution*, 58(1) Psychology and Education (2021).

¹⁴ Alisha Vidya & Malto, *Witch Hunting: A Grave Silence in India*, 5(2) Indian J. L. Legal Rsch. (2023).

narrative serves to illuminate the deep-seated community resistance to state-led legal interventions that continues till date.

Chapter 3 – Social Media as the New Town Square and the Digital Pyre

The basic machinery of the witch hunt *viz.* public denunciation, social shaming, and social ostracism, have been surprisingly resilient to new technologies. It is contended that social media websites have become new town squares where technology has supercharged the sites of modern witch hunts that, though they are frequently bloodless, are deeply psychologically, socially, and career-damaging.

The Architecture of the Digital Witch Hunts from Town Square to Timeline

Social media platforms replicate and intensify the essential dynamics of the historical witch hunting on an unprecedented level of scale, speed, and durability. The digital timeline is now the public square where accusations are made and the networked mob is summoned. The architectural design of such platforms makes this process easier. Algorithms that are designed to maximize interaction and virality build ideological echo chambers and speed the propagation of outrage and misinformation, making it terrifyingly easy to create a “flood of toxic misinformation” against a targeted victim. This is the digital equivalent of rumours propagating through a village, except with immediate, worldwide reach. Digital witch hunting seeks to perform the same patriarchal function as their ancient predecessors: policing and controlling women’s behaviour, conduct and expression. They establish a “hierarchy of dominant femininities,” punishing women who are not living up to unwritten standards of “moderated and recognized femininity” online. Women who speak out, enter into historically male-dominated discursive areas, or challenge and disrupt political and social conventions are popular targets for concerted campaigns of organized harassment aimed at embarrassing, shaming, silencing, and de-platforming them.

The death of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput in 2020 set off an online witch hunt aimed at his girlfriend, **Rhea Chakraborty**. Fuelled by sensationalist reporting and an outraged online audience, she was described as the arch-villain behind the death of a man. Quickly the narrative descended into misogynistic cliches as she was described as a manipulative “gold-

digger” who dabbled in black magic as some kind of “witch”.¹⁵ This media-instructed mob trial rich in unfounded charges saw her arrested by the Narcotics Control Bureau as some kind of vengeance demanded by the online mob long before any judicial verdict. Though the CBI technically cleared her of all charges in 2025 ascertaining Rajput’s death as being the result of suicide, the incident itself still provides the distressing contemporary example. It demonstrates how the woman might become publicly accused and shamed as well as punished in the online public sphere, her guilt being declared by popular opinion in the face of factual legal evidence.¹⁶

Case Study: The Weaponization of Social Media against Women Journalists

In India, this phenomenon of digital witch-hunting is vividly exemplified through the politically driven and methodical online harassment of vocal women journalists. The campaigns are not instances of isolated, spontaneous trolling, rather an orchestrated and organized digital witch hunts aimed at silencing voices of critique and dissent.

The case of **Rana Ayyub**, a Muslim female investigative journalist, serves as a chilling example. As a fierce and vociferous critic of the incumbent government, Ayyub has been subjected to an industrial-scale harassment campaign that is deeply intersectional, attacking her gender, religion, and profession.¹⁷ This involved an onslaught of thousands of hate and abusive tweets, constant rape and death threats, doxxing (the malicious publication of her personal information, such as her phone number), and the circulation of a deepfake pornographic video featuring her face.¹⁸ This virtual persecution was accompanied by offline judicial harassment as well; wherein legal cases were being filed against her on charged that

¹⁵ Poornima Rajeshwar, *Targeted Harassment: The Media Led-Witch Hunt of Rhea Chakraborty*, The Media Manipulation Casebook (Apr. 8, 2021), available at <https://casebook-static.pages.dev/case-studies/targeted-harassment-media-led-witch-hunt-rhea-chakraborty/>

¹⁶ Shivangi Deshwal & Sumati Thusoo, *Reading Rhea Chakraborty's public vilification as a modern-day witch hunt: Actress' harassment has historic roots*, Firstpost (Sept. 3, 2020), available at <https://www.firstpost.com/art-and-culture/reading-rhea-chakrabortys-public-vilification-as-a-modern-day-witch-hunt-actress-harassment-has-historic-roots-8770681.html>

¹⁷ *Rana Ayyub, the face of India's women journalists plagued by cyber-harassment*, Reporters without Borders (Nov. 27, 2024), available at <https://rsf.org/en/rana-ayyub-face-india-s-women-journalists-plagued-cyber-harassment>

¹⁸ *India: Journalist harassed with rape and death threats*, IFJ Asia Pacific (Nov. 21, 2024), <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/india-journalist-harassed-with-rape-and-death-threats>.

started out in right-wing social media circles.¹⁹

The gruesome and tragic fate of yet another journalist, **Gauri Lankesh**, is a cold reminder of how digital witch hunts may escalate into physical violence and brutality. A outspoken critic of the Hindu supremacism, Lankesh was the target of vicious online trolling and threats prior to her assassination in 2017.²⁰ The following triumphalist celebration of her death by social media handles followed by ranking political leaders brutally highlighted the dangerous link between state-sponsored online hate campaigns and lethal offline violence.²¹ These incidents expose that such campaigns are usually directed by politically motivated “troll armies” with a mission to intimidate, discredit, and ultimately eliminate critical female voices in the public domain.

Case Study: ‘Sulli Deals’ and ‘Bulli Bai’ as Intersectional Digital Femicide

One of the most cynical, graphic and explicit examples of digital witch hunts in recent India history is the case of ‘Sulli Deals’ and ‘Bulli Bai’ applications. Hosted on the software development platform GitHub, these apps scraped the photographs of scores of prominent Muslim women, including journalists, activists, pilots, and other professionals, from their public social media profiles and listed them for “auctioning” in a mock sale.²²

The very names of such apps – *Sulli* and *Bulli* – constitute an act of violence, wherein they are contemptuous and derogatory slurs employed by right-wing Hindu nationalists to denigrate Muslim women.²³ This was not isolated, random instances of trolling, rather a highly coordinated and organised campaign of communal hatred and misogyny, designed to sexually harass, embarrass, humiliate, terrorize and intimidate an entire community of educated, visible,

¹⁹ *Halt all retaliation attacks against Indian journalist Rana Ayyub – UN experts*, UN News (Feb. 21, 2022), available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112362>; Betwa Sharma, *What 8.5 Million Tweets Targeting Rana Ayyub Tell Us About Online Violence & The Failure To Stop It*, Article 14 (Jul. 15, 2022), available at <https://article-14.com/post/what-8-5-million-tweets-targeting-rana-ayyub-tell-us-about-online-violence-the-failure-to-stop-it-62d104dd20f4b>.

²⁰ Bidisha Saha, *Gauri Lankesh murder: Video was weaponised, journalist a casualty of disinformation, claims report*, India Today (Feb. 16, 2023), available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/gauri-lankesh-murder-video-was-weaponised-journalist-a-casualty-of-disinformation-claims-report-2335529-2023-02-16>.

²¹ V Kumara Swamy, *Journalist who fought divisive forces*, The Telegraph Online (Sept. 6, 2017), available at https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/journalist-who-fought-divisive-forces/cid/1521757#goog_rewarded; Phineas Rueckert, *In the age of false news: A journalist, a murder, and the pursuit of an unfinished investigation in India*, Forbidden Stories (Feb. 14, 2023), available at <https://forbiddenstories.org/gauri-lankesh-in-the-age-of-false-news/#:~:text=Friends%20said%20that%20by%20the,popular%20right%20wing%20Facebook%20pages>.

²² Geeta Pandey, *Sulli Deals: The Indian Muslim women ‘up for sale’ on an app*, BBC (Jul. 10, 2021), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57764271>.

²³ Anushka Jain, *118 days since... still no justice for those targeted by the “Sulli Deals” incident*, Internet Freedom Foundation (Oct. 30, 2021), available at <https://internetfreedom.in/118-days-since-still-no-justice-for-those-targeted-by-the-sulli-deals-incident/>.

and vocal Muslim women, effectively putting a digital bounty on them and subjecting them to collective public humiliation. The action of “auctioning” women is a metaphorical assertion of ownership and a threat of sexual violence, echoing historical, classical means of patriarchal power and dehumanization.²⁴

Apart from the above-mentioned, other prominent victims of digital witch hunt include, **Monica Lewinsky** (Clinton-Lewinsky scandal), **the Amanda Knox case** (wrongful murder conviction in Italy), the **Lindy Chamberlain case** (‘dingo-took-my-baby’ case), **Amber Heard** (Depp-Heard defamation trial), **Mahua Moitra** (cash-for-query parliamentary scandal), **Dhanshree Verma & Nataša Stanković** (online harassment as ex-wives of prominent cricketers) among others.

The functional analogy among these digital campaigns and historical witch hunts is deep and profound. The anonymous designers of such hate apps and the leaders of these troll armies play the role of contemporary *Bhopas* or *Ojhas*, spotting the “witch”, the transgressive women who dares to have a public voice. The viral propagation of the charge, aided by algorithms and bot networks, acts as the “community consensus” or “spectral evidence” of the past, generating a compelling appearance of social proof that legitimises the ensuing punishment. In this dynamic, the social media platform is not a neutral conduit; its inherent design of virality and algorithmic bias makes it an active player in the hunt, fulfilling the same function that popular credulity and institutional failure did centuries before.

Chapter 4 – Dousing the Flames: A Framework for Legal, Structural and Digital Reform

A holistic, all-encompassing strategy is the need of the hour to combat the complex, multi-faceted phenomenon of witch hunts as well as address its manifestations in the physical and the virtual realm. This chapter shifts from diagnosis to prescription, proposing a multi-pronged framework that zeroes in on legal inadequacies, platform accountability, and the underlying structural causes enabling this form of gender-based violence to persist.

Critiquing India’s Fragmented Toothless Legal Response

The current legal framework in India for addressing witch hunting is fragmented, inadequate,

²⁴ Sonam Joshi, *Beyond Sulli Deals: Why the online harassment of Muslim women is growing*, Times of India (Jul. 12, 2021), available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/beyond-sulli-deals-why-the-online-harassment-of-muslim-women-is-growing/articleshow/84343303.cms>.

and poorly enforced. A significant flaw is the lack of a robust, comprehensive central law that exclusively deals with crimes relating to witchcraft, superstition or occult-inspired activities. In 2016, the first attempt was made by the introduction of the Prevention of Witch Hunting Bill in the Lok Sabha of the Parliament. The draft bill sought to make the act of witch hunting a cognizable, non-bailable, and non-compoundable offence with the punishment ranging from three months to life imprisonment. It also included specific provisions for the rehabilitation of victims and free legal and medical aid services to them.²⁵ However, the law was never passed and lapsed. The second and recent attempt was made with the Prevention and Prohibition of Witch-Branding and Witch-Hunting and Other Harmful Practices Bill, 2022,²⁶ which was introduced in the Rajya Sabha. Similar to the previous Bill, this aimed to outlaw, prevent, and eliminate black magic, witch hunting and superstitious practices. The proposal includes provisions for a Special Enforcement Task Force, victim compensation, rehabilitation facilities, and national awareness programmes.

While eight states, namely, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Rajasthan, have passed special anti-witch hunting legislation, these enactments are much maligned as being toothless. They often prescribe light sanctions, fail to provide for the complete rehabilitation of victims or for compensating them for or restoring their property, and are rarely adequately implemented. Critics point out that these laws serve as a mere “check-mechanism” rather than a solution to the deep-seated, inherent socio-economic roots of the practice.

The legal response to digital witch hunts is just as inadequate. Cases of online harassment are generally prosecuted under general provisions of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code, 1860 (“IPC”) and the Information Technology (“IT”) Act, 2002, including stalking, defamation, or obscene publication. However, these regulations are typically gender-neutral and not fail to address the unique character of organized, politically motivated, and gender-based online hate campaigns. Crucially, there is a lack of specific legal protections against acts of doxxing, and the striking down of the contentious Section 66A of the IT Act by the Supreme Court, left a substantial legal vacuum for pursuing online hate speech. Adding to these, the legal enforcement is precarious, which is frequently caused by police insensitivity, a lack of gender

²⁵ Vidhi, *The Witch Hunt Bill, 2016: Speculation & Urgency*, Vidhi.org (Jul. 17, 2020), available at <https://vidhi.org/the-witch-hunt-bill-2016-speculations-urgency/>.

²⁶ The Prevention and Prohibition of Witch-Branding and Witch-Hunting and Other Harmful Practices Bill, 2022, Bill No. XC of 2022, as introduced in the Rajya Sabha on 9th December, 2022.

sensitization of the judicial system, and the high level of political and social influence enjoyed by the offenders. Victims, specifically those belonging to the marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities, continue to face barriers in accessing justice.

Table 1: A Comparative Overview of State-Level Anti-Witch Hunting Legislation in India

State	Legislation	Key Provisions	Prescribed Punishments	Limitations/Critique
Assam	The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015	Comprehensive law – prohibits identifying, stigmatizing, or accusing any person as a “witch”; provides for the protection of victims and witnesses; and mandates awareness campaigns.	Imprisonment upto 7 years and a fine up to ₹5 lakh for identifying someone as a witch; and imprisonment from 3 years to life imprisonment, with fines for causing harm.	While considered as a strong law, lack of effective implementation and awareness at the grassroots level remains challenging, alongside underreporting and conviction.
Bihar	The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999	Criminalises the act of identifying a woman as a ‘daain’ and causing her harm.	Imprisonment upto 3 months and/or a fine of ₹1,000 for identifying a women as a ‘witch’; and imprisonment upto 6 months and a fine of ₹2,000 for causing physical or mental torture.	The legal penalties are lenient and not a sufficient deterrent; often criticized for weak implementation and lack of provisions for victim rehabilitation.
Chhattisgarh	The Chhattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act, 2005	Criminalises the act of identifying any person as ‘tonahi’ and their harassment; defines ‘tonahi’ and includes	Rigorous imprisonment upto 3 years and a fine for identifying a person as a ‘tonahi’; and rigorous imprisonment upto 5 years	Delayed implementation and low awareness in remote areas; criticised for not adequately addressing the victim rehabilitation.

		provisions against ' <i>ojhas</i> '.	and a fine for harassing a person identified as a ' <i>tonahi</i> '.	
Jharkhand	The Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Craft Practices Act, 2001	Prohibits accusing a person of being a ' <i>dayan</i> ' and causing them harm.	Imprisonment upto 3 months and/or a fine of ₹1,000 for identifying a person as a ' <i>dayan</i> '; and imprisonment upto 6 months and/or a fine of ₹2,000 for causing physical or mental harm.	Similar to the Bihar Act, the penalties are inadequate and the law has been criticized for poor implementation an lack of support system to victims.
Karnataka	The Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act, 2017	Broad anti-superstition law that also covers witch hunting; prohibits several inhuman practices performed under the guise of black magic and superstition.	Imprisonment upto seven years and fine which shall not be less than ₹5,000 but which may extend to ₹50,000.	Implementational challenges and concerns about potential misuse; and ambiguous distinction between religious practices and harmful superstition.
Maharashtra	The Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013	Also a broader anti-superstition law that covers witch hunting; aims to prohibit various forms of exploitation based on superstitious beliefs	Imprisonment for a term between 6 months and 7 years and with fine between ₹5,000 and ₹50,000.	Implementational challenges due to deep-seated nature of superstitious beliefs; and need for concerted efforts in public awareness and education.
Odisha	The Odisha Prevention of Witch-	Criminalises identification and persecution	Imprisonment up to 3 years and a fine for	Lack of effective implementation and

	Hunting Act, 2013	of individuals as 'witches'; provides for protection and rehabilitation of victims.	identifying a person as a 'witch'; and imprisonment from 1 to 7 years with a fine for causing physical harm.	law of awareness among tribal and remote areas.
Rajasthan	Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015	Prohibits the practice of witch-hunting; and provides for victim rehabilitation and resettlement.	Rigorous imprisonment up to 5 years and a fine of not less than ₹50,000 for identifying a woman as a 'witch'; imprisonment from 3 years to life imprisonment with a fine for causing grievous hurt; and death penalty or life imprisonment for murder.	Considered one of the more stringent ones, yet effective enforcement and creation of supportive ecosystem for victims is missing; significant impediments include social attitudes and deep-rooted patriarchal norms.

Policy Recommendations for Institutional and Structural Reform

Addressing the historically deep-seated practice of witch hunting requires a comprehensive and robust legal, political and social response that transcends punitive measure in order to combat its root causes:

- 1) **Need for a Central Legislation:** The most important and critical step is the enactment and passing of a comprehensive, non-negotiable central legislation prohibiting the practice of witch hunting and the subsequently ensuing violence, both physical and mental. This law must provide for stringent, deterrent penalties and establish well-defined procedures and protocols for victim and witness protection, and mandate a time-bound process for restoration of property and comprehensive rehabilitation, which includes psychological and social counselling, and economic assistance.

- 2) **Sensitization of the Justice System:** All stakeholders of the justice delivery system, including the police force, the judiciary and the administrative officials, should be subject to mandatory, regular and gender-sensitive training. Such training must move beyond the simplistic narrative of “superstition” and emphasise upon the socio-economic drivers and intersectional dimensions to the practice of witch hunting.
- 3) **Strengthening Grassroot Governance:** Local governance bodies, especially Panchayats (village councils), need to be legally empowered and mandated to proactively prevent and report cases of witch branding. Accountability mechanisms should be established to penalize officials for inaction or complicity.
- 4) **Tackling the Root Causes:** A large percentage of governmental resources should be spent against the fundamental causes of witch-hunting. This involves investing in accessible and high-quality public healthcare facilities in rural and tribal communities, developing scientific temper and critical thinking via education, and, most importantly, ensuring women’s land and property rights to lessen economic vulnerability.

Need for a Framework for Platform Accountability and Digital Justice

Addressing the phenomenon of digital witch hunts demands a paradigm shift or structural transformation that both keeps technology platforms accountable while reforms legal systems to meet the needs of the conditions of the digital era:

- 1) **Enforcing Platform Accountability:** There is a need for the era of self-regulation to decline. The Indian judiciary and the legislature must ensure that clear legal liabilities for social media platforms exist (such as a robust Digital India Act) in order to curb hate speech and coordinated harassment campaigns. Additionally, a transparent algorithm to scrutinize the promotion of online hate content must be made mandatory.
- 2) **Gender-Sensitive Content Moderation:** Social media platforms having operations in India must be legally obligated to invest in sophisticated content moderation systems, being made effective in local languages and cultural contexts. Both systems of human and AI-driven, should be mandatorily trained to swiftly identify and act against gender-based hate speech, trolling, doxxing and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos.

- 3) Strengthening Grievance Redressal Mechanisms: The grievance redressal systems required under India's IT Rules should be enhanced. Platforms should be forced to establish specialised, accessible, and trauma-informed support teams for victims of severe online harassment, as well as explicit, legally mandated response and action timetables.
- 4) Promotion of Digital Citizenship: A national program to encourage digital literacy and responsible online behaviour should be started. Curriculum in schools and colleges must include digital citizenship programs that concentrate on consent, privacy, and the real-world consequences of cyberbullying and online sexism.

Conclusion

The witch hunt is a virulent and dynamic vehicle of patriarchal cruelty, not an outdated oddity. This discussion has followed its unbroken chain, showing how the misogyny of logic, social discipline, and women's dispossession links the 16th century European pyre, the 21st century Adivasi village's brutal violence, and the organized harassment campaign on a social media timeline. The symbol of "witch" is historically seen as a socially constructed figure, a term to denote those females who transgress boundaries or the mythological "*Lakshman Rekha*", whether social, political, economic, or sexual. Such persecution played a key role in the establishment and continuation of a capitalist patriarchy by policing and regulating the female body and agency and deeming their work unworthy. In modern-day India, it continues to be used as a vicious tool of intersectional violence, overwhelmingly aimed at women from the Dalit and Adivasi community for the purpose of enforcing caste and gender hierarchies as well as enabling material expropriation. This practice has not been eradicated by the digital era, rather has been given a novel, terrifyingly effective arsenal that has empowered politically driven mobs to silence and intimidate vocal and outspoken women at unprecedented speeds and scales.

In order to extinguish these flames of the pyre, there is a need for a comprehensive and intersectional feminist response. Merely passing toothless laws by branding the practice as "superstition" or politely requesting behemoth social media platforms "to do better" is rather insufficient. The fight against the cruel practice of witch hunting, in all its manifestations, necessitates a fundamental reordering and reorganization within the power structures. The need of the hour is the enactment and effective, rigorous enforcement of legislations to protect the

most vulnerable; the dismantling of the impunity of digital platforms that profit from such hatred; and structural and ongoing investment in the structural foundations of gender equality in aspects of education, health, economic empowerment, and securing land rights for women. Finally, countering this phenomenon requires a direct confrontation with the patriarchal power institutions and structures in laws, economics, communities, and digital architecture that continue to fuel it.