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## Witch-Hunts in Jharkhand: Gender Violence and Tribal Identity

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### Abstract

Witch-hunting remains a persistent and brutal practice in several regions of India, especially in Jharkhand witnessing some of the highest incidences of this violence, particularly against tribal women. This article critically examines the socio-cultural and historical roots of witch-hunting in Jharkhand, revealing how it is often weaponized as a tool of patriarchal control, caste-based discrimination, and land appropriation. Despite the existence of laws like the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001 in Jharkhand, the prevalence of the practice highlights the inadequacy of legal interventions that fail to address the underlying social stigma and systemic marginalization. Through analysis of case studies, government crime data, and scholarly insights, the article exposes the intersectional vulnerabilities of tribal women and critiques the failures in policing, community awareness, and legal redressal mechanisms. It concludes by recommending, including culturally-sensitive legal reforms, grassroots advocacy, gender-sensitive education, and the integration of tribal voices into policymaking, as necessary strategies for dismantling the deeply deep-rooted practice of witch-hunting in Jharkhand.

**Keywords:** With-hunting, tribal Women, Gender-Violence, Jharkhand

### Introduction

The phenomenon of witch-hunting entailing the persecution, torture, and often the brutal killing of individuals, predominantly women accused of witch craft has emerged as a grave socio-legal issue in several parts of India. Among the most severely affected states is Jharkhand, a tribal-dominated region where the intersection of patriarchal norms, superstitious beliefs, and economic marginalization renders marginalized women especially vulnerable. In particular, rural and tribal belts of Jharkhand are rife with practices that brand women as witches, leading to their ostracism, physical assault or murder (Roy, 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>. As per the National Crime Record Bureau report 2,097 were murdered with hunting motive between 2000 and 2012. Among those Jharkhand has on one of the worst affected state recording of 363 murders and this figure does not include the murder in 2000 when Jharkhand was a part of Bihar (Sahu, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Jharkhand office has a total number of 414 such murder from 2001 to October 2013 and case registered for witchcraft is 2854 (Sahu, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>.

In many tribal areas of Jharkhand, the act of branding a woman a witch is not merely the result of irrational belief but often serves as a mechanism of social control. Accusations are frequently motivated by land disputes, inheritance conflicts, or efforts to remove women who assert independence or resist male authority. Once labeled a witch, women are subjected to brutal violence, social ostracism, and public humiliation, often with the implicit or explicit support of the local community (Toppo & Hans, 2021) <sup>[12]</sup>. The failure of state institutions, especially in terms of policing, legal redress, and victim protection, contributes to the impunity with which these acts are committed. Although Jharkhand enacted the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, to criminalize such practices, enforcement remains inconsistent, and many cases go unreported due to fear, stigma, or community pressure (Sahu, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>. Combating this violence requires not only stronger legal enforcement but also comprehensive social reform, including education, gender sensitization, and community engagement to challenge the entrenched norms that sustain this horrific practice. Thus, witch-hunting in Jharkhand is not only a manifestation of deep-seated superstition but also reflects structural violence against women at the intersection of gender, caste, and economic

marginalization. The phenomenon of witch-hunting and its disproportionate impact on tribal women in Jharkhand has garnered growing scholarly attention, illuminating the intersection of superstition, gender-based violence, and structural marginalization.

### Review of Literature

This brutal practice is not merely an outcome of irrational belief systems but a deeply entrenched social mechanism used to regulate women's behavior and reinforce patriarchal control within tribal communities. Scholars such as Ranjana (2020) <sup>[5]</sup> have argued that women who challenge or deviate from traditional gender roles such as those who remain unmarried, assert property rights or exhibit leadership qualities are often targeted through accusations of witchcraft. In such contexts, witch-hunting becomes a tool of social discipline, silencing women and reasserting male dominance in both domestic and public spaces.

This perspective is echoed by Kumar (2018) <sup>[4]</sup>, who emphasizes the synergistic role of gender, poverty, and superstition in sustaining this violence. In many marginalized communities, particularly in tribal belts of Jharkhand, chronic underdevelopment and lack of access to health care, education, and legal aid create conditions in which unexplained illnesses, deaths, or economic hardships are attributed to supernatural causes. Tribal Women especially those who are widowed, elderly, land-owning, or socially isolated become easy scapegoats. The resulting violence is not merely individual but collectively sanctioned, reflecting a broader societal complicity in upholding patriarchal hierarchies through the language of superstition.

The legal frameworks designed to combat witch-hunting have been widely critiqued for their limited scope and ineffective implementation. Although states like Jharkhand have enacted special laws such as the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, scholars such as Sharma (2019) <sup>[9]</sup> argue that these laws often remain detached from the socio-cultural realities of the communities they aim to regulate. Legal interventions tend to focus on punitive measures without addressing the root causes, such as illiteracy, gender inequality, and economic deprivation. Moreover, legal redress mechanisms are often inaccessible or intimidating to tribal women, who may lack the resources or support to pursue justice. Further complicating the issue is the role of local governance structures and community leaders, who in many cases perpetuate or tacitly condone such practices. According to Gupta (2021) <sup>[2]</sup>, panchayats and village elders who are expected to mediate disputes and uphold justice sometimes act as enablers, either participating directly in witch-branding rituals or failing to intervene. Gupta underscores the importance of coupling legal reforms with community-based education, awareness campaigns, and empowerment initiatives, particularly those that promote gender equity and challenge harmful cultural norms.

The intersectionality of caste, gender, and tribal identity adds another critical dimension to the issue. As Das (2022) <sup>[1]</sup> observes, tribal women often suffer from multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination. Their marginal status within a caste-dominated society, compounded by gender subordination and ethnic marginalization, renders them especially susceptible to violence and exclusion. Witch-hunting, in this sense, is not an isolated cultural aberration

but a manifestation of layered structural inequalities as a point that necessitates a broader analytical lens than legal discourse alone can provide. In conclusion, the scholarly literature highlights the urgent need for interdisciplinary approaches to effectively address the issue of witch-hunting in Jharkhand. A purely legalistic framework is insufficient; what is required is a synthesis of legal, sociological, anthropological, and gender studies perspectives that can collectively interrogate the normative structures sustaining such violence. Only through such a comprehensive socio-legal approach can we hope to dismantle the institutionalized mechanisms of oppression and ensure justice and dignity for the tribal women most affected by this brutal practice.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design, aimed at investigating the socio-legal dimensions of witch-hunting in tribal regions of Jharkhand, with particular attention to the districts of Gumla and Ranchi. It seeks to understand the root causes, patterns, and institutional responses to witch-branding and related violence, using recent documented cases as critical entry points. Given the complexity and sensitivity of the issue, a secondary data analysis approach has been employed to triangulate findings from multiple domains including academic literature, media reportage, statutory frameworks, and official records.

### Research Design and Rationale

The research is grounded in qualitative interpretivism, which acknowledges that social phenomena like witch-hunting are contextually constructed and culturally embedded. The interpretive approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how gender, superstition, and customary beliefs intersect with law and governance in tribal societies. The study does not aim to generalize findings statistically, but to analyze meanings, narratives, and patterns that emerge from well-documented cases and data sources.

### Data Collection

The present study relies entirely on secondary data, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and credibility. The data sources include:

- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings etc. focusing on gender studies, sociology of law, tribal rights, and human rights in India. These texts provide theoretical grounding and historical context (e.g., Roy, 2015; Kujur, 2020) <sup>[6, 3]</sup>.
- **Legal Documents:** The Jharkhand Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001 and sections of the Indian Penal Code pertaining to violence against women have been reviewed to understand the legal instruments available for redressal.
- **Media Reports:** Newspaper articles from reputable national dailies, particularly The Times of India, covering recent cases such as the murder of Baso Oraon in Chanhoo (Ranchi, 2023) and the Phatti Bagicha Toli incident in Gumla (2025), have been examined for empirical case reconstruction and response analysis.

### Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by using thematic content analysis, a method well-suited to qualitative research involve a textual and narrative data. The theme was identified under the

subtheme: Socio-cultural belief and superstitions, gendered patterns of violence, legal and policy response. A critical feminist lens was applied to analyze how patriarchal structures intersect with tribal customs and legal inaction, reinforcing the vulnerability of women accused of witch-hunt.

### Case Study1: The Witch-Hunting and Murder of Baso Oraon (Ranchi, December 2023)

In a terrifying incident that underscores the persistence of witch-hunting in tribal Jharkhand, Baso Oraon, a 60-year-old woman, was brutally murdered on the suspicion of practicing witchcraft. The incident took place in Raghunathpur village under the Chanho block of Ranchi district in December 2023. According to local police and eyewitness accounts, Baso Oraon was accused by fellow villagers of causing illness and misfortune in the area through supernatural means. On the evening of the attack, a group of people dragged her out of her home and murdered her with blunt weapons. Her body was later discovered partially buried near a field, indicating a deliberate attempt to conceal the crime (Times of India, 2023).

Investigations revealed that the motive behind the murder stemmed not only from superstition but also from longstanding land disputes and personal enmity, which were conveniently disguised under the label of witchcraft. Her son, who filed the First Information Report (FIR), stated that the family had been facing threats and social ostracism for months prior to the incident. The police later arrested key suspects from the village, but the slow pace of legal proceedings, coupled with fear among witnesses, highlights the broader failure of institutional mechanisms to protect vulnerable tribal women from such targeted violence.

This case mirrors a familiar pattern in rural Jharkhand, where elderly or widowed women are disproportionately accused and punished without evidence or fair trial. Despite the existence of the Jharkhand Witchcraft Prevention of

Practices Act, 2001, such crimes continue to occur due to poor law enforcement, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, and lack of community awareness. The murder of Baso Oraon not only reflects the brutal outcomes of superstition but also reveals how witch-branding is often used as a cover for settling personal scores and grabbing property. Her case stands as a tragic reminder of the urgent need for stronger legal safeguards, community sensitization, and victim protection in tribal-dominated regions of India.

### Case Study2: Murder over Witchcraft Accusations (Gumla, March 2025)

In March 2025, a horrific incident occurred in Phatti Bagicha Toli, a village in Gumla district, Jharkhand, where a 50-year-old tribal woman was found murdered and buried on the bank of the Khatwa River after being accused of witchcraft. Local police recovered the body following a missing persons report filed by her son, who feared she was targeted because of the suspicion. Her neighbor, Karpal Lakra, was arrested and confessed to the crime, citing the victim's alleged involvement in witchcraft. This deeply disturbing case highlights several broader issues: firstly, witchcraft allegations continue to be used as a weapon for murder and property disputes. Secondly, the gruesome disposal of the body underscores the intent to conceal the crime, evidencing the premeditated and clandestine nature of the violence. Thirdly, while the Jharkhand Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, along with IPC charges, applies, the arrest and investigation in this case also underscore the vital often inadequate role of police in forensic recovery and criminal admission. Structurally, this incident reflects a persistent pattern of witch-hunting violence that remains especially frequent in districts like Gumla, Ranchi, Khunti, and West Singhbhum. An analytical summary of mentioned two cases has been presented in the table 1.

**Table 1:** Analytical summary of the Case 1 and Case 2

Dimension	Details of the Cases
Victim Profile	Middle-aged or older tribal woman, isolated, socially marginalized and vulnerable (common target).
Accusation	Branded a "witch" responsible for illness and misfortune in the community
Motive Behind Crime	Superstition mixed with personal enmity and possibly land-related tension
Structural Gaps	No resistance to the branding or violence, Weak community awareness, delayed reporting, superstition, police limitations

### Discussion and Interpretation

This case demonstrates the deep entrenchment of superstitious beliefs in rural and tribal regions of Jharkhand, especially in districts like Gumla, where traditional belief systems often override scientific reasoning and constitutional safeguards. The branding of women as witches is rarely based on any actual proof and is frequently used as a pretext to settle personal grievances, such as land disputes, family feuds, or even gender non-conformity (Roy, 2015; Kujur, 2020) <sup>[6, 3]</sup>. In many such cases, elderly, widowed, or single women those without strong male support—become the easiest targets of community suspicion. The act of burial in secrecy, as seen in the Phatti Bagicha Toli case, reflects not only the brutality of the crime but also a collective culture of silence and complicity (Times of India, 2025).

Despite the legislative framework of the Jharkhand Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, which criminalizes witch-branding and related violence, the

implementation remains weak due to poor legal literacy, lack of timely police intervention, and social stigma (Sahu, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>. The conviction rate in witch-hunting cases remains low, largely due to fear of retaliation, absence of witness protection, and reluctance within communities to testify against perpetrators (Toppo & Hans, 2021) <sup>[12]</sup>. Furthermore, the lack of structured victim rehabilitation services, such as mental health care, financial support, or relocation options, often leaves survivors and affected families isolated and retraumatized (Singh & Ekka, 2022) <sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, while laws exist on paper, their translation into practice is inconsistent, and the root causes are poverty, illiteracy, patriarchal power structures, and institutional apathy continue to sustain the cycle of witch-hunting violence in Jharkhand.

### Conclusion

Witch-hunting practices in Jharkhand remains a grave and persistent form of violence, disproportionately targeting tribal women in rural communities. Despite the existence of



legal frameworks such as the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, the phenomenon continues due to deeply deep-rooted superstition, patriarchal control, lack of access to formal healthcare, and the manipulation of belief systems for personal or economic gain. These acts are not isolated incidents but part of a systemic pattern of violence rooted in intersecting axes of gender, caste, and economic vulnerability. The social stigma attached to accused women often leads to lifelong ostracism, psychological trauma, and in many cases, forced displacement. Furthermore, the underreporting of such crimes due to fear of reprisal, weak institutional response, and societal complicity—continues to obscure the true scale of the problem. Addressing this requires not only legal enforcement but also culturally sensitive community engagement, gender-sensitive education, mental health support for survivors, and sustained policy intervention tailored to the realities of tribal populations.

### Implications of the Study

The persistence of witch-hunting despite existing legislation like the *Jharkhand Prevention of Witch Practices Act (2001)* highlights the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and more victim-centered legal frameworks. There is a pressing need to institutionalize protection measures, establish district-level monitoring cells, and integrate legal aid services in remote tribal regions. Additionally, the inclusion of witch-hunting as a distinct category under the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) can aid in more accurate tracking and response.

The study underscores the urgency of deploying culturally competent community health programs that address superstitious beliefs and promote mental health literacy. Trained health workers, social workers, and tribal welfare officers must be sensitized to identify early signs of witch-branding and intervene before violence escalates. Providing psychosocial support and rehabilitation to survivors must become part of state-run welfare schemes.

Integrating content on gender justice, critical thinking, and scientific temper in school curricula, especially in tribal and rural areas, could challenge the legitimacy of witchcraft beliefs. Special emphasis must be placed on girl-child education, awareness among adolescents, and community sensitization through local languages and traditional media (e.g., street plays, folk songs).

Since witch-hunting is a tool of patriarchal domination and social control, particularly over tribal women, the study reinforces the need for gender-inclusive development models. It calls for empowering tribal women through access to education, land rights, healthcare, and representation in local governance. Women-led community watch groups and legal literacy campaigns can play transformative roles. The study opens avenues for interdisciplinary research across gender studies, anthropology, law, public health, and education. Future studies could focus on longitudinal tracking of survivors, effectiveness of legal interventions, and comparative studies across other states like Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Assam where witch-hunting also persists.

### Limitations of the Study

This research is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may lack the depth or immediacy of primary

fieldwork. Media sources, though valuable, may carry biases in representation.

### Ethical Considerations

This present study did not involve primary interviews, ethical diligence was observed in the selection, citation, and interpretation of secondary materials.


### Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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