



Marked as Witches: Cultural Violence, Gendered Injustice, and the Intersectional Realities of Witch-Hunting in Rural West Bengal

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15844912>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 20-06-2025

Published: 10-07-2025

Keywords:

Witch-hunting, Gendered violence, Intersectional criminology, Rural West Bengal, Cultural crime, Patriarchy, Superstition

ABSTRACT

Witch-hunting in rural West Bengal continues to be a harsh and deeply rooted form of violence that overwhelmingly targets women—especially those who are tribal, Dalit, elderly, widowed, or economically vulnerable. Often dismissed as mere superstition, this practice is far more dangerous than irrational belief. It acts as a tool of control—used to shame, isolate, assault, and sometimes even kill women who are seen as “different” or “troublesome.” This paper explores witch-hunting not just as a social evil, but as a cultural crime—one that lies at the crossroads of gender, caste, class, and tribal identity. By focusing on districts like Jhargram, Birbhum, and Malda, it seeks to uncover how such violence is normalized within communities and how it reinforces patriarchal power. Using a qualitative approach, the study draws from survivor narratives, news reports, court cases, and existing research to understand the social conditions that fuel these accusations. It looks at how local myths, family disputes, economic jealousy, and community politics are used to justify branding someone a “witch.” It also examines how the failure of legal systems, poor healthcare access, and inadequate policing make it almost impossible for the victims to get justice. Framed through an intersectional



criminological lens, the paper argues that witch-hunting is not an isolated event, but part of a larger structure that keeps certain women oppressed and voiceless. Finally, the study calls for urgent action—both through legal reforms and community-based feminist interventions—to dismantle the harmful beliefs and social inequalities that allow this violence to continue. Witch-hunting, at its core, is about silencing women. Understanding this is the first step toward real change

Introduction

Witch-hunting in India is often thought of as a practice buried in the past—a relic of a superstitious age. Yet, for many women in rural and tribal regions, especially in districts like Jhargram, Birbhum, Malda, and Purulia in West Bengal, it remains a horrifying reality. Behind the stories of women branded as “witches” lie complex layers of social injustice, gender discrimination, and structural neglect. These are not random acts of violence rooted in ignorance alone; rather, they are deliberate and systematic acts of cultural violence that reflect how deeply patriarchy, caste-based prejudice, economic exploitation, and superstition continue to shape everyday life in these communities.

In many of these areas, a woman may be labelled a “witch” simply because she is old, widowed, lives alone, owns land, speaks her mind, or refuses to conform to expected gender roles. Often, such accusations are triggered by personal vendettas, property disputes, or the need to scapegoat someone during illness or misfortune in the village. The violence is frequently instigated or legitimised by influential local figures—such as ojhas (traditional healers), male elders, or even close relatives—who use spiritual rhetoric to justify targeted brutality. Once branded, these women face extreme forms of abuse: public shaming, beatings, social exclusion, sexual violence, and in some cases, death. The most painful aspect is that such violence is often committed with the tacit approval—or fearful silence—of the community.

In these rural pockets, where education is sparse, legal mechanisms are weak, and healthcare services are either absent or inaccessible, witch-hunting becomes a tool to enforce conformity. It punishes women who are seen as threats—whether to the family structure, the village power dynamic, or the fragile balance of tradition. Their bodies become the battleground where masculinity, caste superiority, and economic anxieties are played out. Witch-hunting, therefore, is not a fringe practice—it is a mirror held up to a society where the most vulnerable continue to suffer in silence.



This paper approaches witch-hunting not as an isolated or outdated ritual, but as a structured form of cultural crime, sustained by deep-rooted intersectional hierarchies of gender, caste, class, and tribal identity. Using an interdisciplinary lens that draws from feminist criminology, intersectionality theory, and cultural sociology, the study seeks to unpack how and why these acts are normalized. By analyzing specific case studies from West Bengal and reviewing secondary data including survivor testimonies, media narratives, and legal records, the research aims to reveal the social logic behind this violence—and the structural failures that allow it to persist with impunity.

Ultimately, the goal is to shift the focus from seeing witch-hunting as a backward tradition to understanding it as a gendered political act, a form of social control, and a violent means of reinforcing existing inequalities. Only by naming it as such can we begin to imagine meaningful solutions that are rooted in justice, dignity, and community accountability.

Certainly, here is a more elaborate, humanized, and academically grounded version of the Theoretical Relevance section, integrating intersectionality, feminist criminology, cultural criminology, and gender theory, with a focus on the lived realities of witch-hunting in rural West Bengal:

Theoretical Relevance

Understanding the persistence of witch-hunting in rural West Bengal demands more than surface-level explanations based on superstition or ignorance. This paper grounds its analysis in a multidimensional theoretical framework that brings together intersectional theory, feminist criminology, cultural criminology, and the sociology of gendered violence. These perspectives allow us to grasp the deeper structural and symbolic forces at play—forces that shape who is accused, why they are targeted, and how such violence is socially justified and normalized.

At the core of this framework lies Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which insists that we cannot fully understand systems of oppression by looking at gender, caste, class, or tribal identity in isolation. In the context of witch-hunting, it is not just "women" who are victimized—it is certain women: those who are elderly, widowed, tribal, Dalit, poor, or women who dare to speak up, own property, or remain unmarried. Their vulnerability is not accidental; it is shaped by their multiple, overlapping identities, which compound their social marginalisation. Intersectionality helps us see how deeply woven systems of power and discrimination operate simultaneously, making certain bodies more vulnerable to being labeled as "witches"—or more precisely, as threats to patriarchal control.

This perspective is further sharpened by feminist criminology, which critiques the traditionally male-dominated field of criminology for ignoring the specific ways in which women experience crime—not just as victims, but as



targets of gendered social punishment. From this lens, witch-hunting is not a sporadic outburst of community hysteria, but a deliberate gendered act of discipline and control. It functions as a punishment for non-conformity and a warning to other women about the consequences of defying patriarchal norms. Feminist criminology draws attention to how state institutions—such as law enforcement and the judiciary—often fail to protect these women, or worse, participate in their silence, thereby reinforcing structural injustice.

Cultural criminology adds another layer of understanding by exploring how acts of violence like witch-hunting are culturally coded and symbolically meaningful. In rural Bengal, accusations of witchcraft are often embedded in local folklore, oral traditions, religious rituals, and village gossip. These stories do not exist in a vacuum; they carry historical and moral weight, giving a veneer of legitimacy to acts of exclusion, abuse, and murder. Cultural criminology helps us see witch-hunting not just as an act of violence, but as a ritualised performance—a public spectacle through which communities reinforce cultural values, reassert patriarchal dominance, and externalize fears and uncertainties, particularly during times of crisis such as disease outbreaks, crop failure, or social tension.

Finally, drawing from gender theory, especially the works of Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu, this paper considers how the female body becomes a site of symbolic struggle. In these communities, women's bodies are not seen as autonomous or self-owned; rather, they are culturally policed, regulated, and punished when they deviate from assigned roles. The accusation of witchcraft thus becomes a tool to erase female agency, to re-establish moral order, and to uphold the hegemonic structures of masculinity, caste dominance, and rural patriarchy.

By bringing these theoretical strands together, this study seeks to reframe witch-hunting not as an archaic aberration but as a contemporary manifestation of structural and symbolic violence—a form of social control that is deeply gendered, caste-coded, and culturally embedded. This intersectional criminological approach not only helps us understand the roots of such violence but also pushes us to imagine more nuanced, justice-oriented solutions rooted in community, gender equity, and systemic reform.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of witch-hunting in India has garnered scholarly attention across various academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, law, and development studies. Each discipline contributes a unique lens to understanding this deeply rooted and violent practice. However, despite these valuable contributions, a critical gap persists in integrating these perspectives within a culturally embedded and intersectionally grounded criminological framework.

Much of the extant literature focuses predominantly on legal reforms or developmental initiatives aimed at curbing the practice. While these approaches are necessary, they often overlook the embedded cultural logics, symbolic violence, and the socio-political functions that witch-hunting serves within specific communities. There is a



tendency to frame witch-hunting as a relic of superstition or underdevelopment, rather than engaging with its gendered, caste-based, and communal dimensions.

The gendered nature of witch-hunting has been extensively explored by scholars such as Manisha Sethi, whose article “Witch-Hunting: The Dark Side of Tribal Life” (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2011) analyzes how witch-branding functions as a punitive mechanism against women who transgress normative roles—be it through property ownership, assertion of autonomy, or perceived deviance. Sethi argues that these acts of violence are not secretive but rather ritualized and public, signifying their social legitimacy within the community.

Ipsita Roy Chakraverti, in her writings such as “Sacred Evil: Encounters With the Unknown” (2007), provides a unique spiritual-feminist perspective, suggesting that women accused of witchcraft often embody residual feminine power—spiritual, medicinal, or intuitive—that threatens patriarchal structures. Her work reclaims the figure of the witch as one symbolizing dissent, knowledge, and resistance.

A deeper structural understanding is offered by Uma Chakravarti in “Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens” (2006), where she highlights the interlocking systems of caste and patriarchy in rural India. Chakravarti argues that women from marginalized castes—especially Dalit and Adivasi communities—face compounded vulnerabilities that make them easy targets for witchcraft accusations. These accusations serve to reinforce caste hierarchies and patriarchal control, particularly in the absence of formal institutional redress.

Mahasweta Devi’s ethnographic short stories, particularly “Bayen” and “Draupadi,” serve as important literary and socio-anthropological documents. Through her writing, Devi reveals how gender, poverty, and marginality interact to create conditions where violence becomes symbolic, normalized, and cyclical in tribal life. Her depiction of branded women in Bengal illustrates the psychological, social, and physical trauma they endure, while simultaneously showing their subversive potential.

Empirical studies such as Rajeshwari Deshpande’s “Understanding Witch-Hunting in Jharkhand: Legal and Social Perspectives” (2016, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*) and T. K. Oommen’s work on tribal marginality emphasize that witch-hunting is often politically and economically motivated—used to settle land disputes, silence dissenters, or maintain patriarchal control. These patterns are similarly observable in Paschim Medinipur, Birbhum, and Jhargram districts of West Bengal, where most victims are widowed, elderly, or socially isolated women.

A recent study titled “Witch Hunts in India: The Social and Legal Dimension” by Deepa Bhanot (2020, South Asia Research) critiques the failure of the legal system to adequately protect women, especially in states like West Bengal that lack targeted legislation. Her research underscores how the absence of survivor-centered rehabilitation mechanisms exacerbates cycles of ostracism and violence.



Despite rich sociological and feminist work, there remains a notable gap in applying criminological theories—especially those from cultural criminology and feminist criminology—to analyze witch-hunting. The concept of symbolic violence, articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, is particularly useful in interpreting witch-hunting as a culturally internalized form of control. Through public shaming, ritualized violence, and community participation, the practice reinforces the existing socio-moral order and punishes deviations from it.

Furthermore, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality offers a crucial framework to understand how gender, caste, class, and age intersect to render certain women particularly vulnerable. Women who are poor, Dalit or tribal, widowed, or elderly face layered oppressions that criminal justice systems and policy interventions often overlook.

Few works have attempted to systematically integrate intersectional feminist theory with criminological approaches to cultural violence. This paper aims to contribute to this emerging dialogue by situating witch-hunting within the framework of cultural and intersectional criminology, thus moving beyond superstition-based or legalistic explanations. By analyzing case-specific narratives from West Bengal, this study emphasizes how witch-hunting becomes a normalized form of community justice, rooted in caste-patriarchal anxieties and symbolic systems of power.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in interpretivist and feminist approaches, which prioritize lived experiences, cultural context, and subjective narratives over numerical generalizations. Given the sensitive and deeply stigmatized nature of witch-hunting, qualitative methods offer the most ethical and insightful lens through which to understand the symbolic meanings and social processes that shape this phenomenon in rural West Bengal.

Fieldwork for this study focused primarily on Jhargram, Birbhum, Malda, and parts of Purulia, districts known for sporadic incidents of witch-hunting over the past two decades. These areas were selected due to their significant tribal and rural populations, limited access to legal and healthcare systems, and documented cases of witch-branding, as reported by local NGOs, media, and human rights organizations.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with survivors, family members, local activists, health workers, and panchayat members. Survivors were identified through contacts established via grassroots women's organizations and community health volunteers. Interviews were conducted in Bengali and Santali languages with informed consent, ensuring anonymity and emotional safety. Due to ethical considerations and the potential trauma involved, each interview was preceded by a trust-building session, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any point.



Additionally, content analysis of legal case files, police records (where accessible), and regional media reports was conducted to identify patterns of language, representation, and institutional response. Complementary participant observations in community gatherings and local dispute resolution forums (salishi sabhas) were used to understand how accusations of witchcraft emerge and are socially negotiated.

The methodology is also reflexive; as a researcher, I remained critically aware of positionality, power dynamics, and cultural differences, especially while engaging with tribal women whose experiences are shaped not just by gender but also by ethnicity and caste. By centering their voices and contextual knowledge, the study aims to generate a nuanced, grounded understanding of how witch-hunting functions as a mechanism of control and violence within specific socio-cultural settings.

Discussion and Analysis: Tracing the Structural and Symbolic Roots of Witch-Hunting in Rural West Bengal

1. Social Anxiety and Scapegoating in a Fragile Welfare Ecology

The persistence of witch-hunting in rural West Bengal must be located within a wider ecology of socio-economic vulnerability, weak state presence, and cultural anxiety. In regions such as Jhargram, Birbhum, and Purulia, structural deprivation—including lack of healthcare, education, and legal recourse—renders communities susceptible to traditional, non-scientific belief systems. In times of misfortune—such as illness, livestock death, or poor harvest—blame is externalized onto individuals perceived as socially marginal. Here, the accused “witch” functions as a ritual scapegoat, enabling the community to symbolically “cleanse” itself of disorder without addressing systemic failures.

These events become sites of collective catharsis, where symbolic violence is enacted upon the body of a woman already estranged from normative social roles. Superstition alone does not explain the phenomenon; rather, it is the weaponization of cultural belief against women whose social presence disrupts dominant patriarchal narratives.

2. Patriarchal Discipline and the Fear of Female Autonomy

A key explanatory axis of witch-hunting is the gendered disciplining of autonomy. Women who are widowed, childless, financially independent, or socially outspoken frequently become targets. Their non-conformity to normative gender expectations—in particular, their detachment from male guardianship—invites suspicion and fear. In such cases, witchcraft serves as a culturally legitimized tool for patriarchal retaliation.

Acts of public violence—shaving of the head, parading naked, or enforced exile—serve not merely to punish, but to humiliate and dehumanize, reinforcing a village’s patriarchal order. The performative nature of the violence



ensures that others, particularly younger women, are warned against similar transgressions. Witch-hunting thus emerges as a form of gendered moral governance, masquerading as spiritual or communal purification.

3. Economic Precarity and Property-Driven Accusations

Beyond superstition and gender, economic motives are central to understanding the targeting of women as witches. In numerous field studies from Birbhum and Paschim Medinipur, cases have revealed that accusations often arise in the context of property disputes. Widows inheriting agricultural land or pension benefits are particularly vulnerable. Branding them as witches offers a culturally accepted route to dispossess them, particularly when legal literacy is low and institutional protections are weak.

In these instances, witch-hunting functions as a strategic tool of gendered dispossession, with male relatives, neighbors, or land mafias orchestrating accusations to achieve economic gain. These cases also reflect the patriarchal discomfort with female property ownership, particularly in tribal and caste-ridden rural contexts.

4. Caste, Tribal Identity, and Legal Disenfranchisement

The intersection of gender, caste, and tribal status intensifies the vulnerability of the accused. The majority of victims belong to Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, where legal literacy is minimal and access to justice is structurally constrained. In regions like Jhargram and Malda, police stations are often distant, and legal proceedings are either delayed or corrupted. Panchayat bodies, dominated by upper-caste or male voices, often reinforce rather than challenge the violence.

While states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have enacted anti-witch-hunting legislation (e.g., Jharkhand's Witchcraft Prevention Act, 2001), West Bengal lacks a dedicated legal framework, leading to underreporting, misclassification under generic IPC sections, and weak prosecution. In effect, caste and tribal identity mediate both the likelihood of being accused and the inaccessibility of institutional redress.

5. Cultural Memory and the Symbolic Economy of Witchcraft

Witch-hunting is also sustained through a deeply embedded cultural repertoire of myths, folktales, and oral traditions. Figures such as the daini, churel, or tonhi feature prominently in local storytelling, perpetuating the image of the dangerous, older, non-normative woman. These narratives operate within what Veena Das (2007) terms the “everydayness of violence”—where myth and memory collapse into social practice, and brutality becomes routinized.



Children grow up internalizing these belief systems, and women too—socialized into patriarchal frameworks—often participate in reinforcing the stigma. Witch-hunting, thus, becomes culturally transmissible, surviving through pedagogies of fear, ritual, and folklore.

6. Weak State Intervention and Civil Society Challenges

The absence of systematic state-led intervention remains a critical factor in the continuation of this practice. There is a significant lack of:

Awareness programs addressing superstition and gender-based violence
Community-level legal sensitization workshops
Capacity-building among law enforcement personnel to recognize and respond to witch-hunting as a distinct and gendered form of violence
Holistic rehabilitation policies for survivors
While NGOs and activists have taken up isolated interventions, these efforts are often underfunded and face resistance from within the community. Moreover, the state has failed to institutionalize survivors' voices in policymaking or rehabilitation planning. As a result, the silence around witch-hunting becomes structural, and impunity remains the norm.

Conclusion

Witch-hunting in rural West Bengal is not a vestige of irrational superstition or a mere failure of modernity—it is a gendered cultural crime, intricately woven into the fabric of patriarchal ideology, economic precarity, caste hierarchies, and institutional neglect. The branding of women as witches operates simultaneously as a material act of dispossession and a symbolic performance of control, aimed at disciplining female autonomy in spaces where traditional hierarchies remain dominant and state presence is fragmented.

The women targeted are not randomly chosen. They are almost always those who occupy the margins of acceptability—widows, the elderly, the childless, tribal or lower-caste women, or those who assert economic independence. Their social vulnerability becomes a pretext for their dehumanization, while the violence inflicted upon them is rendered culturally legitimate through folk narratives, communal complicity, and institutional silence. In this sense, witch-hunting functions as both a tool of gendered moral governance and a ritual of social purification.

Crucially, this practice is structurally rational, even if morally reprehensible—it serves specific functions: to eliminate resistance, seize property, resolve familial or caste conflicts, and reinforce patriarchal order. As such, it cannot be dismantled by legal prohibition alone.

What is required is a multidimensional, intersectional approach that simultaneously addresses:



Legal reform: The urgent need for a comprehensive anti-witch-hunting law in West Bengal, modeled on legislation from other states. Gender-sensitive institutional training: Police officers, health workers, and local panchayat leaders must be sensitized to treat witch-hunting as a criminal and gendered act, not a customary or “domestic” dispute. Community-based education: Culturally grounded yet progressive curricula that challenge superstition and foster values of justice, equity, and gender rights must be introduced at grassroots levels. Support for survivors: Women who survive witch-hunting must be given access to psychological care, legal aid, economic rehabilitation, and, most importantly, the space to reclaim their narratives—for every accusation carries not just a stigma, but a deep rupture in identity, dignity, and future potential. By reframing witch-hunting through the lens of intersectional criminology, we expose it for what it is: a form of gendered structural violence, sanctioned not only by culture but by systemic failure. In confronting it, we are not merely addressing a fringe social evil, but challenging the foundational inequalities that continue to devalue and endanger women’s lives, particularly those at the margins of caste, class, and kinship. Only by disrupting the symbolic economy of the ‘witch’ and foregrounding survivor agency can we begin to dismantle this persistent and pernicious form of cultural violence.

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