



## Ritualistic Murders In India

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**ABSTRACT:** In the recent past, media has been gripped by innovative crimes committed under the guise of occult practices. In the name of prosperity, abundance, health and longevity, crimes are being committed under the garb of black magic, witchcraft and occult practices. Most crimes involve financial frauds, property embezzlement, animal sacrifices and the like. However, in the recent times there is an escalation of crimes that are committed in terms of mystic practices. Ritualistic murder, also known as human sacrifice, represents a disturbing intersection of violence, spiritual belief, and cultural practice. Although India has made substantial progress in law enforcement and human rights, cases of ritualistic killings continue to emerge from various states, revealing persistent undercurrents of superstition and occult influence. This study presents a conceptual framework for understanding ritualistic murder in India, grounded in an analysis of ten documented cases from 2015 to 2025.

**Keywords:** Occult crimes, ritualistic murder, human sacrifice

### 1. Introduction

Occult crimes and ritualistic murders represent a disturbing intersection of violence, belief, and secrecy, often operating outside the purview of conventional law enforcement and rationalist paradigms. These crimes are frequently characterized by symbolic or ceremonial acts, often rooted in spiritual, mystical, or supernatural ideologies. The origin of the word occult lies in the Latin word '*occultus*' which means hidden. Occult refers to 'secret, hidden, or esoteric knowledge and, more generally, to any matter concerned with the supernatural' (Perlmutter, 2004). There are various forms of occult sciences or practices around the world, such as Satanism, Vampirism, Voodoo, Santeria etc. Even though there are many explanations of the term, occult is most often referred to modality of developing powers.

It is to be noted that there is no uniform understanding of ritualistic crimes or occult crimes. In the United States however, satanic crimes and occult crimes spiked in the 1980s leading to a few studies in the area. One such study was conducted by California Law Enforcement (1989) which defines ritualistic/occult crimes as 'any act of violence characterized by a series of repeated physical, sexual, and/or psychological actions/assaults combined with a systematic use of symbols, ceremonies, and/or machinations' (as cited in Perlmutter, 2004, p.14). Occult crimes generally involve activities associated with esoteric traditions or spiritual practices such as witchcraft, black magic, Satanism, and animistic rituals. The term "occult" broadly refers to hidden or secret knowledge tied to ancient or marginal religious systems (Victor, 1993).

Perlmutter (2004) in her work states that the law enforcement community, typically refer illegal ritual activities as occult crimes. However, she opines that this is an 'inaccurate and pejorative designation' for such crimes as occult is an umbrella term which includes many religious and ideological practices that are non-violent as well. In her opinion, a more suited designation for such crime would be 'ritualistic crime,

because it encompasses crimes that may entail ritualistic behaviour. However, Grillot (2010) suggests that while not all occult practices are violent, some forms have been linked to criminal activities. This is specifically evident when influential leadership is combined with intense beliefs or social isolation. One such violent form of occult crimes is ritualistic murder.

Ritualistic murder involves ceremonial acts, such as mutilation, specific tools or chants, blood sacrifice, or targeting individuals believed to have spiritual power. The ceremonial structure and symbolic purpose are landmark identifiers of ritualistic murders. In sub-Saharan Africa, victims are often selected based on their potential 'ritual value' and on their perceived spiritual qualities (Adinkrah, 2015; Bryman, 2020). These victims often comprise of women, children, or individuals with disabilities or individuals with qualities that separate them from the rest, like a person with albinism. An earlier understanding of ritualistic murders by Lanning (1992), defines it as deliberate and systematic killings conducted as part of a ceremonial practice believed to summon, appease, or control supernatural forces. Such crimes often intersect with broader issues like gender violence, child abuse, and human trafficking, making them multidimensional in nature (Ellis, 2007; Igwe, 2004).

Ritualistic murders vary worldwide, shaped by cultural, religious, and legal factors. Globally, the prevalence of ritualistic murders varies significantly, influenced by socio-cultural, religious, and legal contexts. A multitude child sacrifices and witchcraft-related killings have been reported by Human Rights Watch and UNICEF (UNICEF, 2006; HRW, 2009) in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa. In India, human sacrifices are termed as *narbali* and occur in areas influenced by Tantric or animistic beliefs, often targeting children or marginalized individuals (Roy, 2014). Isolated cases of Satanic ritual abuse or symbolic killings by fringe cults in the Western society have received media and scholarly attention. Although the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s in the U.S. lacked empirical basis, some documented instances involved violent acts performed as rituals (Lanning, 2010; Raschke, 1990). Ritual killings are relatively unusual but sometimes bear some of the hallmarks of a serial killing, such as mutilation of the corpse or some kind of special positioning.

Many ritual murders involve the idea of human sacrifice, usually for religious reasons. Research into motivation for ritual killings has shown that the practice is thought to lead to transformation, self-deification, and healing. Ritual killings are not solely acts of violence; perpetrators often view them as transformative ceremonies that facilitate self-deification, spiritual empowerment, and communal or personal healing. Research in religious anthropology and criminology indicates that these rituals are believed to confer supernatural abilities upon practitioners, bridge the gap between the mortal and divine, and cleanse spiritual or physical ailments (Wojtkowiak, 2018; Perlmutter, 2003). In his work, Girard (1972/1977) discusses how sacrifice allows participants to imitate a cosmic act, achieving renewal and a higher status through symbolic violence. In violent occult rituals, as described by Perlmutter (2003), ritual mutilation and blood offerings serve as "sacred communion meals," transforming the perpetrator's identity and elevating them towards a perceived divine status (Perlmutter, 2003; Wojtkowiak, 2018).

In summary, occult crimes and ritualistic murders are complex phenomena embedded within spiritual and cultural worldviews that defy simple categorization. Understanding their prevalence and patterns requires a multidisciplinary lens, one that considers not only criminological evidence but also anthropological insight, cultural context, and historical memory.

## 2. Aim of the study

Human sacrifice is the most controversial crime committed for as a part of occult/ritualistic crimes. Looking at these crimes through the lens of religious or social belief system only hinders in the understanding, investigation, prosecution, and prevention. The study examines ritualistic murders in India using case analysis of media-reported cases from 2015 to 2025 to highlight this criminological category, demanding academic, legal, and policy attention. Although ritual murder continues to occur, it is under-theorized and inadequately documented within Indian criminology. This study aims to address this significant gap by systematically compiling real-world cases and providing a conceptual framework to comprehend this type of violence.

### 3. Ritualistic Murders in India

Ritualistic murders in India are complex as they are culturally embedded acts that intersect belief and violence. The brutality and symbolic nature often witnessed in ritualistic murders have drawn scholarly and media attention, even though they are not a frequent occurrence compared to conventional homicides. These acts are often committed with the belief that human sacrifice can bring fertility, prosperity, or spiritual conciliation, especially during certain rituals or religious observances (Chattopadhyay, 2019).

Many studies note that crimes tied to occult practices and folk traditions are common. Roy (2014) claims that ritual killings in India are linked to and often justified by informal traditional belief systems as spiritual necessities for personal gain or divine favour. There is immense lack of literature when it comes to occult/ritualistic crimes in India. After scouring many news articles a few statistics were obtained. They are presented here along with the current trend as presented in the Crime in India Report – the annual publication by National Crime Records Bureau.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has categorized "human sacrifice" as a motive for murder in its annual reports. The table below (Table 3.1) presents the statistical data recorded by Crime in India over the last five years i.e., from 2018 to 2022. The highest number of murder for witchcraft was committed in the year 2019 (102 murders) whereas the highest number of child/human sacrifice can be found in 2017 (19 murders). One of the reasons for such collective presentation of data is that when we look at witchcraft and child/human sacrifice on yearly basis as a standalone crime, it does not seem like a problem.

**Table 3.1: Motives of Murder (2018 – 2022)**

Year	Witchcraft	Child/ Human sacrifice	Total No. of murder case
2022	85	8	28522
2021	68	6	29272
2020	88	12	29193
2019	102	10	28918
2018	63	4	29017

India Today (2018) report the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) started compiling separate data on human sacrifice since 2014. The report states that 52 deaths occurred due to human sacrifice and that 385 persons were murdered due to witchcraft during 2014-16. It is alarming to note that most of the victims of human sacrifice has been minors. Besides, statistics on witchcrafts states that 156 people were killed due to witchcraft in 2014, 135 in 2015 and 134 in 2016. According to data sourced from National Crime Records Bureau, 2,000 women have been killed in the name of witchcraft in the country in the last 14 years. However, many experts contend that this figure does not accurately represent the true frequency due to underreporting, fear of retribution, or community complicity. These crimes are often cloaked in secrecy, and investigations are hindered by a lack of witness cooperation and inadequate forensic understanding of ritualistic indicators (Singh & Mandal, 2021).

Another prime reason for the scarcity of statistics is the lack of the right legal domain under which such crimes can be charged. There is no uniform law that deals with superstitious practices or human sacrifices. Baxi (2000) and Narula (2005) underscore the neglect in tribal areas where customary practices and extrajudicial systems persist. Legal experts and human rights advocates urge for community-based, culturally sensitive interventions with strict enforcement of child protection and anti-superstition laws.

In India, Maharashtra is the only state to have a separate Act to deal with occult/ ritualistic crimes. The Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013 came into effect after an 18 yearlong battle. Following suit, students of the National Law School, Bangalore drafted the Karnataka Prevention of Superstitious Practices Bill, 2013 but is yet to be passed by the state Government. So far, these are the only two states that have taken the initiative to curb such superstitious practices. Similarly, on account of the rise in cases of occult/ritualistic crimes in

Kerala, a working draft of a bill titled 'The Kerala Exploitation by Superstition (Prevention) Act' was prepared by the then Additional Director General of Police (Intelligence) in 2014. However, Kerala failed to enact a comprehensive law against black magic. Despite the lack of legal recognition for occult/ritualistic crimes, the instances in which people are cheated, manipulated, tortured and even sacrificed are more common than one imagines.

A few reported incidents are presented here below to illustrate the prevalence and widespread nature of occult/ritualistic crimes in India.

### **Case Study 1: Andhra Pradesh: 5year old boy murdered as human sacrifice ritual (The Indian Express, 2015)**

The accused Rao being in his mid-30s, took the kid from childcare center to his house did all pujas. Then he cut the boys head and collected all the blood and sprinkled it all over the house. This came into light when the boy's mother searched for him as he was not there in the childcare centre. Then along with the villagers help she found Rao's house and found the corpse of her son. Later the villagers tied him to the pole thrashed and set him ablaze after pouring kerosene.

### **Case Study 2: Delhi: Burari case – death of 11 members of family (The Hindu, 2018)**

11 members of Chundawats family were found dead as the ritual had gone wrong. Lalit being the member of the family, made the family to believe him that he can communicate with his late father and the father says that there should be a ritual (Banyan tree worship) performed for the betterment of the family. 11members of the family were found dead in a form of ritualistic suicide with a note that this was done for salvation.

### **Case Study 3: Andhra Pradesh: Mother sacrifices her 2 daughters (India Today,2021)**

A mother along with the help of the father killed her two daughters using dumbbells on Sunday night in Andhra Pradesh saying their daughters will become alive again as "satyuga" starts from Monday. Neighbours called police after hearing strange noises and cries from the house. Officials after investigating the case suspect that both the deceased girls were brainwashed by the parents and that they also believed in reincarnations.

### **Case Study 4: Uttar Pradesh: Noida girl kidnapped for human sacrifice on Holi (India Today, 2021)**

The neighbour of the 7-year-old girl was made to believe that a human sacrifice will ensure his wedding by an occultist. The neighbour with the help of his associate kidnaps this girl to perform the sacrifice. But the police rescued the girl before any kind of rituals.

### **Case Study 5: Bihar: 8-year-old girl killed in human sacrifice ritual (The Times of India, 2021)**

Dilip Kumar being the offender consulted a sorcerer to get an advice to perform some rituals to have a healthy pregnancy as the couple had many unsuccessful years of pregnancy. As per his directions Dilip kidnapped an 8-year-old girl performed some rituals and the sacrificed her to avoid miscarriage of his pregnant wife.

### **Case Study 6: Gujarat: Superstitious businessman tortures 14-year-old daughter to death for money (The Times of India, 2022)**

The father and the uncle of the victim, who are both extremely superstitious, suspected that this girl was possessed with evil spirits and thus rituals would liberate her. They both made the girl to stand close to the fire for hours until her clothes and skin are in fire then thrashed her with stick. Later, they made her to sit in the sugarcane farm tied with a rock so that she couldn't move. This torture continued for three days till she died. Her body was later cremated and informed to the family that she had died due to some disease. After investigating the family members, the police officers arrested both the offenders.

### **Case study 7: Delhi: Women kidnaps infant for human sacrifice ritual to revive her dead father (The Times of India, 2022)**

Shwetha 25-year-old women lost her father in October. During his last rites, she came to know that sacrificing a human of same gender could revive her father and bring him back to life. For this she started searching for infants, went to maternity hospital nearby, and introduced herself as an NGO worker and the care taker of

the newly born baby and his mother. Days later when she found the baby in the absence of any guardian kidnapped him to perform the ritual. But before any such practice police arrested her and safeguarded the infant and handed him over to his mother.

### **Case Study 8: Kerala Narabali (Human Sacrifice) Case, 2022**

In October 2022, Kerala witnessed one of the most gruesome cases of ritualistic murder in recent history when two women were found to have been brutally killed as part of a human sacrifice ritual in the village of Elanthoor in Pathanamthitta district. The victims, both financially vulnerable and engaged in odd jobs, were lured separately with promises of money by Mohammed Shafi, the main accused, under false pretenses. Shafi introduced himself as a tantric and manipulated a couple – Bhagaval Singh, a traditional healer, and his wife Laila – into believing that human sacrifice would bring them wealth and prosperity. Under this belief, the couple, with Shafi's guidance, abducted, tortured, and murdered the two women. The victims were subjected to extreme physical violence, including mutilation and beheading. Their dismembered bodies were buried in the courtyard of Singh's house.

### **Case Study 9: Nashik, Maharashtra – 9-Year-Old Boy Murdered in Human Sacrifice (July 2023)**

In July 2023, the rural region of Malegaon in Nashik, Maharashtra, witnessed the shocking abduction and murder of a 9-year-old boy, allegedly as part of a human sacrifice ritual. The child went missing while playing near his house, and his half-buried body was later discovered in a nearby field, raising suspicions of a ritualistic killing. The police arrested four individuals in connection with the crime, all of whom were reportedly involved in performing occult practices.

### **Case Study 10: Aurangabad, Bihar – Man Beheaded in Holika Dahan Ritual (March 2025)**

In March 2025, during the Holika Dahan celebrations in Bihar's Aurangabad district, a 65-year-old man named Yugal Yadav was allegedly murdered as part of a tantric ritual. According to reports, Yadav's decapitated body was discovered near the ceremonial fire used in the Holika Dahan festival. His skull was missing, and charred remains were found near the fire, suggesting he was partially cremated as part of the ritual. The investigation revealed that a local tantrik (occult practitioner) had orchestrated the murder, promising his followers supernatural protection and prosperity in exchange for the human sacrifice.

India has seen instances of ritualistic killings influenced by superstition, spiritual beliefs, and socio-cultural practices. Several cases have occurred across the country over the past decade that highlight the intersection of belief systems and violent acts. The above incidents prove that the ideology of human ritualistic practice can bring about a change in luck, fortune, childbirth, reincarnation is widespread. Although the police thwarted most of these incidents before the human sacrifice, it is appalling to see the extent to which people will go in the name of faith and belief.

## **4. Discussion**

The theoretical and empirical study of ritual murder in India unmask a profoundly disturbing intersection of violence, belief, and social structure. The case studies analyzed within various states identify that these murders are not individual acts of pathology but culturally mediated acts borne out of spiritual belief, fear, and assurances of personal benefit. Murders associated with occult practices, the persecution of women as witches, and rituals promising economic prosperity illustrate the ongoing presence of irrational belief systems coexisting alongside modern institutions (Reddy, 2023; Nair, 2025).

The typical pattern is the symbolic and intentional character of the violence – victims are not simply murdered but mutilated, sacrificed, or ritually disposed of (Krishnan, 2023). The symbolic aspect differentiates ritualistic murder from ordinary homicide and indicates the involvement of meaning-construction processes based on folk religion and socio-cultural-religious ideology (Jayaram, 2022). Perpetrators in most cases assume that murder frees metaphysical energy or brings forth concrete rewards such as healing, protection, or economic prosperity (Sen, 2024).

The victims are disproportionately drawn from marginalized groups—children, women, the elderly, mirroring wider trends of social vulnerability. The majority of cases take place in rural or peri-urban areas with restricted access to state protection, where customary authority structures broker justice or suppress dissent (Chatterjee, 2023). In spite of legislations such as the Jharkhand Witchcraft Prevention Act,

enforcement is partial, and ritual killings are inadequately documented by social stigma and misclassification within criminal records.

India has no nationally accepted legal definition of ritualistic murder, and therefore such crimes are under-reported and sometimes defined as plain homicide or assault (Rao, 2023). In the absence of such focused monitoring procedures and law enforcement sensitized to this type of crime, its scale and nature are hidden.

## 5. Conclusion

Ritualistic murder in India is a contemporary phenomenon influenced by cultural belief systems, power imbalances, and institutional oversight. This paper proposes a conceptual framework that views ritual murder as a specific socio-criminal category interlinked with spiritual logics, community dynamics, and symbolic violence (Patel, 2023). The ten case studies presented illustrate the geographical spread, ideological complexity, and social entrenchment of these crimes. They demonstrate how religious or spiritual narratives are exploited to rationalize extreme acts of violence, with victims often reduced to spiritual currency. These instances underscore the necessity for interdisciplinary approaches involving legal, anthropological, psychological, and sociological perspectives (Datta, 2021).

India needs explicit provisions to recognize and record ritual killings within crime databases, supported by law enforcement training and victim support services. Future research should further examine how collective narratives, trauma, and local cosmologies interact to normalize or perpetuate violence in the name of faith. Understanding these crimes not as anomalies but as part of a broader pattern of belief-based violence can help dismantle the structures that sustain them. This study aims to create space for serious engagement with ritualistic murder as both a criminological concern and a human rights issue – one that demands action, reflection, and reform.

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