

CRIME AGAINST CHILDREN

CHILD ABUSE

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Last night a friend of mine phoned me up. She appeared extremely worried. After a lot of hesitation she told me that her two year old daughter was being regularly sexually abused by the nurse she had hired to look after the child in her absence. This added one more name to the ever bulging kitty of crime against children in India.

This abuse takes various shapes. A child may be sexually abused. He / she may be a victim of child labour. As a girl child she can be trafficked. A child can also be forced into prostitution. As India celebrates her ritualistic Children's Day each year and as the leaders make tall claims about all good things done for the children, crime records show that kids still face a slew of daily threats ranging from trafficking, sexual violence, forced labour and early marriage. Crime data shows that every day as many as 290 children become victims of crime. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, offences against kids have increased fourfold in just two years. Children are among the most vulnerable groups in the country. Be it victims of sexual assault, kidnapping or murder, children below twelve years have a higher abuse rate as they are more vulnerable and more helpless.

A total of 89,423 crimes against children were reported in 2014. The number went up to 94,172 in 2015 and 1,05,785 the next year. Between 2014 and 2016, the number of crimes recorded under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) went up from 8,904 to 35,980 – a fourfold jump. In fact, the National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB] has reported a 300% rise in the crime against children in last two years. This is shocking more so because this represents only the tip of the iceberg since most cases of abuse against children go unreported. Otherwise the number could have been even more shocking. In fact a social worker claimed that almost every adult person in India has a story of abuse locked up in his / her heart done to him / her when he / she was a child and claiming thereby that child abuse in India has remained an old problem that is now threatening to destroy the entire society.

This is a shocking admission. Are we – the Indians – both abusers and abused, emotionally, psychologically and physically? The man on the street, decent and smiling – is he an abuser masquerading as a philanthropist? Even the sadhus and god-men are not above suspicion in this matter. Cases have been reported of child abuse in their ashrams as well. The scenario is of course not as bad as Nigeria where the extremist outfit Boko Haram kidnapped all the girl students of a particular school and forced them to become sex-slaves, but it is not very self-congratulatory either.

Often it is seen that the abusers are emboldened by the fact that the parents of an abused child hesitate to report the matter to the police and consequently, bring the guilty to book. Social stigma, public shame, the fear that the child may be harassed once the case comes up for hearing and the ensuing trauma for the child are reasons why they generally do not report the incidents. Because of this hesitation the victim suffers and the violator goes scot-free and lies in the lurch for another child victim. In the recent past a brazen violation of law shocked us out of our wits. A girl child from a poor family was raped by a local goon. He threatened her with dire consequences should she report the matter to the police. Ignoring the threat the family of the girl went and lodged an FIR. While she was

coming back from the police station the ruffian abducted her and once more raped her. Then in shame the girl committed suicide and the man with the local political help forced the family of the girl to leave the state. Such incidents too act as deterrents for the victim and her family to ask for redressal. The law makers therefore must understand the need to shield the child victim from unnecessary harassment, insensitive questions in the law court, unnecessary political interference and expedite the cases in order to protect the child from the trauma of 'living' the incident longer than is necessary. The Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) has been doing a 'satyagrah' in the recent past. "We want the Centre and the state governments to draft a law ensuring that within six months the perpetrator should be given death penalty" said Swati Maliwal the chairperson of DCW. But nothing more has been reported on the matter.

It is also seen that the problem is complicated by the fact that the abuser is a member of the family. There have been cases where the father or the uncle and even the grand father is the abuser. Such cases are invariably hushed up as a family scandal and the child is forced to bear the untold story in her heart throughout his / her life. The Victorian novelist Elizabeth Gaskell in her novel *Mary Barton* while talking of the poverty and immorality in Manchester reported that a young girl got pregnant in a particular family. The father blamed his eldest son for the mishap and the son blamed the father; the girl on the other hand blamed both. Of course this is fiction. But the tear stained reality beneath this fiction is heart-rending.

The scenario is alarming, to say the least. No child in India is safe from the groping hands of the abuser. All school going girls travelling by train in every part of India would agree with this. Recently, in a girls' school a [lady] teacher punished little girls by forcing them to disrobe in front of their friends in the classroom. Of course she was sacked from her job but the incident by itself is as shocking as other incidents of child abuse.

The only way to protect a child from sexual abuse, says psychologists, is by teaching them to differentiate between a good touch and a bad touch. The child must be taught to distinguish between the parts of the body which can be touched by others and the parts which cannot. In other words, even before they have any idea about their body they must be taught about it and expected to defend themselves from unwelcome 'touch'. But can this be possible? Would it be possible for a child to understand the difference between a touch of love and a touch of lust? What kind of a person would this child become in the future? What kind of society would we create where each person has been taught in the cradle to view with suspicion all people around him / her? What kind of world would we usher the child into where there is nothing called trust? What kind of social / personal relationship would that child get involved in when he / she grows up?

The criminals who harm the child therefore do more damage than what has been previously envisaged. They are also damaging the social fabric and distorting all inter-personal relationships besides harming an individual child. Therefore they must be stopped before it is too late. The law against such practise must be made so harsh and stringent that the consequence itself would act as an adequate deterrent. Also no time must be lost in booking and punishing the abuser. Justice must be swift and ruthless, so ruthless that nobody would dare touch a child with mischievous hands. Only then can we give back the child his / her childhood – her liberty to see everything bathed in the 'milk of human kindness'.