



International Journal of Human Rights and Constitutional Studies

ISSN online: 2050-1048 - ISSN print: 2050-103X
<https://www.inderscience.com/ijhracs>

**Representation of child abuse in Indian news media:
confronting the ethical interface**

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DOI: [10.1504/IJHRCS.2024.10064443](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJHRCS.2024.10064443)

Article History:

Received:	22 June 2023
Last revised:	25 June 2023
Accepted:	10 July 2023
Published online:	30 November 2024

Representation of child abuse in Indian news media: confronting the ethical interface

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Abstract: Childhood is that nascent stage of life that naturally progresses towards adulthood. Children are the voices of tomorrow budding into adulthood. Their minds are impressionable. Their experience of childhood is never monolithic. Therefore, media plays a very important role as an influencer. It can be a powerhouse of information spreading positivity or a dysfunctional abyss, which might draw children in a whirlpool of darkness. However, in an age of information warfare and increase of digitisation, in modern times, media is playing truant with its child audience. The paper explores the following questions – what does representation of childhood in India mean and what are its implications? How children are represented in modern Indian media? How narratives are built around them? Whether these narratives are augmenting child development or leading to chaos in their lives or their families? In the past decades, we have come across media manipulation while reporting of child abuse.

Keywords: representation; media; childhood; child abuse; ethics.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Basu, K. (2025) 'Representation of child abuse in Indian news media: confronting the ethical interface', *Int. J. Human Rights and Constitutional Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp.59–73.

Biographical notes: Koyel Basu did her Post-graduation in International Relations from the Jadavpur University, and completed her doctoral dissertation from the same institution in 2015 on Human Rights and State Politics in India. She takes keen interest in various issues like sexual violence, security studies, gender and society, feminism, governance, Indian foreign policy, etc. Her book titled *Human Rights and State Politics in India: Case Studies of West Bengal, Punjab and Assam (1970–2000)* was published by Authorspress, New Delhi in 2021. ISBN: 978-93-90891. At present, she is working as the Honorary Visiting Fellow of Nepal Institute of International Cooperation and Engagement, a leading apolitical think tank of the world and Honorary Fellow of Interdisciplinary Institute of Human Security and Governance, New Delhi. She is writing extensively on climate disasters and vulnerabilities on women and her articles are being published in New Delhi's leading web journal, *South Asia Monitor*.

1 Introduction

The UN Convention of Child Rights (1989) defines a child as any human who has not reached the age of 18 years. The ideological construction of childhood is that at this stage, one is innocent, vulnerable and fun-loving. With this nature comes predilection to temptations and errors. They are at formative stage of their lives. Media diatribes show sensationalising of news, with undue bias in presentation of news. There are half-baked truths flying around. Media many a times stokes fear and helplessness amongst its most vulnerable audience misrepresenting facts. This has increased manifold in the recent COVID-19 pandemic when the world was under severe restrictions and lockdowns to contain the spread of the virus. The children were forced inside their homes and therefore their exposure to the digital world increased by leaps and bounds. There were reports of child abuse within the domestic arena as there were incidents outside too.

There was discharge of volley of expletives on families and this weaponising of information made many lives miserable because of media trial. Specifically, media focus on few cases like Aarushi Talwar murder case, the Kathua rape case and the case of a seven-year-old girl who was lured away by her neighbour had been pathetic manhandling of children having pernicious effects on society. For that matter, the ten-year-old girl of Chandigarh who survived rape and her pregnancy was not allowed to be terminated also hogged headlines not in distant past.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a Christian pastor, a resident of Trichy was accused of misbehaving with girls. The news did not find place in any mainstream newspaper or news channel. There are also adult survivors of abuse who had lived through the ordeal as a child and feel their lives are torn apart. In such cases, how can media be enablers in the lives of children especially in developing a favourable environment for them?

2 Childhood and rights of children

The French philosopher and social contract theorist Jean Jacques Rousseau has observed in *Emile*, ‘childhood has ways of seeing, thinking and feeling peculiar to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them’¹. Indeed, childhood is a phase of life that is so special to itself, so esoteric, that it seems almost unique to others. It not only has its own joys and sorrows but difficult and problematic to traverse. As Chris Jenks points out, “The ... concept of ‘childhood’ is far more than simply the state of being a child. Although it is something of which all adults have had direct experience, there is strong tendency to see children and childhood as different from ourselves: the child is familiar to us and yet strange, he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another”². No wonder that ‘the child is the father of the man’ as his adulthood experiences are shaped by what he confronts in childhood (Kumar and Multani, 2020). And against the nature vs. nurture debate in sociology, one cannot help but emphasise the importance of a favourable environment in a child’s physical, emotional and cognitive development. In developing a favourable environment, one cannot ignore the significant role of media, especially news media. Especially in an age of rapid globalisation, upsurge in information revolution and stiff competition in their individual domain, new media has to keep up the pace of journalistic quality to catch attention of audience, even more the child audience who are not discerning viewers. They need high TRPs, catchy headlines and sensationalised stories for gaining the cutting edge in this competitive market. More

often than not, journalists and reporters forget about the content and how to portray it. The whole repertoire of news is targeted to satiate the audience instantly and presented in half-baked manner and not as verbatim to them. This happens both in television and print media. Media requires to be more responsible when reporting about children and their issues. They should be aware of their role in raising public consciousness on various issues on children, i.e., their rights, their development, their lives especially their abuse.

3 Who are children and what are their rights?

The UN Convention on child rights 1989 CRC defines a child as any human who has not reached the age of 18 years. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children that was ratified by India in 1992 – all children are born with fundamental rights. These are – right to survival (to life, health, nutrition, name, nationality); right to development (to education, care, leisure, recreation and cultural activities); right to protection (from exploitation, abuse and neglect); right to participation (to expression, information, thought, religion) and a basic right to fulfil these rights. However, the rights of children have been violated innumerable times and their needs neglected.

4 The UNCRC and protection from abuse

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child came to force in 1990 and was ratified by almost all states in the world. Many campaigns are based on UNCRC and it sets the agenda for child rights everywhere. The UNCRC defines child rights just like adult rights but these rights are implemented by adults. Therefore, in practice these rights are conditioned. Since children essentially lack power to implement them on their own, it is the responsibility of states to ensure that they are looked after. Though UNCRC gives children the right access to media, it can be restricted by the state. The UNCRC, significantly states children's right to get protection from violence by the state. In 1990, the United Nations adopted the Riyadh Guidelines which place a social responsibility on the media towards the young people, especially in relation to pornography, drugs and violence. Since, India is a signatory to UNCRC, it should have been cautious about protecting its children especially Indian news media should have been empathetic in reporting child abuse.

5 What is child abuse and news media's role in its representation in India

Maria Montessori said, "No social problem is as universal as the oppression of the child. No slave was ever so much the property of his master as the child is of his parent. Never were the rights of man ever so disregarded as in the case of the child".³

5.1 Defining child abuse

Child abuse refers to any action or failure to act, that violates the rights of the child and endangers his or her optimum health, survival and development. Child abuse or maltreatment encompasses all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual

abuse, neglect or negligent treatment and commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Child abuse has been taking place since time immemorial and also not a new phenomenon in India. In this country there has been child abuse for a long time and children face a perpetual state of shock and disbelief because many a times this happens within the four walls of their homes. More often than not they are unable to speak out to their parents as immediate family members are involved and therefore the trust factor does not work. These children grow up as maladaptive adults who carry scary memories throughout their lives. Moreover, since Indian families are not comfortable talking about sex with their children, these abused children face the crisis about whom to confide. Abuse has a profound effect on the mindset of a child. It leaves a child worried, stressed and traumatised. Along with physical trauma due to injury, it involves emotional trauma as well. The child faces guilt and shame and is unable to overcome the trauma if mistreated. Often the news media keep on flashing the names and identities of the victim-survivors and parade them for questioning. Their photographs are all over the newspapers and media channels and this puts media ethics in question. The child gets stigmatised for entire life and petrified of societal pressures.

6 News media and its role

Media has the power to direct focus and determine the contours of popular discourse. Irresponsible reporting can lead to distress, reprisals, negative publicity and child victimisation. Media persons have to be very careful about what they publish and how they publish it. Informed, sensitive, and professional journalism is a key element in any media strategy. Media professionals should be sensitive while reporting child abuse and think about the circumstances while reporting and the repercussions of the reports that might scar the child for his/her life. They should be trained properly to ensure children's safety, privacy, security and welfare. The news media professionals should remember they have an unheard audience in the children themselves. Nowadays, children are exposed to media at a very early age. They are bombarded with information and they find it difficult to pick and choose.

Especially in the recent COVID-19 pandemic, children were locked up in homes and their hours of television watching increased manifold. Therefore, they were also audience watching sensationalised news. Media professionals who are motivated to present news in a proper way are committed to clear set of ethics.

7 Kathua rape case

In India, reporters have crossed the line of ethical reporting a number of times. For instance, we can refer to the reporting of the Kathua rape case of an eight-year-old girl in Jammu in 2018. There was peddling of misinformation on television and print media. An article appeared in Jagran newspaper's various editions authored by Advesh Chauhan of Jammu who claimed the eight-year-old girl from Kathua was not raped. To establish his case, the author cited two post-mortem reports that allegedly mentioned the injuries and not the sexual assault. The report argued that there could be reasons for the victim's

injuries for instance – the ruptured hymen was because the nomad girl could be engaged in activities like cycling, swimming, horse riding, etc. and scratches on the thigh could be as a result of a fall. The news story was pulled down and again revived in a matter of 24 hours. The newspaper did not issue an apology for its reportage. Sushil Pandit's deceitful column 'Anatomy of a Concoction' was published in the Sunday Guardian on 14th April, 2018. It also claimed that the eight-year-old girl was not raped. Madhav Nalapat, the editorial director of The Sunday Guardian justified the column's deceit by saying, "Sushil Pandit has the right to pen literature". Zee News also concocted a story that the eight-year-old girl was not raped.

The high court of Delhi on 13th April had taken suo motu cognisance of news reporting on the gangrape and murder of an eight-year-old in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua. It issued notices to various media houses, prohibiting them from disclosing the victim's address and identity in any manner. The high court observed that the manner in which the incident was reported was contrary to the provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act as well as The Penal Code. "The manner of reporting the incident is also against the public justice", the high court said. Section 23 of the POCSO Act puts blanket ban on disclosing the identity of the victim in cases of child sexual abuses. In the year 2012, the Government of India has passed the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012. This is the POCSO Act. The stated objectives of the Act are, to protect children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography, to establish special courts for trial of such offences and to give effects to Convention on the Rights of the Child. Apart from these usual objectives, one of the underdog objectives is to protect the identity and privacy of the victim. Subsection 2 of 228A of IPC permits the media house or any person authorised to make known the identity of the victim with prior permission of the next kin of the victim, whereas Section 23 of the POCSO Act puts blanket ban on disclosing the identity of the victim in cases of child sexual abuses.

In contravention to POCSO Act provisions, the reporters in Kathua rape case had disclosed the identity and names of the victim. Therefore, the high court questioned why action would not be taken against them.

Ms. Stuti N. Kacker, Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, stated that she was generally satisfied with the current state of journalism around child rights. She felt there was adherence to the ethical guidelines on reporting on children. However, she also felt that in the Kathua rape case, the court and the NCPCR had to step in to remind journalists that the dead children had the same rights as the ones alive and hence taking the name of the child, who was the victim of a gang-rape, was a violation.⁴

8 Aarushi Talwar murder case

Aarushi Talwar, aged 13, the only child of two dentist couple, Rajesh and Nupur Talwar, was found dead on her bed in the New Delhi suburb of Noida. The Indian media sensationalised the case to present it before the gossip-hungry Indian audience. Both the parents were charged with murder and conspiracy for killing their daughter. Later, they were acquitted.

However, with media blaming them for the death of their child, verdict was already given by the media trial. Justice of Supreme Court said, "Irretrievable justice has been

done to the couple, who lost their only child. This is unthinkable in a democracy”.⁵ No boundaries were left uncrossed, no efforts unspared to nail the Talwars guilty. The media left no stone unturned to turn people voyeurs!

The Talwars had become a punching bag for the media. The DNA said, “The couple varyingly through the media’s lens, were child murderers, adulterers, wife-swappers, cold-blooded sociopaths ... the CBI wasn’t far behind”. An opinion piece in *The Quint* also called for ending media trials. “Even before clinching evidence was in place, my fellow journalists pronounced the verdict on the basis of some leads, and so-called confidential information from what we call ‘impeccable sources’”, wrote Mayank Sharma. The Talwars, were pronounced guilty even *before the CBI court said so*.⁶

The Talwar case shows how media almost walked over the case and how a sex-scandal hungry media played detective. In an age where opinions are cheap and plentiful, it is easier to arrive at conclusions. The media was very happy to showcase views that were extreme. Many people watched television during those days when the case was in the courts and pointed out that Nupur Talwar does not fit their pre-set image of a devastated mother. Shobha De, one of the public figures was also circumspect. She said, “The conduct displayed by Mr and Mrs Talwar appears a bit too calculated, even cold blooded ... for a mother of a dead girl to project such steely determination during what must have been the most harrowing time of her life, seems a bit unnatural...their faces are stony, their eyes, strangely devoid of any emotions”.⁷ This is a fixated notion and influences the narrative in public minds.

9 Murder of Hansini in Chennai

Media is consumed continuously especially in an age of digital childhoods and hybrid education. Therefore, it needs to be responsible, sensitive and accurate while reporting sexual abuse of children. We do not need lurid details of the incident. Significantly, the language of the report is very important. Advocates of child well-being – from psychologists to survivors to reporters themselves – journalists need to re-think the way they cover harms facing the youngest members of society. They’re calling for changing not only the language and the details the journalists use but also the sort of stories they choose to talk about abuse and trauma. Better coverage can prevent CSA in future. What is important is to avoid casting victims as powerless, broken or naïve. Positive aspects of survivors, their struggles and how they navigate their situation should be highlighted.

In 2017, Chennai witnessed a shocking crime. Seven-year-old Hansini was sexually assaulted and murdered, allegedly by a man who lived in the same colony as her family. Dhasvanth, a neighbour, was accused of burning her body. He was granted bail later. When the news of the crime broke out, Hansini’s name and face were splashed across newspapers, digital news outlets and television news. Some even played the visuals of her charred body. The family ultimately relocated to their native village in Andhra Pradesh. Even as they tried to cope up with the tragedy, the media started mudslinging and started blaming the couple by saying they left the girl alone and went for a movie while the couple said they went to buy vegetables when their daughter was playing with the neighbours.

10 How does the media cover child sexual abuse

The callousness of the news media is widespread. The stiff competition amongst media houses and the rat race for being at the top of their jobs and TRPs, lead journalists and media persons to resort to unethical ways of reporting child sexual abuse and sensationalise the news presentation. The essence of presentation is lost. Sensationalism of news reporting erases the legal boundaries and unfortunately, it leads to re-victimisation of the child. The objective of the POCSO Act is easy to discern. It has been enacted in view of the social object of preventing victimisation or ostracism of the victim of a sexual offence. In *Shankar Kishanrao Khade vs. State of Maharashtra* (2013) the Honourable Supreme Court directed that, “Media personals, persons in charge of hotel, lodge, hospital, clubs, studios, photograph facilities have to duly comply with the provision of Section 20 of the Act 32 of 2012 and provide information to the S.J.P.U or local police. Media has to strictly comply of the section 23 of the Act as well”. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, a total of 14, 913 cases under the ‘Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act’ 2012 were registered during the year 2015. Latest statistics say that India recorded a total number of 149,404 instances of crimes against children in 2021 – a rise of 16% from previous year. Further, the report noted that the crime rate registered per lakh children population was 33.6 in 2021 compared to 28.9 in 2020.⁸

11 Lack of nuance

The media plays a major role in defining what is normal and what is deviant in society. It thus contributes to definitions of what is and what is not considered as abuse. Many people read about abuse in news media for the first time. So, it is irreparable damage done to them when they develop myths and stereotypes about child sexual abuse from media. Lack of nuance is especially found if we focus on the Pascal Mazurier case in April 2012. Suja Jones, the wife of Pascal Mazurier, the French diplomat accused him of raping their three-year-old daughter. While Pascal was acquitted by court, she drew enough flak of concocting a story and using her child as a weapon! When the case was still sub-judice in 2015, the news media got polarised and began to take sides instead of remaining neutral. Instead of analysing the condition of families of victim survivors, what ordeal they go through, how do they battle the demons in their lives after such incidents take place, the media goes on incriminating or favouring the parties in cases. Either it’s too harsh on survivors in a race to be on the top or too casual to investigate in finding out the real offenders. Kushi of Enfold says, “A detailed analysis of how victims are treated across cases – what the accused and victims go through in adjudication – this is an extremely complex, research driven type of journalism. If that is the type of journalism one is engaging in – fantastic. I rarely see intelligent reportage, except in some magazines sometimes, that goes beyond the story to educate”.⁹

12 Use of language and dramatisation

The news media in India is extremely crude in expressing the lascivious behaviour on children. More often than not, the attitude of the news media is dramatic and the focus is

on the perpetrator than on the victim. The media should be very careful about the phrases and terms they use while reporting child abuse. There are simplistic and inaccurate headlines and there is spread of panic amongst the readers and viewers. Arun Ram, Resident Editor (Chennai), Times of India said that there is no clarity of thought in reporting child abuse. He further added, "For instance, usage of the word paedophile is debatable"¹⁰, he states.

Paedophile literally translates to a 'child lover' but is used to describe a person who is sexually attracted to children. There have been arguments against labelling child sexual abusers as paedophiles since the word lets the former hide behind the garb of an 'illness'. There is also the question of using the term 'survivor' over victim. The former some feel masks the victimhood and suffering a raped or sexual assaulted child experience.

13 Biases in reporting

The news media which often caters to the middle and upper middle-class audience is oblivious of news value and content. Many times, mainstream news media and sometimes regional media too, report child abuse in a biased manner. Ranjitha Gunasekaran, Assistant Resident Editor (Telangana), The New Indian Express, said, "Ideally, we should treat all cases the same but we don't. And it's a whole different conversation. But within the realm of our biases, it is worth highlighting the system and processes".¹¹ However, despite the biases, the coverage of news is important. For instance, the media botched up investigation in the Aarushi murder case and the Talwars faced an incredibly tough time despite their resources and money. So, it is not a wild guess what would have happened to others with the same allegations from lower middle-class families. What matters is not always the economic status of families though. It's important to create awareness about POCSO. Sometimes the support of non-governmental organisations matters. Some are doing wonderful job. For instance, Enfold India was founded in November 2001 by Dr. Sangeeta Saxena and Dr. Shaibya Saldanha in Bangalore. They give personal safety education to children to prevent sexual abuse.

14 The need to protect survivors' identities

The news media inadvertently disclose the identity of the victims of child sexual abuse. This is in violation of section 23 of POCSO Act which puts blanket ban on disclosing the identity of the victim in cases of child sexual abuses. The provision reads

- 1 No person shall make any report or present comments on any child from any form of media from studio or photographic facilities without having complete and authentic information, which may have effect of lowering his/her reputation or infringing upon his/her privacy.
- 2 No reports in the media shall disclose, the identity of a child including his name, address, photograph, family details, school, neighbourhood or any other particulars which may lead to disclosure of identity of the child. The Special Court may permit such disclosure, if in its opinion such disclosure is in interest of the child.

- 3 The publisher or owner of the media or studio or photographic facilities shall be jointly and severally liable for the acts and omissions of his employee.
- 4 Any person who contravenes the provisions of Sub-section 1 and Sub-section 2 shall be liable to be punished with imprisonment of either description for a period which shall not be less than six months but which may extend to one year or with fine or with both.¹²

Also, under section 228A of the IPC mandates that identities of victims of sexual assault, including minors, be withheld in the media. BT Venkatesh, a former public prosecutor in the High Court and a senior advocate who handles POCSO cases, states that while the English media maintains some degree of sensitivity, the regional media often tends to sensationalise such cases. The news media is not discreet about disclosing the identities as well as details of his/her family.

The police also need to be sensitised. The police have to be very careful about sharing the identities of the victim-survivors with the media. They should remember that once, it's out in the public domain, it is open to and accessible to all. And in the age of social media, once its shared it will be there forever. In Hansini's case, her photo was flashed all over the newspapers. This was extremely hurtful for her family.

For prevention of child sexual abuse, a training programme was organised in Bhubaneswar in 2022. The speakers spoke about how child abuse is a major concern in India and roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders under Juvenile Justice Act and POCSO Act. Media representatives present in the programme, Gangadhar Rout and Bibekananda Das highlighted trauma after sexual abuse of children and its ramifications. They stressed that media should be very careful while making reports on such crimes including not publishing their names, photographs or reveal their identities in any other way. They mentioned about steps and methods to be used while assessing child, engaging support persons, social investigation report, prosecution methods, victim compensation and rehabilitation, appointment of prosecutor, role of special court and monitoring mechanism, etc. It was said that in many cases, despite awareness, child sexual abuse goes unreported due to various reasons including social stigma and parents' constraint, etc. Cases should be reported without fear or reservations.¹³

15 What is media ethics?

The specific ethical standards that media should follow are media ethics. Media ethics deal with the moral standards and ethical principles of all forms of media including print, broadcast, film, advertising and internet. Media ethics promotes values such as universal respect for life and rule of law and legality. Since media deals with public interest, it is obliged to cross-check authenticity of news and act as watchdog to the government. The core principles of ethical journalism focus on accuracy, accountability, objectivity, truth and fairness and independence.

Accuracy implies verified facts and figures that increase the credibility of the news. Verifying the news content from multiple sources serve good. Not only authentic news but accountable journalists make a nation proud. Responsible journalism calls for that. Objectivity is another ethical criterion which means to present all aspects of a story instead of bringing one-sided reports. A core ethical principle is truth and fairness. Truth is the way things are actually in the reality. The Oxford Concise Dictionary says, "the

state of being true or accurate or honest or sincere or loyal or accurately shaped or adjusted". Finding out the truth is time-consuming. So, does truth gets sacrifices at the altar of profit-making? Journalists should also work independently and not on behalf of some vested interests.

The media is called the Fourth Estate in a democracy because of its responsible role. At present, due to increasing competitiveness of various channels and news media outlets in print media too, commercialisation of the media industry, it is difficult to keep pace in a cut-throat competitive market. The compulsion to outshine others can weigh heavily on the ethical and moral responsibilities of the media. The traditional news media like newspapers, television and radio face stiff competition from social media and internet which have wider reach to the audience. Therefore, news media take resort to unfair means to cover news many times and they cross the ethical line. The news media often forget the dos and don'ts of ethics and violate the core principles of ethical journalism.

16 Trial by media

Trial by media is a popular phrase to describe the impact of the television and print media coverage on a case by creating widespread perception of guilt on part of accused regardless of any verdict in a court of law and hence the accused is guilty even prior to his trial. This might create public hysteria and make free and fair trial impossible. This means news media also misdirects investigation by meddling in the role of the judiciary. This also lowers the authority of courts.

In order to be in a race for being the cut above the rest, the news media do more harm than good. The news media violates the principle of limitation of harm. This means not divulging details of abuse of minor children, crime victims or withholding names of persons that might harm the investigation of the case. The Aarushi murder case is an instance where news media went berserk in reporting the incident and the manner and grammar of the coverage was obnoxious. Without corroborating facts, the news media pronounced the Talwars guilty who were later acquitted. The images of the deceased and the accused were spoiled badly. With constant media hype and pressure, the Central Bureau of Investigation was forced to take help of the Supreme Court which passed a restraining order barring the media from any scandalous or sensational reporting on the case. Justice Altamas Kabir stated, "We are asking the press not to sensationalize something which affect reputations".¹⁴

17 Testimonies

17.1 Case study 1

The scars of childhood abuse are carried throughout life. That is the story of Purnima Govidarajulu, who grew up in Chennai before moving to Canada in 1986. She was abused by her cousin's husband regularly between the ages six and thirteen. She said, "I would wake up at night to find him sitting next to me in the dark. He would put his hands and mouth on my private parts". Although the more intrusive penetrative acts took place at night or while travelling during the holidays, the abuse took place during the day too. She continued, "Whenever he would find me alone, he would stick his fingers into my

panties. There would be fondling, groping”.¹⁵ One day she asked him to stop but that was much later. Since she came from a very conservative family, she said she had no idea of sex. She also struggled with self-hate, she said she felt dirty. Mostly, these abusers are repeat offenders.

17.2 Case study 2

An 18-year-old college student opened up to her parents about her struggle with childhood abuse as reported by Ambika Pandit, “.... I was four or five years old when I became a victim of sexual abuse. I did not understand what was happening to me then, but the impression the experience left on my subconscious mind started showing when I became a teenager. I suddenly found that I was averse to any kind of physical contact. If a friend or a relative comes forward to hug me or kiss me I literally stop breathing in fright. I simply withdraw telling them I don’t like it but the reality is that my childhood experience flashes before my eyes forcing me to react the way I do. The root of this problem lies in the abuse I faced over a period of time. I remember this neighbour who was then in his 20’s coming to my house to play with me when I just about four to five years old. My parents were very close to his parents. My father really liked their son who took advantage of their trust and abused me when no one was around.

It all started one day when he called me out to the verandah. I rushed out thinking he wanted to play with me. He held me very tightly and then pushed me on the dewaan (a couch) in the verandah and held my shoulders very tightly. He asked me to open my mouth. I was shocked at this unusual behaviour but followed his instructions. As soon as I opened my mouth, he put his mouth on mine and his tongue inside. I was horrified but he kept doing it. I don’t know how many minutes it was but it was a terrible feeling. After he stopped and let me off, I ran straight to the sink and started washing my mouth.

He returned to do this again and again. When I look back, I am unable to remember the exact period of time the abuse happened but one memory that returns to haunt me is of him kissing me forcibly and each time I am rushing to the sink to wash my mouth. His family moved out of the colony a year or so later and the abuse stopped.

I was so small that I did not know that this was abuse. I did not tell anyone about it because I did not know what to say, so I just endured it. The memory too faded. I even attended his wedding when I was about 12 years old. By then I had realised that he had abused me but like most other girls I chose to ignore it as a bad memory.

I did not know that what I was ignoring had affected my inner consciousness so deeply that it would affect my life in the years ahead. My teenage was spent battling the fear of being hugged or kissed by family and friends. I can hold hands, sit next to people but hugging is a tough thing for me”.¹⁶

The abused student said that the TOI survivor series helped her to get out of this trauma by narrating the story here, on this media platform. She said, “The TOI Survivor Series gave me the courage to speak up. Just this week I wrote a letter to my parents both of whom are working professionals. I wrote down my story and shared my struggle with them. Two days after receiving the letter, my parents came to me and spoke to me about it in a very mature way. They are very understanding and I am happy that I have finally shared my problems with them. My mother told me there are only two ways to deal with it one is forgiveness and the other is revenge. She has promised to walk the path that I will choose to help me heal.

I don't want to go to the police to report the abuse and am not seeking revenge. I want to forget all this and move on. I am seeking closure and therefore I tell my story here. I have broken my silence and I want others like me to also come out so that there is hope for closure and a new life away from abuse".¹⁷

17.3 Case study 3

The child sexual abuse is not only about the girlchild. It is as much difficult for a boy to speak up as a girl. The sense of shame is very strong for a boy too. A survivor of sexual abuse spoke up when he was 28 years old. He said he was first abused when he was seven years old. He was abused by a boy in his locality in Mumbai by an older boy.

The trauma changed his life altogether. As he said, "The abuse changed my life. The trauma impacted my speech and I started to speak very fast after the incident. I changed as a person as I started losing confidence in myself and a deep sense of fear got instilled in me.

This changed the way people perceived me. I became more vulnerable as people would consider me to be timid and thought they could bully me. I feel it was the timid personality that I acquired after the abuse that resulted in abuse the second time, as boys thought I was a soft target. I was in class 9 and in the middle of the class, when a classmate sitting next to me started abusing me...". He carried the incident within himself and he had to take the help of therapy.¹⁸

18 Quality of journalism on child abuse

P.N Vasanti, Director General of Centre for Media Studies, felt that the media did not always live up to its responsibility of addressing child rights. She felt not only the news media but also the entertainment wing of the Indian media was not treating children fairly. Certain studies and surveys proved that media focus was on violent crimes and reportage of voyeurism. Also, those who reported on children did not go up the career ladder compared to those who reported on politics and economic condition of the country. Media sources indicate that success would depend to a large extent on the specific partnerships that the media houses forge and credibility attached to overall media. The Deputy Editor of leading English language news channel stated, "For both print and TV, there needs to be a news peg – while no other editor would want to be quoted as stating this, the fact is that it is very difficult for media to move away from sensational incident-based reporting for fear of losing viewers. There is however a lot of scope to introduce trainings that focus on making such incident-based reporting more responsible and slightly more discursive".¹⁹ In all news media channels, there are no separate beat for children and mostly junior journalists are assigned jobs to cover reportage on children which are mostly incident driven and has a political spin. Editors ask reporters to focus on glamorous stories. Therefore, child rape or abuse stories are readily glamourised by the news media. One senior journalist stated, "The trigger for a media story is always an incident and a tragedy serves as a strong trigger point; the bigger the tragedy, the more popular the news item".²⁰

A survey was done on 720 hours of national news and Andhra Pradesh news media. Professor Zubair Meenai, Director of Jamia Milia Islamia's Early Childhood Development Research Centre was much less appreciative. He finds the current state of

journalism on children quite sensationalist, bending towards sexual exploitation or abuse more than developmental issues. Children are portrayed as victims with no agency, no voice, etc. Most reports are episodic and crisis-oriented giving too much focus on children state of abuse instead of working towards a solution centric reportage on the abused children and their families and how they cope with the abuse. The reports are often focused on exclusive details of abuse and flashy headlines.

There are hardly follow-ups and these do not match with the narratives of the families. When the story breaks there is a lot of hype but when the story dies down, there is no attention given to the scattered lives of the victims and their families.

19 Recent incidents of child abuse and death in Tiljala and Gajole in West Bengal and news media

Two incidents in West Bengal, one in Malda and the other in Kolkata point out how child sexual abuse and death again has come to the forefront of news media reporting. And instead of focusing on investigation of the incidents and the sorry plight of the families, news media is embroiled in focusing on the central-state fiasco between the State Child Rights Commission and NCPCR feud over the issue. There are flashy headlines by print and electronic media to make the incidents more acceptable and delectable to the audience.

Mostly the news media reports instead of being the vanguard of the survivor or victims' families, they create moral panic. The report headlines are instigating and inciting violence and very unsettling. For instance, in the Tiljala murder case of a seven-year-old child, one media report states, "Mob mayhem shuts down Tiljala after child's murder in Kolkata". The report talks about child sexual and physical abuse and that the child died a 'violent death'.²¹

Besides, instead of focusing on the crux of the matter, the news media is overhyped on stressing about the spat between the chairpersons of NCPCR and State Child Rights Commission. The news media is ready to apply the stranger danger theory while identifying culprits without even introspection. The observation of a stranger attacking the child diverts the attention from the fact that most times, the perpetrators are known to the victims. The news media is basically intrusive and voyeuristic. Child sexual abuse has been oversimplified, sensationalised and presented in a factually inaccurate manner. Their presentation is framed within the parameters set by dominant societal values and patriarchal norms.

In a news media presentation of the recent gangrape of a class 6 girl student in Gajole, Malda, West Bengal, a vernacular (Bengali) electronic news media channel is focusing on the rift between the State Child rights commission and NCPCR by flashing headlines like 'chairperson versus Chairperson' or like 'commission versus commission'. This kind of headlines obfuscates the whole investigation.

20 Conclusions

Reportage on child abuse whether it is sexual physical or mental, has reached a saturation point. The news media often forgets that it caters to a wide range of audience both in print and electronically who form opinions and make judgements based on this reportage.

There is a culture of silence on the real issues and hue and cry on other matters which do not help the victims' families and dead or diseased. There is scapegoating of victims and theories and stories are pedalled that do not stand the test of time. There is no respectful coverage of issues and almost all incidents become a matter of frivolous panel discussions. There is no idea of the harsh reality faced by those who are affected and the ordeal they go through. Most reports are repetitive and problem-centric. Journalists should be closer to reality and take cognisance of the immense power they wield over the common psyche. And with power comes responsibility. Dramatic representations of violent crimes do not make nuanced reporting. In a recent programme organised in Manipur by the department of psychiatry, JNIMS, the focus was on sensitisation of the media houses on child abuse reporting. Assistant Professor of the Psychiatry department of JNIMS said, "When reporting on sexual violence against children, ask yourself if the child victim and potential child victims benefit from the story and be aware of the possibility of vested interest".²²

Therefore, though there has been an explosion of interest in reporting child sexual abuse, there are lots of gaps between raising awareness and factual and neutral presentation of incidents that highlight the social evil of child abuse. In order to present issues sensitively, the news media itself should be sensitised to child abuse issues instead of super-specialising and over-focusing on an incident that looks agenda-driven and gawky.

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