

Childhood Sexual Abuse and Disability: A critical study of an invisibilized constituency in India

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This paper explores childhood sexual abuse as understood by disabled individuals from their particular locations. The paper reports on qualitative research with disabled adults identifying themselves as survivors/victims of childhood sexual abuse. In the Indian context, Childhood sexual abuse has been understood in a monolithic way, erasing all differences that exist among children from different social locations. The paper attempts to provide an alternative perspective by focusing on the specificities of the experiences of disabled persons. The textual sources examined in the paper investigate the concept of childhood, disability and sexuality and their interconnections, both in the Western and the Indian context. Discourses that construct children as passive and ignorant make it important to provide narratives which capture strategies of resistance within power structures which constrain choices. This paper makes an attempt to document and analyze the experiences of disabled individuals who have undergone childhood sexual abuse within the larger context of Indian laws, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which engage with the concept and reportage and which represent dominant views on Childhood sexual abuse and disabilities.

Keywords: Childhood; Disability; Child Sexual Abuse

Introduction

Childhood is often associated with images of innocence and play. It is looked at as a time of carefree fun *under the protection* of those older than them. There has been a transition to a discourse of rights within certain progressive circles, but it is not separate from the ideal of childhood as being pure and sheltered. This construction of childhood often misrepresents the material realities of most children. One such constituency is that of disabled children, whose experiences are completely disregarded and invisibilized in most mainstream discussions on childhood.

Closely linked to an understanding of childhood as one of innocence, is that of a lack of sexual agency. The discourse of innocence enforces asexuality as the defining feature of

children (Meyer, 2007). Children are thus conceptualized as people with few or no sexual desires or wants. Alongside this, a commonplace assumption is the widely accepted and propagated stereotype of disabled people as ‘asexual’ beings, both undesirable and without any desire of their own. In this paper, I will attempt to explore the intersection of these two dominant discourses on childhood and disability by engaging with the complicated and vexed arena of childhood sexual abuse of disabled individuals in the Indian context. Though it is possible to only speak of positive sexual choices, I believe it is important to note the manner in which conversations on coercive and negative sexual experiences often exclude disabled children.

The material I discuss here is restricted to the Indian context, though literature from Western countries has been taken into consideration to substantiate certain ideas. Another reason for the inclusion of findings from the Western context is that the contemporary urban Indian context is constituted by various agents of globalization which have had a direct influence on the conception of childhood in these areas. The major focus of the paper is to document and integrate the subjective experiences of disabled adults who identify themselves as survivor/victims of childhood sexual abuse with the presence and functioning of non-governmental organizations which work in the area of child sexual abuse as well as the legal reforms made in recent times regarding the same. The intention of this exercise is to understand these narratives in the context of the available resources and analyze whether they in any manner speak to the requirements and experiences of disabled persons.

Methodology

The motivation to conceptualize and write this paper arises from an academic as well as a personal investment in the subject of childhood sexual abuse. I identify as a queer, cis-woman who has undergone sexual abuse at the age of 4 for a period of 4 years, within my residential complex, the perpetrator being a close family friend. Aside from struggling with the memories of the incident and finally being introduced to the vocabulary of abuse in my adulthood, I have always had to negotiate the abuse alongside my queer identity. The causal link between my choice to be intimate with non-cis men and my abuse is one made far too often. This unique form of discrimination arising from the experience of abuse and identifying as queer, steered me towards other socio-political identities and the manner in which these identities shape diverse experiences of childhood sexual abuse.

I chose to focus on disabilities, when following my initial investigations, it dawned on me that most representations in the form of public service announcements, of children who undergo childhood sexual abuse, or who may be “at risk” of it, were those of cis-gender, seemingly non-disabled children within the upper-middle class familial or domestic space. This brought up the question of whether the materials produced by NGOs engaging with childhood sexual abuse as well as the provisions of the governmental legislation in any way

reflect the realities of the experiences of disabled children.

This paper attempts to understand various perspectives on the concepts of disability and childhood, as well as their connection to sexuality in the Western and the Indian contexts. As mentioned earlier, since the urban Indian realities are greatly influenced by an influx of western symbols, cultural references, material realities and policies, it is important to understand histories as well as the connections regarding these concepts in both spaces. This section is necessary to situate the findings of the paper.

Next, the paper throws light on the written literature put forth by a few of the NGOs which address childhood sexual abuse, and analyzes their engagement with disabled children. This is followed by an analysis of the various clauses of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) (2012), the only law in the Indian constitution which directly and exclusively engages with childhood sexual abuse to explore whether it is cognizant of the realities of disabled children. Finally, the paper turns to understanding the subjective narratives of two disabled adults who identify as having undergone childhood sexual abuse. The shift from having spoken about childhood to speaking to adult survivors does on one level point to my lack of resources to get in touch with and communicate with children undergoing abuse currently. But on another level, while conceptualizing the paper, I also thought that speaking to younger children who are currently negotiating sexual abuse may be extremely violent if not conducted in a sustained and graded manner. Thus, I chose to speak to two adult survivors who have come to terms with their experiences of abuse and are willing to share their experiences for the purpose of this research. These are individuals who have been conversing with me about childhood sexual abuse for a sustained period of time and wished to participate in this research. The interviews were conducted over the phone as well as via e-mail. The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. This paper does not attempt to provide representative perspectives in any manner, but rather aims to shed light on certain narratives and juxtapose them with the existent discourses, or lack thereof, on the lived realities of disabled children's lives. The text of the online conversations has not been altered and all the grammatical or spelling mistakes have been retained to lend authenticity to their point of view.

Childhood and disability: an overview

Though it is not possible to explore all the individual components within the complex concepts of childhood sexual abuse as well as disabilities within the scope provided by this paper, it is important to interrogate the meanings and values ascribed to both childhood and disabilities.

With respect to exploring the concept of childhood, studies in the Indian context point to the predominance of the Western understanding of childhood in the research as well as advocacy

done in the Indian context. Balagopalan (2011) speaks of how policy-driven research on childhood often assumes that the reason why things do not work out in the Non-west is because of the lack of good governance. In her article about the construction of a global or universal concept of childhood, Nieuwenhuys (1998) states how the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) is framed entirely around the western ideal of childhood as the normative standard. She explains how the definition of a child is portrayed as being any gender, individual below the age of 18, which in no way resonates with the realities of children in the Indian context. She also critiques the language of rights, which arises from the same quarters as the language of 'development' which has often meant destruction in many non-western contexts. Finally, she elaborates on how the convention sees non-domestic spaces as menacing, which restricts children to the domestic sphere, which in the context of India can be a highly exploitative household of an employee that a girl child often works for. Thus, it can be seen that Western conceptions of childhood, which often drive policy-related work, completely ignore the fact that there may exist multiple childhoods. This is especially true in the Indian context where children are located diversely on the basis of their caste, class, religion, gender and ability.

Next, I have chosen to review literature from the Western context which explores precisely this universalizing concept of childhood in order to understand how disabled children are excluded from this discourse of childhood and child sexual abuse. Kitzinger (1988) investigates the various images of childhood and proposes that childhood is seen as a time of play, of a desexualized and peaceful existence within the protective shelter provided by the family. Building on these thoughts, she states that childhood sexual abuse is hence looked at as the theft or violation of childhood. She argues that this seemingly organic link that is built between innocence and childhood, stigmatizes and excludes the 'knowing child'. Meyer (2007) states that childhood is to be understood as being constructed through three major discourses- those of evil, innocence and rights. Stressing the discourse of innocence, she points to how children are reproduced as having an essentially virtuous and innocent nature, in need of adult protection. She further makes a connection between morality and (a)sexuality by proposing that the modern conception of children as being distinct and separate from adults produces asexuality as the defining property of childhood. Thus, it can be seen that the image of childhood that is created through various discourses focus on childhood innocence and purity, which actively contributes towards the erasure of any positive expressions of sexuality by children. These images are also exclusionary towards many children who do not fall within certain categories of normative existence. This includes children who do not belong to stable and secure heteronormative family frameworks. It also includes disabled children, whose patterns of dependency and experiences of access and mobility are very different than those of able children.

O' Dell (2003), in her attempt to understand the narrative of childhood sexual abuse, speaks of how the concept of child is that of a *developing organism*. So, the child is constructed in the immature state, without any understanding of the power dynamics between the child and

the adult. She further states that in assuming the same story of harm and damage for all survivors of childhood sexual abuse, issues of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and culture are either simplified or completely erased. Though she locates her writing in the Western context, I believe her argument that a singular narrative of childhood sexual abuse can exclude many constituencies of children and their experiences is applicable to the Indian context.

Having dealt with the current mainstream understanding of childhood sexual abuse, it is important to shift the focus to the constituency of disabled persons and the manner in which persons belonging to this population are perceived and responded to by the mainstream. In particular, the naturalized association between disability and a lack of sexuality has to be addressed to understand the nuances of how disabled children are excluded from the discourses of childhood sexual abuse.

Before proceeding further, it is important to note what is broadly being understood by the term disability. Wendell (1996) elaborates on how the concept of disability has biological, social and experiential elements. Stressing the need to problematize the 'othering' of disabled persons, she challenges the supposed boundaries of disability and displays how illness and old age can result in disabilities or vice-versa. She also examines the important concept of individuals defining 'disability' themselves as various complications that arise whether one self-identifies, or not. Drawing on these discussions, in this paper I understand disabilities as a combination of social, political and biological realities, whereby self-identification is relevant with regard to the persons whose subjective experiences have been documented.

A variety of studies in the Indian context have attempted to understand the local or traditional constructions of disabilities as well as examined the intricate connections between disability and other identities, especially gender and sexuality. Staples (2011) states that Hindu mythology, along with western bio-medicine, produce a bias against disabled people in India. Addlakha (2008) observes that Hindu religion and mythology often attribute some form of deformity to the negative characters. She explains the connections between disability and gender by presenting case studies where women talk about how economic self reliance is of utmost importance when marriage seems improbable, while men express how social and self worth diminish if pushed to have to solicit assistance. Staples (2011), focusing on the construction of masculinity in the Indian context, critiques the simplistic notion of social construction of disability, by pointing to the importance of the materiality of the body. In his research, he observes that people with impairments which affect bodily movement, rather than form, require additional care, which challenges the notion that disability has only a passing relationship with the body.

Focusing on the relationship between disability and sexuality, Shildrick's (2009) arguments, though formulated from a Western context, are of utmost importance. A subject is someone with physical and mental autonomy, who is apparently separate and distinct from others.

Disability compromises control over one's own body and can be seen as an indication of interdependence and connectivity (Shildrick 2009). Thus, she proposes that mainstream society does not view disabled people as subjects to begin with. She further states that there exists pervasive anxiety about the sexuality of disabled people. In her view, contrary to popular belief, it is not disabled people who have insecurities concerning their sexuality, but rather the mainstream. This normative anxiety depends on repression for maintaining stability (ibid, 2009). Thus, it can be seen that the denial of disabled people's sexuality is related to the mainstream refusal to view disabled individuals as subjects because they do not fall within the framework(s) of personhood or subjecthood established to maintain stability or normalcy. Though this understanding of a whole and independent subject may have originated in the Western context, I believe globalization in urban India has definitely resulted in the adoption of this ideal.

Now I want to connect the erasures of the subjectivity of disabled individuals with that of children. Both constituencies are denied their right to sexual choices and are rampantly desexualized in the process. The discourse of innocence and purity that constructs the image of a child, obstructs children from accessing knowledge and resources in the same manner that disabled people are denied a right to articulate their sexuality. For disabled children, both the biases and manifestations of those ideologies combine to produce unique situations of difficulties.

The desexualization of disabled children leads to extreme parental anxiety, rather than actual communication on issues of sexuality. Disabled children are systematically denied basic information about sexual health and relationships which makes them extremely powerless (Smith et al. 2013). Children with disabilities are more at risk of sexual abuse, but less likely to receive protection from mainstream or specialist agencies (Brown, n.d.). Brown further states that visible disabilities can make certain children more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Disabled children are also more isolated from their peer groups and have difficulties in communication, which leads to them having issues of access to information. This additional risk exists less because of impairment than the contexts in which disabled children are placed because of structurally discriminatory practices and ideologies (Brown, n.d.). There are structures which perpetrate dependence as opposed to supporting more independence. This ideology, referred to as the 'culture of compliance', denies the right to say 'no' to everyday choices, and makes disabled children even less equipped to say 'no' (Smith et al. 2013). Though I am personally unsure about the strategy of putting a major part of the onus on children having to say 'no' to their abuse, whether disabled or not, it is important to note how disabled children cannot respond to situations of abuse in the same manner as other children because of structural exploitation they face due to their disability as well as age.

An extremely relevant reality of disabled children with respect to sexual abuse, is their immediate environment. Though the familial context is relevant and must be noted, children with disabilities are also at additional risk when they are separated from their families and

accommodated in settings where they have multiple caregivers, where they can be targeted because of their visible difference (Brown, n.d.). Thus, the normative images of childhood sexual abuse, where children are imagined as being in the heteronormative and upper class familial context, are very misleading, if one is attempting to understand the sites, agents and intensity of abuse faced by disabled children.

Having completed a partial overview of the various concepts this paper is addressing, I refuse to adhere to a single definition of childhood or disability. I believe that the Indian context is constituted of and shaped by diverse and multiple childhoods, but globalization has had a universalizing effect on the urban Indian as well as policy level understandings of childhood. With respect to disability, the material realities of bodies, whether disabled or otherwise, should be acknowledged while understanding disabilities from social, biological and experiential perspectives.

The following sections begin with an exploration of the textual and visual content disseminated by non-governmental organizations focusing on the issue of childhood sexual abuse and whether and to what extent the realities of disabled children are comprehended and represented. This is followed by an understanding of the basic laws in the Indian context and the manner in which they address the specific location of disabled children. Finally, the two narratives of disabled identified adults who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse will be presented and analyzed in juxtaposition with the contemporary constructions and images of child sexual abuse.

NGOs: Who are we looking at exactly?

It is important to analyze the ideological positions as well as material produced by non-governmental organizations engaging with the issue of childhood sexual abuse. These organizations are often viewed as representing the interests of the child, rather than any other powerful agent. While I have no authority to judge the work carried out by these organizations, the content of some of the written material put forth by them, merits interrogation, to understand what may be certain ramifications.

For the purpose of this paper, I have reviewed textual material in the form of a booklet of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) published by Arpan, a Mumbai based NGO working on childhood sexual abuse, the official website content of several organizations, as well as videos disseminated for the purpose of public awareness by a few of them. The intention of this exercise was to understand how certain discourses on the definition, process and prevention of childhood sexual abuse, which exclude disabled children from their purview, are perpetuated by the major agents working in the field. At the same time, I have tried to exercise enough caution in not just critiquing the lack of inclusion, but also acknowledging positive actions taken by a few of the NGOs through their materials.

Arpan has published a set of FAQs for the purpose of public awareness¹. The set of answers address issues related to the rampant, pervasive and commonplace nature of abuse. They highlight the needs for sexuality education and for a safe and trusting immediate environment. The FAQs take the usual path of dispelling myths and replacing them with facts which shift the blame from the victim to the perpetrator. The section on personal safety education is the one that concerns the theme of the paper the most. This section suggests various methods through which children can keep themselves safe. It categorizes children in different age groups, and provides age-appropriate guidelines for them to assess, prevent or report sexual abuse. Though the intensity and depth of dialogue may change across ages, what remains almost completely unchanging is asking children, when approached by perpetrators, to yell “NO” and run away. Though it is acknowledged that it is important to build a support system of adults for the child to seek help from, the strategy still focuses on the child taking the initial step against his/her/hir² abuser.

This extremely popular defense to childhood sexual abuse is problematic on several levels. Firstly, it is making multiple assumptions about the child, their socio-economic, familial context. Secondly, it makes the assumption that children will have the *ability* to yell and run from one place to another, completely excluding the possibility that the child may have a physical disability. Finally, as Kitzinger (1988) states, training children to be assertive while still operating within the child protection framework is confusing for the child, because abuse is not the only instance of their autonomy being intruded.

Secondly, the strategy of asking children to respond and retaliate with a “NO” and run or get away does not acknowledge the very real power differentials that exist between the child and the adult in question. Putting the onus on the child can make the child feel that they can be in control, when in fact the situation is far more riddled with power dynamics which act against the child (Kitzinger, 1988). This holds true, especially for disabled children, who are otherwise raised in a culture of compliance (Smith et al. 2013). But, the FAQ, while dealing with the section on personal safety education, also addresses the question of personal safety reaching out to children from lower income locations as well as disabled children. In the latter, there is a mention of the fact that disabled children are more vulnerable because of needing greater care by adults. It stresses on empowering support systems for disabled children. While describing the techniques employed by the organization, they mention how while engaging with deaf children, they use non-verbal techniques to convey their message or with children who use wheelchairs, they teach them different ways of getting help since it may not always be possible to get away from the unsafe situation. Thus, it can be seen that disabled children are not completely missing from the discourse of childhood sexual abuse, but they are still treated as an exception to the normative. The point may be further substantiated through the analysis of the websites.

I have reviewed the content on the websites of 2 important organizations engaging with childhood sexual abuse: Childline India Foundation and Tulir. Childline India, a nationwide

toll-free helpline meant for children who are facing difficulties of abuse of any nature, has an exhaustive website describing the framework of their interventions, the constituencies they deal with, as well as the various legislations related to children³. The website provides detailed information about the meaning of child rights and child protection (CRCP). It describes child protection as a framework through which the rights of a child can be attained, as it holds various agents of the society such as the government, police, school as well as civic society accountable. The website also mentions the category of vulnerable children as children at risk, which includes children with physical as well as mental disabilities. In the specific section on childhood sexual abuse, much like the FAQ published by Arpan, it attempts to dispel myths by replacing them with facts about the nature and extent of abuse faced by children. In an effort to communicate the fact that all children across various backgrounds face abuse, the point that certain children undergo uniquely difficult circumstances because of their identities often gets glossed over.

Tulir, unlike Childline India, is working solely with a focus on child sexual abuse⁴. The website has various sections on the role of the family, schools and community in combating sexual abuse, on personal safety education as well as replacing myths with fact. The 'myths versus facts' section, while also emphasizing that children across various strata of society are abused, make it a point to address the myth that disabled children are not abused because they are considered unattractive. Instead they state that there is a greater likelihood of disabled children getting abused. Even in their FAQ section, a question regarding the possibility of disabled children getting abused is addressed. The website also contains a section on personal safety education, which guides adults to let children know what is appropriate and what isn't. It also explains the details of safe and unsafe touch, but stresses the fact that the subjective experience of discomfort of the child is far more important than the intent of the adult in question. What can be observed is that though there definitely is engagement with disabled children, the larger discourse, especially one focusing on personal safety guidelines, focuses on a normative child who is not disabled. This can lead to eclipsing the needs of a disabled child with it getting lesser attention in the hierarchy of issues to be addressed. It also feeds into the argument that issues of any minority, whether they be numerical or on the basis of marginalization, are lesser important and can be dealt with after the majority is free of problems.

Finally, moving to visual public awareness tools, Childline India Foundation, a nationwide toll free phone helpline, which engages with children of all kinds, has produced a video for public awareness named 'Komal the Girl Child'⁵. The animated video begins with the description of Komal's life who clearly belongs to a middle class background and hails from a functional heteronormative family. The initial part of the video has all the tropes of innocence, playfulness and cheer associated with a happy childhood in it. The colour of her surroundings changes to grey as the abuser, her neighbor, comes into the picture. The abuse finally stops when the child confesses to her mother and she contacts Childline to deal with the abuser. The agency also sends a professional social worker to the school who speaks to

children about good touch and bad touch and the strategy of yelling and running away. The entire plot may not be actively discriminating against disabled children, but it completely ignores the existence of this constituency of children. The access that the said child has to public spaces, formal education and outdoor activities is difficult for disabled children. Similarly, the strategies suggested alienate disabled children and do not consider the realities of their context.

Another video disseminated by Arpan depicts a young girl playing a game of dumb charades with her brother, while their mother is reading and overlooking the game playfully⁶. While enacting various people from their immediate context, she ends up describing her abuser and the acts he performs while abusing her, much to her mother's immediate alarm. This too only speaks of an upper middle class child who lives within a secure home environment and is able bodied, though she is using the sign language to communicate the issue.

One video, slightly different from the previous two examples, was produced by a Mumbai based organization Sneha, which works against violence against women⁷. The video clearly illustrates a girl child in a lower to lower middle class household being abused by a man who lives or often visits her home. Her innocence and childhood is symbolized by a painting she is making, which falls out of her hands as the man proceeds to abuse her.

Though I in no way have covered all possible representations of childhood sexual abuse, I have selected a few efforts which have gained ground with a certain internet audience in the country. The attempt has been to show how certain media depictions of childhood sexual abuse constructs images of who that child in need of protection from child sexual abuse is, and that the child is almost always the normative able bodied person. I believe that these representations can be extremely alienating for disabled children and one needs to not only be inclusive in the sense of mentioning disability on rare occasions, but integrating it while conceptualizing interventions.

Legislation: Where does disability figure?

In the Indian context, there are several pieces of legislation which focus on children. For the purpose of this paper, I will be concentrating on The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) (2012). Before the law came into being, there was no law in the country which focused on sexual offences against children. The Ministry of Women and Child Development realizing the need for a specific law for sexual offences against children lead the struggle to formulate this act which finally came into being in 2012.⁸

Obviously, as I am not in a position to analyze the implementation of this law, my analysis is concerned rather with the provisions made in the Act. The purpose of this is to understand whether disabled children and their needs and their unique contexts are understood by the

Act. The Act divides sexual offences into the categories of Penetrative Sexual Assault, Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment and Using the Child for Pornographic Purposes. The first two categories also have a sub-division which considers the cases of Aggravated Penetrative Sexual Assault and Aggravated Sexual Assault. These sections consider situations of extreme violence against children. This understanding is based on both the identities as well as the contexts of the children. Sexual offences perpetrated by people in authority, such as the police or security officials, is included in this. To offer an instance of context, offences committed during the outbreak of communal violence is also counted as aggravated violence. The act also considers sexual offences against disabled people as aggravated forms of violence. Under Section 5, it states that anyone who takes advantage of a child's mental or physical disability is punishable for a term of no less than 10 years which may extend to imprisonment for life and shall also be liable to a fine (POCSO, 2012, ss.5). Similarly, under Section 9, aggravated sexual assault against disabled children is recognized and warrants a punishment for a term of 5 years which may extend to 7 years and is also liable to a fine (POCSO, 2012, ss.9). Secondly, though this may not be directly addressing disabilities, the act also recognizes the aggravated nature of sexual offences committed by people in positions of authority in remand homes, observation homes, protection homes or other places of custody or care. This particular clause is extremely important to disabled children as many of them often occupy spaces in care homes where they are dependent on caregivers to a much larger extent than non-disabled children.

Though these are examples of some very important nuances within the law, it also has certain drawbacks. Section 19 of the act states that any person who has an apprehension of an offence being committed under this Act is obligated to report it (POCSO, 2012, ss.19). If people fail to report, they are punishable under Section 21 to imprisonment for 6 months and are liable to a fine as well (POCSO, 2012, ss.21). Thus it can be seen that mandatory reporting is now expected of people who are aware of the incidences of the abuse. As explained by Pooja Taparia, the founder and chief executive of Arpan:

We haven't seen any increased reporting of cases after POCSO was passed. The sense we have got is that people are extremely wary of reporting cases, or even coming to service delivery agencies like ours because it is mandatory to report these crimes. Doctors refuse to examine children and school managements are unwilling to implement personal safety programmes. Even NGOs hesitate to bring cases to us. Hence, preventive work is getting affected⁹

It can be seen that mandatory reporting originates in the thought that the retributive justice system, a system which believes in State authorized punishment as the ultimate and the most effective option, should be the only option for victims of child sexual abuse. This puts the legal machinery in a position of tension with other organizations which are engaging in preventive programs with scattered groups of children and post-abuse work for individual

children and their mental health. Very importantly, mandatory reporting puts certain children who are already in situations of vulnerability and dependency under extreme pressure. They may believe that reporting is not the solution for their situation, but might still wish to confide in certain people or organizations, expecting it to remain confidential. This definitely applies to disabled children who have to depend on caregivers and institutions for their basic survival. To put the onus of reporting the case of abuse on people who come to know of it, for instance the people who work with organizations addressing child sexual abuse, who may be the only source of outlet for children, is a highly problematic clause. Hence, it can be seen that though POCSO is an extremely important step towards addressing the issue of child sexual abuse, the legal machinery needs to collaborate and cooperate with the other agents to provide the best possible support for victims of child sexual abuse.

The law also makes provisions under Section 39 (POCSO, 2012) for the Ministry of Women and Child Development to comprehensive model guidelines for the implementation of POCSO¹⁰. This document contains a chapter which spells out certain general principles for use by professionals and experts assisting the child at the pre-trial and trial stages. The chapter contains a section on children with special needs, which provides detailed instructions to the professionals who engage with disabled children who have undergone sexual abuse. It does not make the assumption that all disabled children need the same treatment, and distinguishes between various disabilities. It asks the professionals not to assume that all deaf children must be familiar with the sign language or that all blind children understand Braille. Rather, it asks them to consult people from the child's world and assess their preferences. It deals with the question of mental disabilities and elucidates on how some children may have issues with concepts of linear time and how it is important to link events with major activities or routines which are a part of the child's daily life. The section requests professionals to not homogenize all cognitive abilities. It asks them to be prepared to engage with a child who may be easily distracted and continue conversing in a clear and calm voice. It finally addresses the very important question of the disabled child's context of fearing losing their independence in case they "come out" with their story as they may have to enter a long term care facility or a hospital if their caretakers have assaulted them. Finally, the section states that though the disability may have made a person more vulnerable to abuse, it is important for the professional to focus on their experience and not only on their disability. Thus, it can be seen that these guidelines are not just providing lip- service to disabled children, but have considered this constituency as an important category within the larger population, which deserves patient and careful attention.

Having addressed the legal and non-governmental support systems and the location of disabled children in their ideology, provisions and strategies, I will proceed to explore the subjective narratives of disabled adults who identify as survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This section will attempt to understand what, if any, are the gaps in understandings of childhood sexual abuse by mainstream and special service providers and those of the disabled victim/survivor of childhood sexual abuse. While I am not suggesting that subjective

narratives are the ultimate source of accurate knowledge on any particular subject, nevertheless visibilizing certain experiences is important to understand details, realities and strategies which would go unnoticed otherwise.

Subjective Experiences: Stories rarely heard

Before proceeding to the narrative section of the paper, the processes of identifying and conducting the interviews discussed below needs to be elaborated. The people interviewed for the purpose of this paper belong to my larger personal circles and share certain political leanings with me.

The two people in conversation share certain aspects of their identity and background, but differ from each other as well. Anisha is a 22 year old woman with cerebral palsy. She is a wheelchair user. She belongs to the city of Kochi in the state of Kerala and was raised in Dubai. Anisha describes the abuse she experienced as a ‘one time incident’ which occurred in her early teens within her household. James, a 24 year old man who is visually disabled, also hails from the state of Kerala. He experienced abuse for 4 months or so at the age of 16 in his residential school. Though both of them belong to upper-middle class backgrounds and are educated in social sciences, the nature, site and responses to the experience of abuse are different and need separate attention. Both of them talked about certain common themes regarding experiences of living with a disability, expressions of sexuality and lack of representations.

Here I acknowledge that both the respondents, though belonging to diverse categories of disability, are still within the purview of physical disabilities. I have not had the opportunity to meet and communicate with persons with intellectual disabilities, which limits the scope of the following discussion..

To begin with, both the respondents had difficulty comprehending the experiences as sexual abuse. This can be seen as being connected to both the generic lack of sexuality education for younger persons and otherwise in the Indian context as well as the specific manner in which sexuality of disabled people, especially children, is completely erased.

Anisha elaborated that a male friend of a female domestic worker who worked at her house came over to their place when she was alone and abused her. This male friend of the domestic worker, whom she was in an intimate sexual relationship with, was also a colleague of Anisha’s father, which makes it necessary for us to acknowledge the power differentials between them on the basis of gender and class. When asked how and when she understood her experiences, Anisha said:

I never see myself as someone who could be as easily victims to assaults or physical

abuse because I never saw any representations of someone like me as a sexual being, keep getting messages that treated me as infantilized

James, unlike Anisha, was living in a residential school. He stated that he was abused by his female warden when in his 10th grade. He elucidates:

I did not articulate it as abuse. What went through my mind was that this was an act that I did not want to do. I started to talk to her as a 'didi' (older sister) and this is not what I expect from her. I took it as someone making me something I did not want to do. I knew the sexual nature of the act...I only thought rape was something; I did not think that these acts are abusive. For me it was problematic because she had a lot of power and she was compelling me to do something using it.

What can be observed is a lack of vocabulary to understand sexual abuse. This can be seen as being connected to the absence of discourses on child sexuality in general, but more specifically to a lack of conversation on any sexual matters regarding disabled children or even adults. While Anisha points to the more specific lack of representations of sexuality of the disabled, James speaks of how sexual violation understood only as rape, led him to not perceive his experiences as ones of sexual abuse. Here, there also exists a stereotype of men not being seen as victims of sexual abuse in operation. Thus, one notices a generic need to expand our understanding of sexual beings, sexual choices as well as kinds of sexual violations.

Anisha, while continuing her account of the abuse, said that she had a close relationship with the domestic worker, which included conversations about sex and sexuality. Which is why, while growing up, she blamed herself for the incidence of abuse. As she says:

I had the impression that the reason the abuser was invited because the woman trying to do me a favour, out of sympathy or something

James analyzes his experiences as follows:

When I think of it retrospectively, I had to undergo it because I was disabled. Secondly, the fact was this- I don't know how many hostels will give a female warden if it was not for disabled people

Thus, it can be seen that both the respondents made the connection between disability and their experience of sexual abuse. There also seems to be a connection between gender and employment opportunities, as the fact that a female warden being chosen for a hostel for persons with disabilities instead of a man indicates a lower value placed on people of marginalized genders in the job market in the Indian context. As put forth in the earlier sections, one can observe the rampant desexualization of disabled persons and a lack of

widespread representation of positive sexual choices made by disabled persons in the mainstream media or even organizations specifically addressing childhood sexual abuse. The respondents also commented on how sexual experiences of abuse can often be confusing for a child or a teenager.

James recalls one particular instance as follows:

One day she comes and she attempted to give me a blow job. For 2 seconds I thought it was good and then I stopped it. That is when I thought I should stop it and then resisted

Anisha, narrating her perception of certain aspects of the incident, says:

Yes I protested. And also something very confusing happened at that time. I felt sexually validated by a male for the first time. And I found myself liking it. Even if it was for a brief moment before the disgust came in and I protested. That really put me in a mental mess later about the whole incident

Childhood sexual abuse is often the interaction of a sexual nature for many children. Despite the abuse of power and consent, the sexual act can be enjoyable for the child. But the complete absence of conversation on sexual choices by children and the hyper-visibility of the singular narrative of childhood sexual abuse as being destructive and inappropriate can make children feel guilty and alienated if they perceived the experience as anything but singularly negative. This can be especially confusing for disabled children who are anyway considered to be outside the ambit of sexual beings. There is a dire need for alternative discourses and material practices on understanding sexual expressions of children and adolescents. There is a need for spaces where disabled or any other marginalized child can understand and articulate both their sexual desires and instances of abuse. For any of this to materialize, various systematic changes need to be made in the conceptualization and further representation of childhood sexual abuse.

The narratives also pointed in the direction of strategies that may be adopted by disabled persons in situations of abuse. James spoke of instances of individual resistance, when he slapped the abuser during one of her attempts to harass him. He also stated how he let a teacher at his school know about the instances. But the final strategy he adopted was one of confiding in his mother who trusted him and, along with her, reporting the abuser to the school authorities. He acknowledges the fact that his reputation as an intelligent and obedient child helped him put forth his case.

Anisha explains how she responded to the abuse:

The guy came. I was in d [sic] living room sitting on the sofa. He sat next to me and got talking. He was too close and I felt already uncomfortable...she(Female domestic worker) stood near me smiling and chipping in. After asking something about my studies and all, the conversation went to my disability. He started rubbing my thighs and asking about what happened, does it hurt blah blah...she went to the kitchen. He lifted my skirt to 'see' how my leg was and kept rubbing my thighs. I pulled it down and started showing I'm uneasy. I think I said something loudly...he stopped. Then I grabbed the phone that was nearby and started going hysterical saying I'll call my dad. They tried to assure and calm me but I freaked out and started saying 'uncle just go'...I threatened to call. He could've grabbed it but it was time for my brother to return....so she told him to go...they went to the kitchen, after a while he left

With respect to James's experience, it can be noted how the combination of a strong familial network as well as cultural and social capital can help one combat situations of sexual abuse. Anisha, on the other hand, presents an individual or isolated response from her location as a disabled child.

The general popular prevention programmes usually suggest children to scream and run away. They ask the children to physically remove themselves from the abusive context and report to a trustworthy adult. But this is a highly narrow and immediate understanding of responding to the situation of abuse. This strategy is also alienating to many disabled children who will be unable to perform its various stages.

Thus, it becomes very important to document and disseminate the above mentioned narratives of resistance. These alternatives to the mainstream need to be visibilized and circulated, not only to disabled children, but to everyone, to make people aware of the diversity of contexts and responses possible to instances of abuse. Building awareness programmes and strategies, which are not only inclusive in nature, but - given the role of class/caste, family ties and communicative capacities in constituting both possibilities of disclosure and credibility - a focus on the realities of marginalized children of different kinds will be an extremely important step towards reaching out to previously ignored constituencies of children. Simultaneous to the amends in the conceptualization of childhood sexual abuse, there need to be changes in the media representations of the phenomenon. More visual tools such as videos used by organizations should have narratives with disabled or otherwise marginalized protagonists.

Without genuine exposure to diversity, the picture of childhood sexual abuse and its prevention will be skewed and limited to a very small constituency of the society. This will only further alienate disabled children out of the discourse as well as interventions on child sexual abuse.

Conclusion and discussion

The paper attempts to explore the manner in which disabled people are understood in the discourse around childhood sexual abuse in the context of India. It can be observed that though there is mention of disabled children in legal documents as well as educational and awareness material published by non-governmental organizations, there need to be more attempts at emphasizing the experiences of various marginalized children. Through the review of literature, short films meant for public awareness, and legal documents, it can be seen that though disabled children are included in the discourse around childhood sexual abuse, the general representations as well as interventions on the issue are centered around non-disabled children from upper to upper middle class and hetero-normative families. Thus, there need to be attempts at shifting this focus from generic interventions to highlight or prioritize the specific needs, concerns and experiences of marginalized children to effectively represent and engage with the issue of childhood sexual abuse. And children with disabilities would be a very important constituency in the process.

Notes

1. Arpan [n.d]. *Understanding Child Sexual Abuse: Frequently Asked Questions*. The document was accessed as a pamphlet distributed at an event. More information on Arpan: <http://arpan.org.in/> >
2. Hir is a gender neutral pronoun used here to denote children who may choose to identify outside the binary of male and female.
3. Childline India Foundation. <http://www.childlineindia.org.in>
4. Tulir: Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse. <http://www.tulir.org/>
5. 2013. *Komal- A film on Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vky0xqtW6W8>
6. 2009. *Arpan- against Child Sexual Abuse* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfmo8kjes8>
7. 2011. *Social Awareness Film: Child Sexual Abuse in Family* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wirOQm0MqnQ>
8. POCSO Act- Providing Child-Friendly Judicial Processes. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/efeatures.aspx?relid=86150>
9. Stories of Change, Child Sexual Abuse. <http://www.satyamevjayate.in/child-sexual-abuse/reviewing-pocso.aspx>
10. Model Guideline under Section 39. <http://wcd.nic.in/act/POCSO%20-%20Model%20Guidelines.pdf>

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