



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE WITHIN FAMILIES IN INDIA: A DISTURBING REALITY

Ms Priya V

Assistant Professor, Dr M.V.Shetty College Of Nursing, Mangaluru, Karnataka.

Anu Mathew

Assistant Professor, Dr M.V.Shetty College Of Nursing, Mangaluru, Karnataka

ABSTRACT Child sexual abuse (CSA) within families remains one of the most disturbing yet underreported crimes in India. This type of abuse violates not only a child's body but also their trust in those meant to protect them. The perpetrator, often a parent, sibling, uncle, cousin, or another relative, exploits the child's dependence and the family's silence, resulting in trauma that can last a lifetime. Despite the enactment of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and various awareness initiatives, familial CSA remains inadequately addressed due to deep-rooted social taboos, stigma, and fear of reputational damage. This review explores the prevalence, patterns, and psychological impact of intra-familial child sexual abuse in India. It examines recent real world cases, including incidents from Kerala, Punjab, and Rajasthan, to illustrate the scale and brutality of these crimes. It analyses systemic weaknesses, including gaps in detection, underreporting, poor legal enforcement, and societal neglect. The article also presents recommendations for systemic reform, educational interventions, community awareness, and survivor support mechanisms to combat this horrific crime. 1

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive and deeply traumatic form of child maltreatment. When it happens within the confines of a family, it becomes particularly horrifying. India, a country where family is often idealized as a sanctum of protection and morality, rarely acknowledges the possibility of such transgressions within its households. But data and distressing incidents suggest otherwise. Family members are often in positions of power, trust, and access, making children vulnerable to abuse that is both physical and emotional. Children may not even be aware that what they are experiencing is abuse. They may be threatened into silence, and when they do try to speak out, they are often not believed or, worse, blamed. Intra-familial CSA includes abuse by fathers, mothers, siblings, uncles, cousins, and even grandparents. It is often repeated and continues over extended periods. The close proximity, lack of supervision, and protective shield afforded by family structures make detection difficult. Victims may suppress the trauma, leading to long-term psychological, emotional, and social consequences. This article aims to shed light on the prevalence and recent cases of intra-familial CSA in India, the socio-legal environment surrounding it, and the reforms needed to prevent and address such abuse effectively.¹

Prevalence and Underreporting

One of the most challenging aspects of combating intra-familial CSA in India is the lack of reliable data. Much of the abuse goes unreported due to fear, shame, and familial loyalty.

A study conducted at a tertiary care hospital in Southern India between 2019 and 2022 analysed 231 reported cases of CSA. Of these, 115 (49.8%) involved children under 18 years, with 89.6% of perpetrators known to the victims. Penetrative abuse was reported in 58.3% of cases, and revictimization occurred in 31% of instances.³

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 38,444 cases of child rape in 2022, though experts agree the actual number is likely much higher due to underreporting. In many regions, law enforcement agencies still hesitate to register FIRs in CSA cases, especially when the accused is a close relative. Social norms further suppress reporting. Families often prioritize honour over justice, choosing silence over shame. In rural areas, children's testimonies are frequently dismissed or negotiated into compromise, especially when the accused is the breadwinner. There's also a significant gap in data collection. Most statistics do not disaggregate abuse by the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim, which conceals the extent of familial abuse.⁴

Recent Case Studies

3.1 Kerala (May 2025)

A four-year-old girl was reported missing in Kochi and later found dead in the Chalakudy River. Initially believed to be a case of accidental drowning, an autopsy revealed she had been raped. Her mother later confessed to throwing the child into the river. The uncle admitted to prolonged sexual abuse and was arrested under the POCSO Act.¹¹

3.2 Malappuram, Kerala (July 2023)

A 14-year-old girl, five months pregnant, was found to have been sexually assaulted by her own brother and cousin. The abuse took place in her home and nearby locations. The case came to light when she was brought to a hospital with pregnancy complications. Despite the horror of the case, local residents revealed that the girl had attempted to report the abuse earlier, but her family silenced her.¹³

3.3 Dausa, Rajasthan (October 2024)

A father allegedly tied up and raped his teenage daughter while the rest of the family was away. The case was reported by the girl's mother. Neighbours later testified that the girl had become unusually withdrawn, but nobody suspected the father.¹¹

3.4 Kharar, Punjab (March 2025)

A three-year-old girl was raped by her mother's boyfriend with the mother's knowledge and help. The mother filmed the abuse and saved it on her phone. The father found the video and reported it to the police. This case is particularly chilling due to the mother's involvement.

3.5 Andhra Pradesh (2019)

A man repeatedly raped his 13-year-old daughter over two years. The girl eventually confided in her school counsellor. Her mother had suspected abuse but chose not to act, fearing financial insecurity. These cases show how diverse and horrifying intra-familial CSA can be. They cut across states, religions, and socio-economic classes, proving that this crime knows no boundaries.

Psychological and Social Impact

- ❖ Children who experience sexual abuse within their families often suffer long-term psychological damage:
- ❖ Mental Health: High rates of PTSD, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm.
- ❖ Cognitive and Emotional Development: Impaired learning abilities, emotional dysregulation, sleep disorders.
- ❖ Behavioural Issues: Aggression, isolation, withdrawal from social interaction.
- ❖ Trust Issues: Difficulty forming relationships, especially romantic or intimate ones.
- ❖ Shame and Guilt: Many survivors internalize guilt, especially when family members blame them.
- ❖ Family-based abuse is uniquely damaging because the child is betrayed by those expected to protect them. It often continues for years without intervention, deepening the trauma.

Legal Framework and Challenges

India has recognized the urgent need to protect children from sexual abuse through the enactment of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. This legislation represents a landmark step in addressing child sexual abuse (CSA) comprehensively by criminalizing all forms of sexual offenses against children and mandating child-sensitive mechanisms for reporting, investigation, and trial.

POCSO Act (2012): Key Provisions

- **Comprehensive Criminalization:** The Act covers penetrative and non-penetrative sexual assault, sexual harassment, and exploitation, including using children for pornography. It explicitly recognizes the child's right to be protected from all forms of sexual abuse.
- **Child-Friendly Procedures:** POCSO mandates that the child's testimony be recorded in a child-friendly environment by specially trained police officers and magistrates to minimize trauma. It requires that trials be conducted in camera (private) and that the child not be exposed unnecessarily to the accused.
- **Mandatory Reporting:** Professionals such as teachers, doctors, and social workers are legally obligated to report suspected cases of abuse. Failure to report can result in punishment under the Act, helping break the cycle of silence.
- **Special Courts:** The Act stipulates the establishment of Special Courts for the speedy trial of CSA cases to reduce delays and minimize the child's exposure to repeated court proceedings.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite these strong legal provisions, significant challenges impede effective enforcement and justice delivery:

- **Delayed Justice:** Court trials under POCSO often take several years to conclude due to backlogs, procedural delays, and a lack of adequate Special Courts. Such delays retraumatize victims and undermine their confidence in the legal system.
- **Low Conviction Rates:** According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, conviction rates in CSA cases can be as low as 30% in certain states. Factors contributing to acquittals include poor evidence collection, lack of witness protection, and inadequate legal representation for the child.
- **Lack of Training and Sensitivity:** Police officers, healthcare workers, and judicial officials frequently lack proper training in handling CSA cases sensitively. This can lead to re-victimization during investigation, improper recording of statements, and failure to follow child-friendly protocols, discouraging reporting and participation.
- **Victim Blaming and Social Stigma:** Cultural taboos and patriarchal attitudes often result in families and even institutions blaming the child for the abuse or pressuring them to remain silent. This societal stigma acts as a significant deterrent to reporting abuse and pursuing legal action.
- **Underreporting:** Many cases remain unreported due to fear of social ostracization, distrust in law enforcement, and economic dependence on the accused family members.

Recommendations and Solutions

Combating child sexual abuse (CSA) within families requires an integrated approach that addresses prevention, early detection, legal justice, and long-term rehabilitation. Each stakeholder, schools, families, community leaders, legal systems, and policymakers, has a critical role to play in eradicating this deeply rooted issue.

1. Community and School-Based Education

One of the most effective ways to prevent CSA is through early education and awareness:

- **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE):** CSE should be integrated into school curricula from an early age, teaching children about bodily autonomy, consent, personal boundaries, and the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch.
- **Age-appropriate Modules:** Educational content should be age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and delivered in local languages. It must also emphasize that no one, even family members, has the right to touch a child in a way that makes them uncomfortable.
- **Empowering Teachers and Counsellors:** Teachers should be trained to recognize behavioural changes that may indicate abuse and to respond sensitively when a child discloses abuse.
- **Parent Involvement:** Schools should regularly engage parents through workshops and seminars to educate them about CSA, signs of abuse, and how to respond if their child confides in them.

2. Public Awareness Campaigns

To fight CSA, society must first break the silence surrounding it:

- **Media Engagement:** Use television, radio, cinema, and social media to normalize conversations about child protection. Campaigns should de-stigmatize reporting and emphasize that abuse can happen in any home, to any child.
- **Helplines and Support Services:** Promote awareness of national helplines such as CHILDLINE 1098, mental health hotlines, and online reporting portals. These services must be widely advertised, even in rural and low-literacy regions.

- **Community Outreach:** Local leaders, religious heads, and health workers should be mobilized to talk about CSA, particularly in conservative or closed communities. Community vigilance committees can act as watchdogs in neighbourhoods.

3. Professional Training

CSA cases often go undetected or are mishandled due to inadequate training of professionals:

- **Capacity Building:** Provide mandatory sensitization and training for police officers, teachers, healthcare providers, social workers, and judiciary members on how to handle CSA disclosures.
- **Child-Friendly Procedures:** Ensure that children are interviewed in a safe, private, and non-intimidating environment. Professionals must avoid harsh questioning, leading statements, or repeated interviews that retraumatize the child.
- **Medical and Forensic Training:** Healthcare workers should be trained to perform forensic exams with sensitivity and skill, following POCSO guidelines. Improper evidence collection often leads to acquittals.

4. Mental Health Support

CSA survivors require immediate and sustained psychological care:

- **Free Counseling Services:** Every district should have government-sponsored mental health facilities for child survivors, staffed with child psychologists and trauma counsellors.
- **Rehabilitation Programs:** Survivors often need long-term care, including psychotherapy, special education, and vocational training, especially if the abuse disrupts their education or home life.
- **Family Counseling:** Intra-familial CSA often affects the entire family unit. Non-offending family members, especially mothers, should receive counseling to deal with guilt, grief, and how to support the child.
- **Trauma-Informed Systems:** Schools and foster care systems should adopt trauma-informed policies that protect survivors from further harm or re-victimization.

5. Legal Reform

Despite the POCSO Act, justice remains elusive for many CSA victims due to systemic flaws:

- **Fast-track Courts:** CSA cases must be prioritized in courts. Special fast-track courts with child-friendly environments should be established in every district to avoid years-long trials.
- **Conviction Monitoring:** Convicted sex offenders, especially those with a history of incest or familial abuse, must be monitored post-release through mandatory check-ins and counseling, possibly under a national registry.
- **Strengthen Witness Protection:** Children and their families often face threats or coercion to withdraw cases. Providing legal aid, protection schemes, and relocation assistance can encourage more families to come forward.
- **Accountability of Public Servants:** Police officers and healthcare workers who delay or mishandle cases should face administrative penalties, ensuring accountability at every level.

6. Family Interventions

Since most CSAs in India happen within the home, interventions at the family level are vital:

- **Address Root Causes:** Programs aimed at addressing contributing factors like domestic violence, alcoholism, poverty, and toxic patriarchy are essential. Many abusers have themselves been victims of violence or neglect.
- **Support for Non-offending Parents:** Often, the mother or another guardian is aware but fears financial or social consequences if the abuser is exposed. Providing financial aid, legal support, and alternative housing can empower them to act.
- **Community Parenting Workshops:** Encourage families to adopt positive, respectful parenting practices. Workshops can emphasize child development, emotional needs, and gender sensitivity.
- **Reporting Without Retaliation:** Families should be educated that shielding abusers, even if they are relatives, is a punishable offense. The state must ensure that those who report abuse are protected from social and legal retaliation.

DISCUSSION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) within family settings is a deeply disturbing and complex issue that reflects not only individual trauma but also broader societal failures. The review of recent cases, legal frameworks, and challenges underscores the urgent need for a multi-dimensional approach to address the problem effectively.

Firstly, the familial context of abuse complicates disclosure and intervention. Unlike abuse by strangers, intra-familial CSA involves

trusted relatives, making it emotionally and socially difficult for the child and non-offending family members to come forward. The fear of breaking family bonds, social ostracization, and economic dependence often silences victims. This silence perpetuates abuse and delays justice, highlighting a critical gap between legal protections and societal realities.

Secondly, while the POCSO Act has been a progressive step, the low conviction rates and procedural delays reflect systemic weaknesses. The lack of adequate training among police, healthcare providers, and the judiciary results in insensitive handling of survivors and ineffective evidence gathering. This creates barriers to justice and discourages other victims from reporting abuse. Furthermore, societal stigma and victim-blaming reinforce a culture of denial and shame, obstructing efforts to protect children.

Thirdly, the persistent presence of patriarchal norms and domestic violence within families often creates an environment where abuse thrives unchecked. Alcoholism, financial stress, and power imbalances exacerbate vulnerability among children, particularly girls. These underlying social issues must be addressed alongside legal reforms to create safe family environments.

The review also reveals that current interventions focusing solely on legal mechanisms are insufficient. Comprehensive strategies, including community education, psychological support, and family empowerment, are critical. Schools and communities must become proactive arenas for prevention, awareness, and early identification of abuse. Mental health support must extend beyond crisis intervention to long-term rehabilitation.

CONCLUSION

Child sexual abuse within families in India is a deeply entrenched and complex issue that continues to evade adequate recognition and intervention. Despite progressive legislation like the POCSO Act and increasing awareness, significant gaps remain in prevention, reporting, prosecution, and survivor support. The unique dynamics of intra-familial abuse, rooted in trust, power imbalances, and social taboos, make it particularly difficult to detect and address. To effectively combat this crisis, a multi-pronged approach is essential, combining strengthened legal enforcement with community education, mental health services, and family-level interventions. Breaking the cycle of silence requires societal courage to confront uncomfortable truths and a committed effort to protect the most vulnerable. Only through coordinated action involving all stakeholders can India hope to provide safe, nurturing environments where children are truly protected from harm.

REFERENCES

1. Maity, S., & Chakraborty, P. R. (2023). Implications of the POCSO Act and determinants of child sexual abuse in India: Insights at the state level. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(6). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-022-01469-x>
2. Child sexual abuse in India: A wake-up call. PubMed Central. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8445113/>
3. A descriptive study on the child sexual abuse act in India. PubMed Central. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9480801/>
4. Child sexual abuse, Indian Journal of Medical Research. https://journals.lww.com/ijmr/fulltext/2015/42010/child_sexual_abuse_issues_concerns.1.aspx
5. Crimes against women, children rose by 4%, 8.7% in 2022: NCRB report. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/crimes-against-women-children-rose-by-4-8-7-in-2022-ncrb-report-101701667979601.html>
6. Status of POCSO Cases 2018-2020. Satyarthi Foundation. <https://satyarthi.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Status-of-POCSO-Cases-2018-2020.pdf>
7. Status of POCSO Cases 2017-2019. Satyarthi Foundation. <https://satyarthi.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Status-of-POCSO-Cases-2017-2019.pdf>
8. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) - Crime in India 2022. Data.gov.in. <https://www.data.gov.in/ministrydepartment/National%20Crime%20Records%20Bureau%20%28NCRB%29>
9. Our Work | India Child Protection. India Child Protection. <https://www.childprotection.org.in/end-child-sexual-abuse>
10. Child abuse on the rise in India. FairPlanet. <https://www.fairplanet.org/editors-pick/child-abuse-on-the-rise-in-india/NewsArticles>
11. Ernakulam Child Case: Three-year-old girl sexually abused by uncle; arrested. Samayam. <https://malayalam.samayam.com/local-news/ernakulam/police-arrested-man-on-incident-against-child-in-ernakulam/articleshow/121332952.cms>
12. After 4-year-old's autopsy reveals sexual assault, dad's brother held. The New Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2025/May/23/after-4-year-olds-autopsy-reveals-sexual-assault-dads-brother-held-2578481.html>
13. Kerala minor, thrown into river by her mother, was repeatedly sexually abused by uncle. The Indian Express. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kerala-minor-thrown-into-river-by-her-mother-was-repeatedly-sexually-abused-by-uncle-10022040/The_Indian_Express
14. Murdered 4-yr-old girl's paternal uncle charged with rape, arrested. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/murdered-4-yr-old-girls-paternal-uncle-charged-with-rape-arrested/articleshow/121347384.cms>
15. Migrant worker arrested for sexual abuse of four-year-old girl. The New Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/kerala/2023/Aug/05/migrant-worker-arrested-for-sexual-abuse-of-four-year-old-girl-2602067.html>
16. Four-year-old sexually assaulted in Malappuram, migrant worker arrested. The News

Minute. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/four-year-old-sexually-assaulted-malappuram-migrant-worker-arrested-180654>

17. Minor girl gang-raped, woman raped in Dausa, cases lodged. The Times of India. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/minor_girl-gang-raped-woman-raped-in-dausa-cases-lodged/articleshow/110461124.cms
18. Married woman, boyfriend arrested for making rape videos of her 3-year-old daughter. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/married-woman-lover-arrested-rape-videos-3-year-old-daughter-punjab-9900087/>
19. Woman and her male friend were arrested for sexually abusing her 3-year-old daughter. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/woman-and-male-friend-booked-for-sexual-assault-on-3-year-old-girl-mohali-police-9900557/>
20. Police arrest paternal relative for the rape, murder of four-year-old girl in Kochi. The New Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2025/May/22/police-arrest-paternal-relative-for-the-rape-murder-of-four-year-old-girl-in-kochi-2578383.html>