

WICKED VOX: Sex education can help protect children from paedophiles

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A few months ago, the Kerala police launched Operation Big Daddy, an online crackdown on paedophiles who allegedly posted hundreds of sexually suggestive comments in Malayalam alongside pictures of three and four-year-old children.

The comments were spotted on a Facebook page called Kochu Sundarikal (Malayalam for "little pretty girls").

The accused were arrested on a number of charges, including soliciting children for sex. The arrests led the Supreme Court to order a probe into online child sex rackets on social media.



Actress Alia Bhatt played the role of a girl who was abused by a relative in the film Highway

Last week, a section of women lawyers also filed a petition demanding castration as a punishment for child sex abusers.

Quoting the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics, they cited an alarming 151 per cent increase in "child rapes" in the country.

But how viable is the suggestion? The NCRB data does not have a separate category for registering crimes against pre-pubescent children, kids below 11 years who are the primary target of paedophiles, as the Indian law regards everyone below 18 years as a child or a minor.

(It is another matter, though, that "naïve" minors above 16 years now have the potential to transform into "adult" monsters under the new juvenile law, if they commit heinous crimes.)

So it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of paedophiles in the country.

Moreover, conviction rates of people who commit crimes against all those who are classified as children under the Indian law itself are as low as 2.4 per cent.

If they are convicted, should castration also be extended to abusers of non-human minors? Mail Today recently reported a case of zoophilia where a teenager was admitted at the All Indian Institute of Medical Sciences for allegedly having sex with a calf. Since the animal involved is a minor, would the teenager's actions make him a zoopaedophile?

Incidentally, zoophilia, where the object of lust are animals, is an extremely rare sexual deviancy reported in one per cent of the population, and not the fall-out of watching online pornography as some doctors seem to suggest.

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'I said goodbye Annie you know you're going to a beautiful place.'



Zoophilia is a rare form of sexual deviancy that pre-dates online porn

Most sexual deviancies, including zoophilia, have pre-existing histories, writes psychologist Jesse Bering, citing examples from ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Indus Valley civilisations, in his book Perv: The Sexual Deviant in All of Us.

What online porn might have done is "pull together" all those people who were previously marginalised on the basis of their sexuality, on a single platform.

Neither is there any scientific proof, other than our moralistic revulsion and the fact that an animal cannot give consent for sex, for the claim that adolescents who engage in bestiality will go on to commit adult interpersonal crimes.

Paedophilia, on the other hand, is regarded as an "inherently harmful" sexual deviancy by almost all researchers, including the American psychiatric manual DSM.

This is not the first time that castration has been recommended as a punishment for paedophiles. Citing examples of countries like the United States, Poland, Russia, South Korea and Indonesia, the Madras High Court in the past had called for castration as a silver bullet to prevent child sexual abuse.

Sadly, none of these countries are role models for sexually mature democracies. Even in the United States, where the punishment has been in vogue for decades, the drug for chemical castration has never been approved by the FDA, the American health agency, for use on sexual offenders.

Perhaps even more worryingly, a review evaluating research in English and Scandinavian languages on the effectiveness of medical interventions on people capable of sexually abusing children, published in the UK-based medical journal the BMJ in 2013, showed that under certain circumstances castration could "increase the risk of sexual re-offending" apart from raising ethical questions about the side-effects of the drug.

The best way, therefore, to protect your kids would be through conversation, not castration. For that the real daddies should play a more proactive role. Since most parents are too embarrassed to articulate the names of private body parts in front of their children, they should at least support the introduction of a comprehensive sexuality education programme in schools. This would encourage children to speak up and learn about the importance of boundaries, including unwanted touch, irrespective of from whom it comes, as a vast majority of rapists are known to their victims.

The role models India should follow on this are Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Germany, widely regarded as sexually tolerant and healthy societies with age-appropriate sexuality education programmes in place, and not the U.S or any of the aforementioned countries.

America may have a flourishing porn industry, but the country is as conflicted and politically hypocritical as India when it comes to imparting sex education in schools. In 1994, the then surgeon general Joycelyn Elders was forced to resign by, of all people, Bill Clinton, for her views on masturbation and the importance of teaching sex education in schools at an early age.

Of course, the surgeon general's marching orders came long before the president himself was in the dock over his sexual peccadilloes with White House intern Moica Lewinsky. So much for American openness.

How Germany tackled the dark net

The probe ordered by the Supreme Court into online paedophiles on social media is commendable, but not sufficient. The world over, paedophiles are moving on to discreet territories such as the dark net.

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The dark net is a vast and lawless territory of the internet beyond the reach of conventional search engines, and provides almost absolute secrecy and a safe haven to all sorts of criminals, including paedophiles.

"The dark net architecture is very different. Not even the service provider will be able to tell you who have visited, hosted or transmitted content," says Pawan Duggal, cyber expert and author Dark Net, Anonymity and Law.



The dark net, which operates beyond normal search engines, is the new den of paedophiles

"In 2016, dark net will be a major problem. It is the area where all illegal activities including child pornography and online paedophiles thrive," says Duggal.

To access the dark net, all you need to do is download Tor, a free anonymising browser, which is reported to have over half a million users a day and counting.

A half a minute job for any curious, smart phone-savvy kid - yet the Indian law enforcement agencies seem to be clueless about its existence.

Both the National Cyber Security Policy 2013 and IT Act are silent on dark net, says Duggal.

"In a few years, dark net will supersede superficial net," he warns.

The situation warrants creative approaches from the government in bringing about an attitudinal change in the mindset of a molester.

A novel campaign launched by the German government in 2004 to curb child sexual abuse may be worth exploring. Through a blitz of mass media campaign, the government encouraged self-identified paedophiles to reach out and get help from professionals instead of becoming an offender.

The campaign saw over 350 paedophiles volunteering themselves to take control over their sexual behaviour.

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