

A Socio-Legal Study on Cyber Offences Against Children in Delhi with Special Reference to Online Grooming

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Abstract

As we strive to increase the quality of digital infrastructure, so do the number of children avail the Internet and the number of cybercrimes victimizing these children is also growing at a proportional rate especially in the National Capital Territory of Delhi. Online grooming is one of the most subtle of the offences in which a predator creates a relationship of emotional trust with a child, through the internet, to sexually exploit the child. This paper presents the findings of the socio-legal study conducted on the crime menace of children in Delhi and its specific focus on cybercrime especially grooming of children on internet. Based on the available information flow in the National Crime Records Bureau as well as the judicial view and the various available scholarly materials, it examines the statutory provisions, which consist of: Information Technology Act, 2000, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 and lastly, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. It argues that though the Indian law has been empowered over the years, enforcement is still severely lacking and socio-cultural reasons further prevent the effort from ever succeeding to bring an end to enslaved groomers, particularly in the capital, Delhi, where over-Broward internet connection, digital illiteracy to caregivers, and lack of reporting make its easy functioning with impunity. Combining clarity in legislation, digital up-skilling and specialised investigation forces to fight grooming as a separate crime in a multi-faceted approach are suggested by the paper.

Keywords: Online Grooming, Cybercrime, Children, Delhi, POCSO, IT Act, Socio-Legal, Child Protection, Digital Safety

I. Introduction

As the National Capital Territory of India, Delhi takes up a unique stand in the digital world of India. Children in the capital are among the most digitally literate and at the same time the most vulnerable to the dangers of cyber-attacks with some of the highest rates of smartphone penetration, mobile data usage, and with school-based digital infrastructure in India. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has reported a growing number of cybercrimes against children in the country as 1,376 incidents in 2021 to 1,823 cases in 2022, a 32 per cent increment.

In this national figure, overall cases of cybercrime have increased in 2021 by 111 per cent in Delhi over 2020 and the most prominent motive in 2021 was sexual exploitation. Most of the complainants in Delhi were either women or minor aged between twelve and seventeen years.

It is on this statistical backdrop that online grooming has risen as a form of cybercrime that is both a serious and under-addressed crime. In its digital form, grooming refers to a form of gradual, systematic trust-building by an offender - usually via social media, online game, messaging application, or chat room - with the goal of ultimately coercing the child into sexual, emotional, or financial exploitation. Compared to other types of cybercrime, which entail one forceful action, grooming can be described by the long, manipulative, and often covert initial phases, which makes it particularly challenging to detect, prosecute and avert.

The present paper involves socio-legal analysis of online grooming and its associated cyber-crimes against children in Delhi. It examines the type and scale of the issue, evaluates the sufficiency of the current legal framework, the socio-cultural and institutional obstacles in the way of protection and proposes recommendations

towards a more comprehensible and preventative legal and policy action to the problem. It is meant to be doctrinal and analytical and is based primarily on primary statutory materials, judicial rulings, NCRB statistics, government reports, and scholarly works that have been peer-reviewed and published within the past 2020-2025.

II. Literature Review

The scholarly interest in online grooming and kid cybercrimes in India has increased significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly increased the migration of children to the online realm. In a 2024 paper in the International Journal of Innovative Research in Computer Science and Technology, Deepika Rani presents a thorough qualitative form of study of grooming techniques, their psychological and emotional effects on child victims, and how artificial intelligence can apply to identify them at the earliest stage.

The 2022 article of Gurmeet Kaur in the Indian Journal of Public Administration is a comprehensive mapping of internet crimes against minor's legal framework in India, stating that despite the availability of the applicable statutes, including the IT Act and POCSO, the abuser anonymity, gaps in enforcement, and legal jurisdictions continue to be a persistent problem.

Published in the journal Child Protection and Practice, 2024, Manoj et al. take a critical approach to the implementation of enforcing mechanisms in India, the limitations within the field of forensic techniques and the disjointed inter-agency coordination to tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE). In their Table 1, based on 2017-2022 data obtained through NCRB, they report an astounding increase of 1823 cases as against seven official cases in 2017.

A TIJER November 2025 paper on the resilience of India in responding to online child grooming provides a comparative study of the Indian legal system in relation to world-systems and finds that current legislation - which focuses on explicit grooming after abuse - does not serve to criminalise the prior grooming preparatory phases. This has been declared as the most significant structural weakness in the child protection structure in India.

Empirical research by Navitha P and Jegadeeshwaran (2023), based on 5 years of NCRB data, 2017-2021 confirms the trend as crimes against women as well as the category of crimes against children rise in India, and cyber pornography and cyberbullying are among the most registered crimes.

On the policy level, the 2025 Observer Research Foundation analysis of child online protection in India points out that in 2020 cybercrimes against children have increased by more than 400 per cent with about 90 per cent of such cases being child sexual abuse material (CSAM) publication, or transmission.

III. Research Methodology

The research methodology that has been adopted in this paper is the methodology of doctrinal and socio-legal research. The analytical approach includes the critical study of primary materials (statutes, parliamentary debates and judicial rulings) to evaluate the internal consistency, breadth and implementation of the legal framework used to combat cyber offences against children in India. The socio-legal dimension contextualizes these legal provisions in the context of their wider social and institutional framework, and uses statistical information provided by the NCRB, governmental press releases, and the Delhi-specific crime statistics to learn about the ways the law is implemented in practice.

The article is purely based on secondary references, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, governmental/institutional reports, and verified legal databases. All the sources used are presented in the verifiable, open-access or institutionally available sources of 2020-25 in line with the goal of the paper to reflect the modern legal and socio-empirical environment. Delhi is the major geographical center; the national data is implemented where there is no Delhi-specific data and where the national context is required to understand the trends in the cities.

IV. Understanding Online Grooming: Nature, Stages, And Dimensions

4.1 Defining Online Grooming

Online grooming is generally understood to refer to the calculated process through which the offender, through the digital communication systems, develops an emotional bond with a child and gradually undermines the child inhibitions, parental or institutional controls, with ultimate goal of sexual, emotional or financial exploitation. In contrast to traditional forms of sexual abuse, grooming is not a single action but a series of behaviours, compliments, gift-giving, requests of secrecy, introduction of sexual topics at a slow pace and methodical isolation of the child with adults he/she trusted is not a one-time act of sexual abuse.

The TIJER 2025 research article describes grooming as a procedure where the offender strategically hides sexual motive to develop trust, whereby the evidence of mens rea under POCSO is also significantly difficult in the initial steps. This is made difficult by the fact that the grooming relationship might take place over weeks or months and the child might develop the offender as a confidant or a love interest.

4.2 Digital Platforms and Methods

The online groomers in India take advantage of various digital platforms. The most important vectors are social networking sites, instant messaging applications, multiplayer online games and video-sharing. Anonymity that most of these platforms offer enables predators to form fake identities, fabricate fake ages and fabricate a common interest with their victims. It has been particularly noted that social media sites facilitate criminals to collect personal data concerning children prior to making the first attempt of contact.

These risks are largely amplified by the digital space that has emerged after the pandemic. Unsupervised screen time among children rose massively with the mass migration of children to online delivery of the education due to the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemics. By January 2023, India had a population of some 692 million internet users, with a proportional number of 30.4 per cent aged children.

Being a metropolitan centre, where rates of smartphone and broadband adoption are relatively high (even among the lower economic brackets), implies that all children of various economic statuses are at risk of grooming. The Delhi Police Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operations (IFSO) unit, the specialised wing of the Delhi Police that handles complicated cybercrime cases against women and children, has observed that a majority of complainants with Delhi cybercrime involving sexual exploitation are underage children between twelve and seventeen.

4.3 Psychological and Social Impact on Child Victims

The psychological effects of cyber grooming are dire and unending. The many effects suffered by victims include shame and self-blame, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and seclusion. Grooming relationships are shrouded in secrecy and developed by the offender intentionally, so that children are not always ready to share abuse with the parents, the teacher or the police. The fact that sexual offences are heavily culturally stigmatized in India makes the process of underreporting even more complicated, as, in such a major city as Delhi, the necessity of preserving the reputation of the family and inappropriate social pressure often prevents the official reporting of sexual offences.

A systematic review in the journal *Child Abuse Review*, Wiley published, came up with almost four times increased psychological impact on children when an online component is used in abusing them, as opposed to their being abused online; highlighting the special malaise that it is only the digital-mediated grooming that causes. Data mining and grooming victims can experience years of psychological trauma, and even become threatened physically in case the grooming ever results in physical contact.

V. The Legal Framework For Addressing Online Grooming In India

5.1 The Information Technology Act, 2000

The first cyber law of India is the Information technology act of 2000 which was further amended in 2008. The most relevant section to online grooming and CSAM is 67B, which was introduced as a result of the 2008 Amendment. It makes it a crime to publish, transmit, to browse, to collect, to seek, to download, to advertise or to facilitate any content that would describe children in sexual acts. Importantly, in Section 67B(c) the section is only partially dealing with grooming by considering activities of coercing kids to commit online sexual activities, yet there is no mention of grooming per se in the statute.

Sharat Babu Digumarti v. Government of NCT of Delhi the Supreme Court decided that the IT Act of 67 to 67B were an entire code in electronic offences of obscenity and child pornography. Offenders under Section 67B will be imprisoned up to a period of five years and a fine up to ten lakh rupees (first time); repeat offenders will face up to a seven-year sentence.

Notwithstanding these, from the analysis undertaken by Gurmeet Kaur, it appears that the IT Act was not meant to be a law aimed at tackling the issue of child protection nor was the criminal provisions designed with the same intent. Despite these, from the analysis done by Gurmeet Kaur, it appears that the IT Act was not really a law with a child protection remit nor was the criminal provisions designed with the same intent, with the gradual, manipulative design of grooming.

5.2 The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012

The child-specific sexual offences law in India is the POCSO Act, 2012, which was amended in 2019. It characterizes a child as any individual under eighteen years of age, and encompasses a wide scope of the sexual offences, such as penetrative sexual assault, sexual harassment as well as using children during pornography under Section 13 to 15.

Section 11(iv) POCSO criminalises the sexual harassment of a person through electronic communication and Section 15 deals with possession, distribution and viewing of child sexual abuse content. The 2019 Amendment had a significant effect on reinforcing Section 15, establishing graduated penalties and the concern of storage and consumption, which had caused a division of the High Courts previously.

Delhi POCSO courts have jurisdiction over crimes that occur in the NCT. As of May 2023, 412 exclusive POCSO courts are in operation across India under the government sponsored Centrally Sponsored Scheme, with Delhi being one of the crucial jurisdictions. So far, the scheme started, 169, 342 cases have been disposed nationally in these Fast Track Special Courts.

In a 2024 study published by Sage Publications, Rakesh Kumar Handa and Shivani Goswami critically evaluate the judicial history of POCSO by evaluating its inconsistent application of the "best interests of the child" standard, delays in judicial proceedings, and a low conviction rate as structural flaws that reduce the effectiveness of the statute as a deterrent measure.

5.3 The Landmark Judgment: Just Rights for Children Alliance v. S. Harish (2024)

The other orders in the Supreme Court in Just Rights for Children Alliance and Ors. dated 23 September 2024 are the most outstanding ones recently in the field of online child protection in India by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice J.B. Pardiwala. However, the case was established on the Madras High Court's decision in a writ petition filed by the complainant, who had asked for the prosecution against him to be dropped due to his alleged passive possession and transmission of over 100 files containing pornographic images from a child would not amount to a violation of POCSO or the IT Act.

This was amended by the Supreme Court in ruling that the doctrine constructive possession of the statutory presumption of a culpable mental state under Section 30 of POCSO was not applicable in the instance of intentional Favor of CSAM and that the case in question could only be considered to be criminal in nature if it was committed with the necessary intention that children be sexually affected by the use of the CSAM. The Court

also eliminated the previous division of the High Courts concerning the issue of possession or distribution, which has placed a national standard.

Most impressively, the Court ordered all tribunals to cease using the term child pornography, and replace it with Child Sexual Exploitative and Abuse Material (CSEAM) - and it has recognised that this new terminology was exactly what the Court felt was required, given the term was undermining a crime involving a history of abuse and not consensual material.

5.4 The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023

In the year 2023, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita is being brought into the Indian penal code as it will be activated on 1st July 2024 to replace the Indian penal code, with the aim of modernising the substantive criminal law of India. In Chapter V BNS, there are provisions covering offences against women and children which include, sexual offences, crimes against child welfare. The BNS is not a creation or a new chapter on cybercrimes per se but is a continuation of the definition of criminal offences in operation where electronic device, social media and other digital platform are utilized and run concurrently with IT Act.

The BNS adds more penalties to 33 crimes, increases age of adult gang rape victims to sixteen to eighteen years, corresponding with the POCSO definition of a child. Critics, however, point out that as with its predecessor the BNS does not acknowledge an offence of online grooming as a preparatory, pre-contact crime the same gap as the TIJER 2025 analysis notes to be the most vital legislative deficiency in India as of today.

5.5 Other Relevant Legislation

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 gives the statutory provisions governing care, protection, rehabilitation and adjudication to children who have suffered abuse and exploitation. The JJ Act adds to POCSO by putting in place institutional resources to support victims in the form of Child Welfare Committee, Juvenile Justice Board, and Child Care Institutes. It is also applicable to juveniles who are involved in cyber offences as perpetrators establishing a complementary regime to both sides to the cyber offence dynamic.

VI. Online Grooming In Delhi: Socio-Legal Analysis

6.1 Statistical Landscape

The cybercrime statistics of the city of Delhi shows the sustained increase. According to 2021 NCRB data, cases of cybercrime in the city of Delhi were documented at 356 as an increase of 111 per cent compared to 2020. The most common reason was sexual exploitation where most complainants were either women or minors between the ages of twelve and seventeen years. As part of 2023 data, NCRB data showed that Delhi was at the top of a list of Union Territories with cybercrime cases (involving communication devices as a medium or target).

Individually under the POCSO Act, Delhi registered the most cases of girl-child rape among metropolitan cities in 2023 with 1,048 cases being reported, which reflects the extent of child sexual crimes in the city. There is an institutional concern regarding the relationship between offline and online child sexual exploitation in Delhi in the sense that online grooming more often leads to agreements on offline contact.

The 2022 release of the PIB of the Ministry of Home Affairs has verified that the national numbers of cybercrime perpetrated against children between 2019 and 2020 had increased fourfold, between 305 and 1,102 cases, which was directly caused by the COVID-19 lockdown, as it has pushed children into hours of unmonitored online presence. Delhi, being highly digitally connected, was especially impacted.

6.2 The CyPAD/IFSO Unit and Institutional Response in Delhi

The main institutional process in the capital of investigating cybercrimes has been the Cyber Prevention, Awareness, and Detection (CyPAD) unit of the Delhi Police (now under the IFSO (Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operation) of the Special Cell) with a specific mandate to investigate crimes against women and children. The CyPAD has the capability of the National Cyber Forensic Lab (NCFL), which Hacktivists can use to extract

deleted information, forensics of a mobile phone, and produce images digitally. It has conducted training of more than 860 Inspectors and Sub-Inspectors in the different district cyber cells and police station cyber teams on cybercrime investigation.

Nonetheless, the difference between institutional capacity and the solving of cases is large. Enforcement problems as Gurmeet Kaur points out, such as anonymity of abusers, encrypted communications, cross-jurisdictions, and the lack of standardised digital forensic standards continue to limit effective investigation. Numerous instances of grooming remain unreported since those affected, which are mostly teenagers, are afraid of parental backlash, societal stigma or risk exposing exchanges they deem to be a secret.

6.3 Socio-Cultural Barriers to Child Protection in Delhi

Socio-legal aspects of online grooming in Delhi cannot be comprehended without applying to the socio-cultural context in which the digital lives of children play out. There are a number of interconnected obstacles to good protection. To start with, parents and caregivers are digitally illiterate: most grown-ups do not know which platforms their children are using, what type of grooming behaviours children engage in, and what tools can be used to report it. As Manoj et al. note, any digital literacy gap between parents and children opens potential areas of attack by offenders, which is why education and awareness become important elements of a successful regulatory process.

Second, the deep-rooted social notions about sexual crimes, especially the stigma that surrounds victims and the influence on families that these issues will be resolved in private, are obstacles towards making formal reports. This result, as supported by the recent 2024 study conducted by ScienceDirect, is more noticeable within the context of Delhi where cultural standard of honouring family has had a historic negative impact on disclosure of sexual abuse.

Third, children in less-fortunate families of Delhi are also disproportionately affected, as their relatively less economically disadvantaged families rely more on shared, unmonitored devices to access the internet. In the meantime, children with higher incomes can access more devices but lack the monitoring because of the working schedules of their parents. Both the cases provide groomers with opportunities to take advantage of.

Fourth, the underfunding of institutional support services to victims of child abuse, and the lack of training of first-responders, such as police staff and school teachers, in recognizing and responding to online grooming disclosures has been noted by the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR). A 2020-22 DCPCR annual report indicates persistence of victim support infrastructure gaps in the system.

VII. Critical Analysis: Gaps, Enforcement Deficits, And Emerging Challenges

7.1 The Absence of a Standalone Grooming Offence

The biggest loophole in Indian law is the lack of a particular, discrete criminal offence of online grooming as a pre-contact preparatory offence. With the analysis of the TIJER 2025 finished, POCSO and the IT Act are mostly reactive and involve explicit sexual acts or the creation and dissemination of CSAM following an act of abuse. The nuanced, emotional, and manipulative, trust-building initial phases of grooming - which result in actual psychological damage and pave way to abuse consequent to it does not evidently reveal itself to criminal liability by the current framework.

In contrast, comparative jurisdictions like the United Kingdom and Australia have been passing certain grooming offences, which make the communication phase of the process, regardless of the outcome of the solicitation to an offline meeting or express content, criminal. The Indian experience of not following the same approach means that much of the grooming spectrum between first contact to the stage where overt solicitation occurs has not been addressed by law.

7.2 Evidentiary and Jurisdictional Challenges

To convict a grooming offender in a court of law, it is necessary to preserve and admit to a court of law digital evidence, including but not limited to chat logs, metadata, device records, account data, which traverses both private and encrypted platforms. Their cross-border and multi-platform characteristics of most grooming interactions make the territorial jurisdiction provisions applicable to both the IT Act and POCSO complex. In a case where the criminal is not present in this state but is present in another state or country where the child victim is in Delhi, inter agency coordination and mutual legal assistance is necessary but very slow and incomplete.

The 283rd Report of the Law Commission of India of September 2023, in its answer to the question concerning consent under POCSO, highlighted the more general points of concern with the application of the Act to more complex cyber cases and made a request on legislative remodeling to fit modern realities. The involvement of judicial inconsistency in the Report shows the systemic adjudication issue that the case of child cybercrime brings about.

7.3 Underreporting and the Invisible Dimension of Grooming

According to empirical criminology, underreporting is by far the greatest hitch to reasonable view of the prevalence of grooming. This issue is acute in the context of Delhi. Even the data released by the NCRB is to be found by scholars as being only the tip of the iceberg with most of the incidents remaining unreported because of victim shame, fear of parental punishment, a lack of trust in law enforcement and a deliberate nurturing of secrecy by the groomer.

According to an analysis conducted by Menon and Sinha (2025) in the National Law University Odisha Law Review, a rise in the number of recorded NCRB cases (seven in 2017 to 1,823 in 2022) does not only suggest an escalation in offences but the fact that law enforcement now exercises greater vigilance and victims and their families are more willing to report. The true frequency of grooming, and its non-contact preparatory phases, is probably many orders of magnitude greater than the values tabulated would indicate.

VIII. Recommendations

8.1 Legislative Reform: A Standalone Grooming Offence

India needs to pass a particular and isolated offence of online grooming, which can be applied during the pre-contact phase of the process. Deliberate communication with a child via electronic medium with the aim of compromising sexual abuse/exploitation should be criminalized even before an actual explicit or physical encounter with a child. The offence ought to be a part of the POCSO Act - since it has a child focus and procedural impacts that are victim-focused - and the right mens rea aspects should be added to it to prevent over-criminalising harmless communications and to include the calculated trust-building that is the constituent of grooming.

8.2 Strengthening Digital Forensics and the IFSO Unit in Delhi

The Delhi Police IFSO unit, which has forensic capabilities, is in need of much more substantial support of the grooming cases investigation: in particular, trained investigators selecting the data analysis of child exploitation material, increased inter-platform information transfer solutions with social media providers, and standardisation of protocols in preserving the digital evidence once the first complaint is received. Compulsory training of district level police officers in how to identify grooming signs are also imperative since the majority of first-response complaints are therefore presented in the police stations, not to the IFSO.

8.3 Digital Literacy Programmes for Children, Parents, and Educators

Digital literacy is impossible without preventive digital literacy. The schools in Delhi need to incorporate online safety education of the appropriate age of students, including the aspects of nature of grooming, proper online relationships, and the reporting systems, into the school curriculum since upper primary level. The parental

awareness programs, to be held in association with the NGOs in Delhi and via the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal as well as its social media initiative, named CyberDost ought to be stepped up.

8.4 Improving Reporting Infrastructure and Victim Support

Simple measures such as the DCPCR and the Delhi police working together can create anonymous and child-friendly reporting mechanisms such as school based digital safety officers as well as a specific helpline not to be used by the general cybercrime portal, would help in creating less impediments towards disclosure. Survivor support services such as trauma informed counselling and legal assistance must also be simplified and well financed considering the recent dramatic and long term psychological effects recorded in the clinical literature.

IX. Conclusion

Online grooming is one of the most toxic and pernicious crimes that involve children in modern India, and Delhi, with its volume of online activity, internet connectivity, and demographics is an exceptionally acute variety of a nationwide problem. The legal system of India rooted in the IT Act, POCSO, and the newly introduced BNS has seen step in the right direction, especially with the historic decision in *Just Rights for Children Alliance v. S. Harish* of the Supreme Court in 2024 which greatly empowered the law against the possession and consumption of CSAM.

However, the lack of pre-contact grooming violation, lack of enforcement, limitations in forensic capacity, cultural influences on reporting and structural digital illiteracy of caregivers all hinder the protective value of this model. Whether it is the 32 per cent national increase in child cybercrimes between 2021 and 2022, or the 111 per cent rise in total cybercrime in Delhi in 2021, taken as statistical evidence, has become the trend that the existing legal and institutional mechanisms are not addressing to reverse.

To have an authentically protective legal regime of child protection in Delhi would mean that criminalisation should not be reactive but preventive: legislative reform criminalising the act of grooming itself and not just its consequences; institutional investment in specific investigative and prosecutorial resources; a human resource dedication of multi-stakeholder investment in digital literacy that would prepare children and their families and their teachers to act on grooming before it is too late to act.

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