Towards a culture of moral responsibility

Mob action is the most violent expression of fears about the safety of our children; it shows a lack of trust in the state

Twenty people have been killed by raging mobs, on the suspicion of being child-lifters, across the country in the last few weeks. The trigger for the fears in these violent incidents was undoubtedly WhatsApp rumours that were unfounded. I am appalled by these brutal killings.

The violence apart, there are also many people who suspect that their children could be abducted for prostitution, organ trade, forced begging or any other form of slavery.

Eight children go missing every hour in India to remain untraced and four are sexually abused. Aren’t these figures enough to cause fear among the masses?

Can we say with confidence that our children are safe in homes, schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, shelter homes, or even inside the places of worship and faith institutions? Can we guarantee that our children will not be abused by a family member or friend? Can we totally trust our state institutions to bring the perpetrators to justice? Fears triggered by such insecurities quickly take the form of collective frustration.

Mob action, condemnable no doubt, is the most violent expression of such frustration.

Rising anger

Last year, I led an 11,000-km Bharat Yatra to take the message of ‘safe childhood’ across the country. A total of 12 lakh people, including child victims of rape, their parents, survivors of child trafficking and prostitution, former child labourers, and young people, marched with me to demand their right to childhood. Though their rising anger was discernible, I repeatedly appealed to them not to take the law into their hands and to follow the legal, judicial system for justice. But it is necessary to point to the apathy among our institutions toward child safety.

Reports on incidents like the sale of a baby by the Missionaries of Charity home; the rape of minor girls by a self-styled godman in Delhi; and the rape of a nine-year-old girl by a Maulana in a madrassa raise a basic question: Why are many of these residential religious institutions allowed to run without stringent regulations and checks?

The government has information on 1.4 lakh missing children on one hand and on the other, has a database of three lakh children staying in state and NGO-run children’s homes. Why can’t it effectively use simple technological solutions like facial recognition software and try to reunite missing children with their families? Further, what stops the largest democracy in the world from passing more stringent laws against child trafficking and child pornography?

Normally, public outrage in the case of many unfortunate incidents like those in Kathua, Unnao and Mandsaur has been selective and convenient. Nobody has questioned why an eight-year-old was grazing horses and not attending school as per constitutional right to education. Or how a school in Mandsaur could have been so unsafe for a little girl. Or why a political party not just tolerates but protects alleged rapists for so long.

Demanding capital punishment for the perpetrators of child rape is the easiest way to show social media heroism. The government’s response, which includes setting up an enquiry or bringing an ordinance, is equally convenient. However, I have never come across an incident where an individual or institution ever took moral responsibility for such a pathetic situation on child safety. Therefore, I argue for a culture of moral responsibility and accountability among our institutions, as opposed to the prevalent culture of superficial, convenient responses.

Moral responsibility is an individual decision and moral accountability is a culture. Mahatma Gandhi called off the Non-Cooperation Movement against the British because some of his supporters turned violent in Chauri Chaura. Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly called for compassion and hope despite facing vicious racist insults. More recently, Nelson Mandela adopted the approach of reconciliation to bring about justice, despite being a brutalised victim of apartheid. A culture of accountability can be created if the society and the state are guided by a moral compass.

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