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VICTIM SATISFACTION WITH CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

Victim satisfaction is an important yet under researched factor of administration of criminal justice system in India. Although legal reforms have slowly incorporated victim-centric measures, how these are translated into lived realities remains to be seen. The present empirical study measures the extent of victim satisfaction with police investigation, prosecution and court proceedings in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. A mixed-method design was employed to collect data from a total of 132 victims and advocates and law enforcement officers through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by key informant interviews with police officials, public prosecutors, and legal aid lawyers and few law students. The results show a moderate general level of satisfaction, with notable differences between phases, where victims expressed the least satisfaction with police investigation due to perceived indifference, delay and corrupt practices, while satisfaction with court proceedings was relatively higher but tainted by long-drawn-out trials and hostile cross-examinations. Satisfaction was influenced by socio-economic position, the nature of the offence, the quality of legal representation and the communication by justice system actors. Awareness of legal rights and victim compensation schemes was remarkably low. Only 18 per cent of respondents were aware of the Tamil Nadu Victim Compensation Scheme. Major obstacles were re-victimisation at trial, financial load, lack of information and inadequate support services. The study underscores the gap between legislative intent and ground reality and recommends systemic reforms, setting up of victim support centres in court complexes, mandatory sensitisation training for police and prosecutors, simplification of compensation procedures and integration of restorative justice principles. Improving victim satisfaction is not simply an issue of welfare but is important to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

Empirical Study, Victim Satisfaction, Victim Compensation, Police Investigation, Criminal

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the criminal justice system has been concerned with the state and the accused. The victim has been pushed to the margins as a mere witness or informant.¹ Since the mid-twentieth century, the “victim-witness” paradigm has experienced a global transformation with the birth of victimology as a unique field that is concerned with the rights, interests, and experiences of victims in criminal justice policy.² Statutory revisions and acknowledgment of victims’ rights to compensation, fair treatment and participation in the judicial process by the Supreme Court of India have signalled a shift towards a more victim-centric approach. But legislative pronouncements do not immediately translate into satisfaction. The subjective experiences of victims in the justice process are impacted by a variety of institutional, procedural and socio-cultural elements.

Despite these improvements, the empirical work on victim satisfaction in India is scant, piecemeal and mostly limited to metropolitan case studies or specific crime types. Chennai is one of the largest metropolitan areas in India with a complicated crime profile and established judicial infrastructure. It is a suitable site to examine whether the legal provisions of victim-oriented justice have percolated to the ground. This study fills this lacuna by providing a rigorous mixed-methods assessment of victim satisfaction with the criminal justice system in Chennai.

The study is led by five research questions, which are: What is the level of victim satisfaction with police investigation, prosecution and court proceedings? What influences victim satisfaction? Are victims aware of their legal rights, compensation schemes and support services? What are the primary obstacles facing victims? What can be done to improve satisfaction and victim centred justice? The objectives parallel these questions with the aims of assessing, identifying, evaluating, examining and suggesting. The research contributes to the wider discourse on procedural justice and institutional legitimacy by foregrounding the voice of the victim and provides evidence-based recommendations for policy reform.

¹ M.S. Grover and B.R. Sharma, *Victimology in India* 22 (APH Publishing, New Delhi, 2010)

² Ezzat A. Fattah, “Victimology: Past, Present and Future”, 33 *Criminologie* 17 at 21 (2000); see also Andrew Karmen, *Crime Victims: An Introduction to Victimology* 67 (Cengage Learning, Boston, 9th edn., 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Victim satisfaction has been conceptualised through procedural justice theory which proposes that individuals' perceptions of fairness in process voice, respectful treatment and neutrality and trustworthiness of authorities are as important (or more important) than the outcome in determining satisfaction. Research has shown that victims who feel heard, informed and treated with dignity express increased satisfaction in the criminal court system regardless of case outcome.

International research, especially from the United Kingdom and United States, indicates that satisfaction depends on the stage, with victims being generally dissatisfied with police because of perceived inaction and poor communication, and with courts because of the amount of case information provided and the sensitivity of courtroom procedures. Studies in the Global South highlight further dimensions of discontent related to corruption, systemic delays and intersectional vulnerabilities.³

The minimal empirical work done in India too points to similar patterns. The Delhi study indicated that victims of property crimes rated police responsiveness poorly, whereas victims of violent crimes faced secondary victimization during medical evaluations and court appearances. There are sporadic perception polls by the National Crime Records Bureau that indicate poor public trust in police, but thorough, victim-specific satisfaction assessments are rare.⁴ The Malimath Committee Report (2003) and Justice Verma Committee Report (2013) have pointed out the necessity for victim-centric reforms like compensation, legal aid and protection, however the implementation deficiency continues to be a recurrent subject in scholarly discourse. The literature thus provides a strong theoretical and comparative base, but it has a major hole in the absence of actual data from Indian cities like Chennai. This study aims to fill that gap by producing primary data on victim satisfaction and contributing to evidence-based policy discourse.

³ Jan J.M. van Dijk, "Victim Satisfaction with the Criminal Justice System in Developing Countries: Reconciling Expectations and Reality", 15 *International Review of Victimology* 269 at 275 (2008).

⁴ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2022* 145 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023)

GOALS OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following precise objectives:

1. To evaluate the degree of satisfaction of victims with police investigation, prosecution and court proceedings in Chennai.
2. To determine what factors, influence victim's experiences throughout the criminal justice process.
3. To assess awareness of victims' legal rights, victim compensation schemes and support services.
4. To investigate the problems faced by victims in their pursuit of justice.
5. Advocate for improvements to a more victim-centered criminal justice system.

Therefore, the research topics are:

1. How satisfied are the victims with police investigation, prosecution and court proceedings in Chennai?
2. What Influences Victim Satisfaction with the Criminal Justice Process?
3. Are victims aware of their legal rights, victim compensation systems and support services?

The primary barriers that victims encounter in obtaining justice are:

What strategies might enhance victim satisfaction and reinforce victim-oriented justice in Chennai?

METHOD OF RESEARCH

We used a mixed-methods methodology to capture breadth and depth of victim experiences. The quantitative component was a cross-sectional survey using a structured questionnaire administered to 132 advocates and law enforcement officers and victims and law students across the four zones of Chennai (North, South, Central, West)⁵ A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across gender, offence type (violent crimes including assault, sexual offences, robbery; property crimes) and socio-economic background.

Victim cases were considered that had reached at least the charge sheet level to assure experience in numerous justice phases.⁶

⁵ John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* 54 (Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 3rd edn., 2017).

⁶ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* 418 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 5th edn., 2016).

The survey instrument comprised five-point Likert scale items on satisfaction with police (responsiveness, communication, fairness), prosecution (legal assistance, case updates) and court (treatment, speed, outcome), and sections on awareness of rights and compensation, and a checklist of challenges. The questionnaire was translated into Tamil and back translated to establish linguistic validity⁷

The qualitative part of the study was comprised of semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of 20 survey respondents, selected to maximize variation in satisfaction levels and demographics, and key informant interviews with 2 police officers, 1 public prosecutor and remaining all legal aid lawyers.

Ethical guidelines were adhered to strictly: informed consent was sought; anonymity and secrecy were assured; and victims were directed for psychosocial help where appropriate. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the institution.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A. Respondents' Profile

Of the 132 responders, 52% were male; 48% were female. Mean age was 34 years (range 18–65 years). Regarding education, 36% had no formal education, 42% had secondary education and 22% were graduates. The recorded offences were assault (30 per cent), sexual offences (22 per cent), robbery/theft (28 per cent) and other offences including deceit and criminal intimidation (20 per cent).

B. Victims' Overall Satisfaction

The total satisfaction score as a combination of police, prosecution and judicial dimensions was 2.8 on a 5-point scale, pointing to moderate unhappiness. Only 24% of respondents rated their experience as “satisfied” or “very satisfied”. This is consistent with global patterns of moderate to low victim satisfaction, but slightly lower than figures reported in European victimisation surveys, which may reflect systemic deficiencies in the Indian context.⁸

⁷ Richard W. Brislin, “Back-Translation for Cross-Cultural Research”, 1 Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology 185 at 187 (1970).

⁸ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Victims of Crime in the EU: The Extent and Nature of Support for Victims* 42 (FRA, Vienna, 2019).

C. Police investigation satisfaction

Police inquiry was recorded as the lowest satisfaction (mean 2.3). The main concerns were: delays in registration of First Information Reports (FIRs); insensitive questioning; refusals to register complaints deemed to be “family matters” or minor; and demands for bribes.⁹ “The police told me to adjust they called my husband and made us compromise,” said a female victim of domestic abuse. “I wasn’t even given a copy of the FIR.” This is in line with earlier research that have pointed to police reluctance to intervene in domestic sphere incidents.¹⁰ Victims who received copies of FIRs and were updated on progress of inquiry had much better satisfaction ($p < 0.01$) which emphasizes the significance of communication. The investigating officer was seen as caring and active. Few positive stories were remarkable. One respondent whose stolen motorcycle was recovered after a week appreciated the officer’s.

D. Satisfaction with Prosecution

Prosecution satisfaction was just above mid-point. Victims liked it when public prosecutors explained the charges and court procedures, but regretted that such exchanges were few and far between, and usually limited to the day of hearing. A huge majority (78 per cent) said that they had never met the prosecutor before the trial started. Victims were disconnected from their own cases, as there was no formal victim-prosecutor interaction system. Legal aid lawyers, when available, were seen as overburdened and uninspired, with one respondent noting, “My lawyer changed three times; each time I had to narrate everything again.” Victims who hired private counsel expressed more satisfaction, revealing a socioeconomic disparity in access to justice.

E. Satisfaction of Court Proceedings

Court satisfaction was 3.0. While some victims noted the judge's kind manner, the main frustration was about the delays and constant adjournments. In the sample cases, the average period from filing of charge-sheet to disposal was 28 months with a number of cases waiting for more than five years.¹¹ Repeated court appearances led to loss of pay and emotional weariness. Hostile cross-examinations, particularly in sexual crime cases, were a major source of re-victimisation. The questioning by the defence lawyer was “more violating than the crime”, said one survivor of sexual assault. Section 33 of the Indian Evidence Act and

⁹ Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, *Police and the Victim: Bridging the Gap* 31 (CHRI, New Delhi, 2018).

¹⁰ Nivedita Menon, “Domestic Violence and the Limits of Law”, 45 *Economic and Political Weekly* 41 at 44 (2010).

¹¹ Daksh, *Access to Justice Survey 2021-22* 56 (Daksh, Bangalore, 2022).

recommendations in *Sakshi v. Union of India* demand in-camera trials and screen protections, but these were not always followed.¹² This is an example of the difference between law and practice: just 12% of sexual crime victims were assessed by video-conference or with a screen.¹³

F. Factors Affecting Victim Satisfaction

Multivariate regression analysis revealed numerous important predictors of satisfaction. Satisfaction was shown to be positively connected with socio-economic status (in terms of income and education). Victims who were better off and better educated were more successful in navigating the system, more likely to hire private lawyers and received preferential treatment. The kind of offending mattered: victims of property crimes expressed higher satisfaction than victims of violent or sexual offences, probably because they experienced less emotional damage and more straightforward case pathways. The biggest predictor was quality of communication, e.g. frequency of updates, explanation of legal concepts, use of polite language ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$), lending support to procedural justice theory. Although gender was not a major predictor in the overall model, qualitative data indicated gendered experiences, with women experiencing suspicion and moral judgement, particularly in sexual assault cases.¹⁴ The provision to make a victim impact statement (which is rarely provided) for example also influenced satisfaction but nevertheless this option is inadequately implemented in India.¹⁵

G. Knowledge of Legal Rights and Compensation Schemes

Awareness levels were shockingly low. Only 18% of respondents knew about the Tamil Nadu Victim Compensation Scheme, and only 9% had even applied. Even those who knew about it considered the system complicated, involving a lot of paperwork and collaboration with the District Legal Services Authority. Awareness of the right to free legal aid under section 12 of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987¹⁶ was 32% but only 14% of victims used it, sometimes because police or court workers did not tell victims they could use of the benefit. Victim

¹² *Sakshi v. Union of India*, (2004) 5 SCC 518; The Indian Evidence Act, 1872 (Act 1 of 1872), s. 33.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, *Everyone Blames Me: Barriers to Justice and Support Services for Sexual Assault Survivors in India* 45 (HRW, New York, 2021).

¹⁴ Flavia Agnes, "Law, Ideology and Female Sexuality: Gender Bias in the Rape Law", 32 *Economic and Political Weekly* 323 at 326 (1997).

¹⁵ The Code of Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Act, 2008 (Act 5 of 2009), s. 357C

¹⁶ Tamil Nadu Victim Compensation Scheme, 2018; see also Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, *Unfilled Promises: A Study of Victim Compensation in India* 28 (Vidhi, New Delhi, 2021).

protection rights like the ability to be heard on bail under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, were almost unknown. The information gap creates structural exclusion, which deprives victims of the entitlements that are supposed to benefit them.

H. Obstacles for for Victims

Thematic analysis of the interviews resulted in five primary difficulty groupings. Firstly, institutional apathy and corruption: victims often recounted demands for money to register FIRs, speed investigations or obtain positive medico-legal results. Secondly, the procedural complexity and delay of negotiating the maze of police stations, courts and legal aid offices without assistance took its toll. Third, psychological re-victimisation: insensitive interrogation, public exposure and lack of counselling help increased suffering. Fourth, economic burden: loss of pay in everyday labour, cost of travel and costs for lawyers plunged many families into debt. Fifth, no information and assistance: victims repeatedly said they wanted one point of contact for case updates, legal counsel and emotional support, a role not currently provided.

V. SUGGESTIONS AND REFORMS

The empirical data are utilized to suggest a multi-pronged reform plan. First, Victim Support and Facilitation Centres should be established in every court complex in Chennai with experienced counsellors and paralegals who would provide information, emotional support and help with compensation applications.¹⁷ Second, mandatory sensitisation training to police personnel and prosecutors on victim communication, trauma-informed interviews and operationalisation of victim rights legislation must be institutionalised through the Tamil Nadu Police Academy and State Judicial Academy.¹⁸ Third, the compensation procedure should be simplified and the compensation proceedings should be initiated automatically upon registration of the FIR in respect of sexual offenses and acid attacks and legal services authorities should help proactively. Fourth, procedural improvements should include video-conferencing facilities for vulnerable witnesses, enforce in-camera trial rules and impose stringent timetables for investigation and trial with responsibility for unreasonable delays.¹⁹ Fifthly, pilot projects for restorative justice may be established for some categories of offences, permitting victim-offender mediation under judicial supervision, which has shown promise in

¹⁷ Victim Support, *Annual Report 2023* (London, 2023).

¹⁸ Bureau of Police Research and Development, *Model Training Manual for Sensitization of Police on Victim Rights* 12 (BPR&D, New Delhi, 2021).

¹⁹ The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (Act 46 of 2023), ss. 176, 183, 354.

terms of increasing victim satisfaction.²⁰ Finally, a victim feedback system should be built into the judicial process to measure satisfaction and to encourage continued improvement.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study on Chennai shows that, notwithstanding the huge advances in legislative victim-centrism by the Indian criminal justice system, the lived experience of victims is marked by moderate dissatisfaction with institutional neglect, communicative deficit and procedural hardship. The first contact of police investigation is the weakest link. Victims complain of apathy, delay and corruption. Court proceedings fare a little better, but are let down by delays and re-victimisation practices. Awareness of legal rights and compensation programs is dangerously poor and this is effectively preventing victims from getting rewards they are lawfully entitled to. Most importantly, satisfaction is not simply a function of case outcome, but is heavily influenced by the quality of the care, information and assistance victims receive the key principles of procedural justice.

These findings have immediate policy implications. But improving victim satisfaction is not a luxury, it is a democratic obligation. It's what the public expects of the rule of law. The ideas are pragmatic and based on the reported requirements of victims themselves, from the institutionalisation of victim support centres to mandatory training and procedural improvements. As India works towards a new criminal justice architecture in the form of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, the time is ripe to integrate victim-centricity not just in text but in institutional culture and daily practice. Only then can the promise of a just, fair and humane criminal justice system be fulfilled for those who experience the harm in the first place.

²⁰ John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation* 73 (Oxford University Press, New York, 2002); Anup Surendranath and Shreya Rastogi, "Restorative Justice in India: A Preliminary Inquiry", 10 NUJS Law Review 1 at 15 (2017)