



ISSN: 2583-7753

LAWFOYER INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DOCTRINAL LEGAL RESEARCH

[ISSN: 2583-7753]

Volume 4 | Issue 2

2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70183/lijdlr.2026.v04.172>

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BEYOND PROTECTION: REASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POCSO IN INDIA

Dr. Priyadarshini Samantray¹

I. ABSTRACT

Enacted in 2012, India's Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) constitutes the country's principal legislative response to child sexual abuse. This article examines the central research question of whether POCSO has effectively achieved its protective objectives after more than a decade of implementation, and to what extent its effectiveness should be assessed through broader indicators than conviction rates alone. The study adopts a doctrinal and comparative methodology, analysing the statutory framework, key decisions of the Supreme Court of India, and empirical data published by the National Crime Records Bureau. Comparative references are drawn from international child-protection standards under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and related institutional practices. The article addresses three principal objectives: evaluating the adequacy of POCSO's legislative design, identifying procedural and institutional barriers affecting implementation, and assessing whether existing enforcement mechanisms adequately protect child victims. The analysis demonstrates that although POCSO introduced gender-neutral offence definitions, Special Courts, mandatory reporting, and child-sensitive procedures, its effectiveness remains constrained by judicial delays, infrastructural deficiencies, inconsistent victim support, conceptual ambiguities, and persistent under-reporting. The article argues that effectiveness must be measured through deterrence, victim welfare, trauma-informed adjudication, and rehabilitation outcomes. It proposes targeted reforms, including legislative clarification, expansion of Special Court infrastructure, improved inter-agency coordination, technological integration, and dedicated budgetary support to strengthen India's child protection framework.

II. KEYWORDS

¹ Assistant Professor at Dhenkanal Law College, Dhenkanal, Odisha (India). Email: masterlucky1998@gmail.com

POCSO Act, child sexual abuse, special courts, reverse burden of proof, mandatory reporting.

III. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of child sexual abuse represents among the most egregious violations of human dignity within contemporary Indian society. Notwithstanding enhanced legislative frameworks and evolving judicial consciousness, such abuse persists as a deeply entrenched social problem, perpetuated through hierarchical family structures, communal silence, and institutional inaction. India's enactment of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act in 2012 (hereafter 'POCSO' or 'the Act') marked a transformative legislative intervention representing the culmination of sustained civil society advocacy, international convention obligations, and judicial acknowledgment of pre-existing legal deficiencies.²

The legislative imperative for POCSO emerged from converging domestic and international pressures. India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child imposed obligations to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. Simultaneously, alarming prevalence rates documented through national surveys revealed that significant proportions of children experienced some form of sexual abuse, with majority incidents remaining unreported or inadequately addressed through existing legal mechanisms. This twin recognition—of international obligation and domestic crisis catalysed legislative action.

Before POCSO's introduction, legislative responses to child sexual abuse comprised a fragmented assembly of provisions within the Indian Penal Code, 1860, including sections addressing rape, outrage to modesty, and unnatural offences. Legal scholars and practitioners widely critiqued this framework for its gender-restrictive language, failure to acknowledge children's particular vulnerability through graduated offences, and procedural insensitivity to child victims. Moreover, the IPC's age-neutral approach to

² UNICEF India, 'Child Protection: Sexual Violence against Children' (UNICEF 2021) <https://www.unicef.org/india/child-protection>

sexual offences failed to recognise that children, by virtue of their developmental stage and power differential with adult perpetrators, require distinctive legal protections. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act fundamentally restructured this legal architecture by defining a comprehensive range of sexual offences against children, establishing dedicated Special Courts for expedited adjudication, instituting victim-protective procedures, and implementing a reverse burden of proof mechanism. Although these references to the IPC are historical in nature and reflect the legal position prevailing prior to 2012, it is important to note that the IPC has since been repealed and replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which came into force on 1 July 2024. Accordingly, POCSO now operates alongside the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, and future legislative and procedural reforms must ensure effective coordination between these two statutory frameworks.

Nevertheless, exceeding one decade following the Act's implementation, fundamental questions regarding its efficacy persist. Statistical data from 2022 documents over 63,414 registered POCSO cases nationwide, indicating both heightened incidence rates and improved reporting mechanisms.³ Simultaneously, conviction rates remain concerningly modest at approximately 32%, while case pendency before Special Courts has reached critical proportions.⁴ These empirical indicators necessitate deeper interrogation: whether POCSO, as presently structured and operationalised, achieves genuine effectiveness – and whether 'effectiveness' itself requires conceptual broadening beyond traditional conviction-rate metrics.

This article unfolds across six substantive parts. Following this introductory section, Part II traces POCSO's legislative evolution and structural framework. Part III analyses pivotal judicial interpretations, concentrating on Supreme Court landmark decisions. Part IV examines empirical and institutional obstacles impeding effective implementation. Part V engages with conceptual critiques concerning definitional

³ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2022* (Ministry of Home Affairs 2023) ch 6.

⁴ *ibid.*

parameters and procedural equity. Part VI advances normative conclusions alongside reform recommendations.

A. Research Objectives

1. To examine whether the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act has effectively fulfilled its legislative objective of providing comprehensive protection to children from sexual offences.
2. To analyse the statutory design and judicial interpretation of POCSO, with particular reference to key decisions of the Supreme Court of India.
3. To identify the principal procedural, institutional, and infrastructural barriers that impede effective implementation of the Act.
4. To evaluate whether effectiveness should be measured through broader indicators, including deterrence, victim welfare, trauma-informed adjudication, and rehabilitation outcomes, rather than conviction rates alone.
5. To propose legislative, judicial, and administrative reforms to strengthen India's child protection framework.

B. Research Questions

1. To what extent has POCSO succeeded in achieving its protective objectives after more than a decade of implementation?
2. What interpretive principles have emerged from judicial decisions concerning the scope and application of the Act?
3. What structural and institutional challenges continue to hinder the effective enforcement of POCSO?
4. Does the current framework adequately balance child protection with constitutional guarantees of fairness and due process?
5. What reforms are necessary to enhance the practical effectiveness of the Act?

C. Research Methodology

This study adopts a doctrinal, empirical, and comparative research methodology. The doctrinal component analyses the text of POCSO and relevant judicial precedents of the Supreme Court of India and various High Courts. The empirical component relies upon statistical data and institutional reports, including publications of the National Crime Records Bureau, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, and other governmental and academic studies concerning implementation outcomes.

The comparative component draws upon international child-protection standards, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and related best practices in victim-centred justice. Primary sources include statutes, amendments, judicial decisions, and official reports, while secondary sources comprise books, peer-reviewed articles, and policy studies. This methodology enables a comprehensive evaluation of POCSO's legislative design, judicial interpretation, institutional performance, and reform requirements.

IV. LEGISLATIVE GENESIS AND STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

POCSO's legislative genealogy traces to the Supreme Court's observations in *Sakshi v Union of India*,⁵ wherein the Court identified fundamental inadequacies within existing legal provisions addressing child sexual abuse and directed governmental development of appropriate legislative and procedural mechanisms. The National Commission for Women had formulated preliminary proposals for dedicated child sexual abuse legislation as early as 2000. Subsequently, the Verma Committee Report of 2013, while primarily addressing sexual violence against women, reinforced the necessity for victim-centred legal frameworks within the Indian context.⁶

Enacted under constitutional concurrent list authority in 2012, POCSO extends protection to all individuals below eighteen years regardless of gender, thereby decisively departing

⁵ *Sakshi v Union of India* (2004) 5 SCC 518.

⁶ Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 (Act 13 of 2013); Justice JS Verma Committee, *Report of the Committee on Amendments to Criminal Law* (Government of India 2013).

from the IPC's gender-specific terminology. The Act establishes a graduated offence spectrum: penetrative sexual assault (Section 3), aggravated penetrative sexual assault (Section 5), sexual assault (Section 7), aggravated sexual assault (Section 9), sexual harassment (Section 11), and utilisation of children for pornographic purposes (Section 13). Each offence category prescribes graduated mandatory minimum sentences,⁷ reflecting parliamentary intent to correlate punishment severity with harm magnitude.

Procedurally, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act mandates the establishment of Special Courts in each district, requires child statements to be recorded by female police officers of sub-inspector rank or above, prescribes in camera proceedings, prohibits disclosure of the child victim's identity, and provides for support person assistance throughout the trial process. These statutory safeguards are supplemented by the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Rules, 2020, which replaced the 2012 Rules and introduced detailed requirements relating to periodic training of police officers, prosecutors and support persons, child-friendly courtroom infrastructure, interim and final compensation procedures, and inter-agency coordination among police, Child Welfare Committees, Special Courts and District Child Protection Units. Despite this strengthened regulatory framework, compliance with the 2020 Rules remains uneven across jurisdictions, contributing to many of the institutional deficiencies examined in Part IV. Significantly, Sections 29 and 30 introduce statutory presumptions regarding guilt and culpable mental state upon establishing commission of the prohibited act, thereby reversing the conventional criminal law principle of presumed innocence.

The 2019 Amendment to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act enhanced punishments for aggravated penetrative sexual assault under Section 6, including the introduction of capital punishment as a sentencing option. This punishment applies where the offence is committed under any of the aggravating circumstances enumerated in Section 5, which include, among other circumstances, assault upon a child below

⁷ Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, ss 4, 6, 8, 10, 12.

twelve years of age. While responsive to public sentiment following high-profile cases, the amendment's deterrent efficacy remains the subject of continuing scholarly and judicial debate, as examined in Part V.

V. JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION: DEVELOPING THE POCSO JURISPRUDENCE

India's Supreme Court has substantially influenced POCSO's interpretive development. In *Nipun Saxena v Union of India*,⁸ the Court promulgated comprehensive directives safeguarding child victim identity, mandating in camera Special Court proceedings, and emphasising state obligations regarding legal aid provision, psychological support, and survivor rehabilitation. This judgment established foundational principles transforming victim protection from statutory aspiration into judicially enforceable mandate.

Addressing systemic delays, the Supreme Court of India in *Alakh Alok Srivastava v Union of India*⁹ took cognisance of alarming POCSO case pendency upon a petition filed by Alakh Alok Srivastava, who appeared in person, and directed High Courts to monitor case disposal while urging compliance with Section 35(2) one-year trial completion mandate. This judicial intervention catalysed the establishment of dedicated Fast Track Special Courts through Central Government initiatives, with more than 700 such courts operational nationwide by 2022.¹⁰

The jurisprudentially significant and controversial recent Supreme Court intervention arose from the Bombay High Court's ruling in *State of Maharashtra v Libnus*,¹¹ where a single judge, interpreting Section 7, determined 'sexual assault' required skin-to-skin physical contact, acquitting an accused who touched a child's breast over clothing. This ruling provoked substantial criticism. The Supreme Court, in *Attorney General for India v*

⁸ *Nipun Saxena v Union of India* (2019) 2 SCC 703.

⁹ *Alakh Alok Srivastava v Union of India* (2018) 17 SCC 291.

¹⁰ NCRB (n 3).

¹¹ *Libnus v State of Maharashtra*, 2021 SCC OnLine Bom 66. (Bombay High Court decision subsequently reversed by the Supreme Court of India in *Attorney General for India v Satish*.)

Satish,¹² categorically reversed the High Court, holding that physical contact with sexual intent – including contact over clothing constitutes sexual assault. The Court emphasised POCSO's protective purpose, determining that restrictive anatomical interpretation contradicts legislative intent.

Regarding evidentiary standards, the Supreme Court in *Vijay v State of Madhya Pradesh*¹³ established that credible child witness testimony requires no corroboration and suffices for conviction. Additionally, in *Ganesan v State*,¹⁴ the Court reaffirmed Section 29's reverse burden of proof constitutionality, rejecting Article 20(3) constitutional challenges.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES: EMPIRICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

Despite robust legislative architecture and progressive judicial interpretation, POCSO's ground-level implementation encounters substantial obstacles. Foremost among these challenges is systemic delay. National Crime Records Bureau statistics reveal that Special Court case pendency exceeded 89% in 2022,¹⁵ starkly contradicting Section 35(2)'s one-year trial completion mandate. Multiple factors contribute to this backlog: insufficient Special Court designations relative to caseload volume, inadequate judicial officer training in child-sensitive procedures, and chronic resource deficiencies.

The infrastructure deficit extends beyond mere court numbers. Many designated Special Courts lack basic amenities required for child-friendly proceedings: separate waiting areas preventing victim-accused encounters, age-appropriate furniture, video-conferencing facilities for remote testimony, and adequate private spaces for victim-support person consultations. In rural and semi-urban districts, the situation proves particularly acute, with some Special Courts operating from makeshift premises lacking even elementary privacy protections. This infrastructural inadequacy directly

¹² *Attorney General for India v Satish* (2021) 5 SCC 283.

¹³ *Vijay v State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022) SCC OnLine SC 1314.

¹⁴ *Ganesan v State* (2020) 10 SCC 573.

¹⁵ NCRB (n 3).

undermines the Act's procedural safeguards, transforming statutory entitlements into hollow promises.

Delayed justice generates cascading detrimental effects. Prolonged proceedings traumatise child victims through repeated court appearances and testimony, often resulting in testimony fade and consequent acquittals.¹⁶ Empirical research documenting POCSO implementation demonstrates that protracted trials frequently culminate in victim and witness hostility, particularly in familial abuse cases where social and economic pressures intensify over time.¹⁷ The psychological toll on child witnesses proves substantial: recurring court visits disrupt education, trigger trauma recollection, and expose children to hostile cross-examination that can constitute secondary victimisation.

A second critical implementation deficit concerns victim support infrastructure. While POCSO mandates support person provision, psychological counselling, and interim compensation, these provisions suffer inconsistent implementation across jurisdictions. Many states lack adequate child psychologist availability, and support person training remains rudimentary. Research indicates that child victims frequently experience secondary traumatisation through insensitive questioning, hostile courtroom environments, and exposure to accused persons during proceedings.¹⁸

Third, mandatory reporting provisions under Section 19 encounter significant enforcement challenges. Despite statutory obligations upon individuals possessing child abuse knowledge to report to authorities, combined with prescribed penalties for non-compliance,¹⁹ actual reporting rates remain concerningly low. Multiple factors explain this under-reporting: social stigma surrounding sexual abuse, familial pressure favouring

¹⁶ *Karan Singh v State of Haryana* (2022) SCC OnLine P&H 1012.

¹⁷ Bharti Ali, Swagata Raha and Hina Nandrajog, *Mapping the Implementation of POCSO Act 2012* (Centre for Child and the Law, NLSIU 2015).

¹⁸ *Child Welfare Committee v State of Rajasthan* [2021] Raj HC (unreported).

¹⁹ Enakshi Ganguly Thukral and Meenakshi Mitra, *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012: A Critical Review* (HAQ Centre for Child Rights 2019).

silence, fear of legal system entanglement, and widespread ignorance regarding POCSO provisions.²⁰

Fourth, inter-agency coordination between police, Child Welfare Committees, Special Courts, and prosecution authorities frequently proves inadequate. Cases documented in various High Court decisions reveal communication breakdowns, jurisdictional confusion, and duplicative procedural requirements creating unnecessary victim burden.²¹

VII. CONCEPTUAL AND PROCEDURAL CRITIQUES

Beyond implementation challenges, POCSO faces substantive conceptual critiques. Privacy concerns constitute one significant area. While the Act mandates victim identity protection and in camera proceedings,²² practical implementation varies. Media coverage occasionally breaches confidentiality protocols, and judicial orders sometimes contain identifying details requiring subsequent redaction.

The reverse burden of proof mechanism, while protective in intent, generates due process concerns. Critics argue that presuming guilt upon establishing physical act commission potentially conflicts with fundamental fair trial principles, notwithstanding the Supreme Court's constitutional validation in *Ganesan*. Additionally, the statutory definition of consent deeming all persons below eighteen incapables of consensual sexual activity creates complexities in adolescent relationship contexts.²³

The 2019 Amendment introducing capital punishment for specific aggravated offences remains particularly contentious. Empirical evidence internationally demonstrates limited correlation between death penalty availability and crime deterrence. Furthermore, capital punishment's introduction potentially discourages reporting in

²⁰ National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, *Guidelines for Implementation of POCSO Act* (Ministry of Women & Child Development 2017).

²¹ *Yogesh v State of Maharashtra* (2021) SCC OnLine Bom 290.

²² *Justice KS Puttaswamy (Retd) v Union of India* (2017) 10 SCC 1.

²³ Sudha Bhardwaj, 'POCSO and the Question of Consent: A Critical Re-appraisal' (2020) 55(2) Economic and Political Weekly 34; Pratiksha Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India* (OUP 2014).

familial abuse scenarios where victims oppose condemning family members to death. Some commentators argue that enhanced life imprisonment with strict parole restrictions might achieve greater deterrent effect while avoiding capital punishment's ethical and practical complications.²⁴

Finally, the Act's focus on criminalisation and punishment, while necessary, inadequately addresses prevention, rehabilitation, and social transformation. Comprehensive child protection requires integrated approaches combining legal enforcement with education, community awareness, perpetrator rehabilitation, and survivor support services extending beyond criminal justice system confines.

VIII. SUGGESTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

POCSO represents substantial legislative progress in India's child protection framework. Its comprehensive offence definitions, victim-sensitive procedures, and stringent penalties demonstrate parliamentary commitment to addressing child sexual abuse seriously. Nevertheless, this article's analysis reveals significant gaps between statutory aspiration and practical realisation.

Addressing these deficiencies necessitates multifaceted reform. First, substantial judicial infrastructure enhancement: increasing Special Court numbers proportionate to caseload, providing intensive child-sensitive adjudication training for judges and prosecutors, and ensuring adequate resource allocation for support services.²⁵ Specifically, each district should have at least one fully-equipped Special Court with dedicated personnel, child-friendly infrastructure, and technological capabilities for trauma-minimising testimony recording. Judicial officers require mandatory training modules addressing child psychology, trauma-informed questioning techniques, and gender-sensitive adjudication methodologies.

²⁴ Justice (Retd) AP Shah Committee, *Report on Child Sexual Abuse Laws* (Law Commission of India 2017); Mrinal Satish, *Discretion, Discrimination and the Rule of Law: Reforming Rape Sentencing in India* (CUP 2017).

²⁵ Law Commission of India, *Report No 283: Child Witnesses* (Law Commission of India 2023).

Second, legislative refinement should address identified ambiguities and procedural gaps. This includes: clarifying consent framework complexities in adolescent relationship contexts; strengthening mandatory reporting enforcement through awareness campaigns and institutional accountability; establishing robust inter-agency coordination protocols; and enhancing victim support service statutory entitlements.²⁶ The Act would benefit from explicit provisions addressing digital sexual abuse, including online grooming, sexting coercion, and child sexual abuse material creation and distribution. Although the Supreme Court of India has substantially clarified this area in *Just Rights for Children Alliance v S Harish*,²⁷ holding that the downloading, viewing, and possession of child sexual abuse material constitute punishable offences under POCSO and recommending replacement of the term “child pornography” with “child sexual exploitation and abuse material” (CSEAM), legislative codification remains necessary to incorporate these recommendations expressly and to establish robust reporting and enforcement mechanisms for online abuse.

Third, technological integration could expedite proceedings while reducing victim trauma. Video testimony recording, remote evidence collection, and digital case management systems warrant systematic implementation nationwide.²⁸ Investment in secure video-conferencing infrastructure would enable child witnesses to testify from familiar, comfortable environments rather than intimidating courtrooms, significantly reducing secondary traumatisation. Additionally, digitised case tracking systems would enhance transparency, enable pendency monitoring, and facilitate inter-agency information sharing while maintaining necessary confidentiality safeguards.

Fourth, effectiveness measurement paradigms require broadening beyond conviction rates. Comprehensive evaluation should encompass case disposal timeframes, victim satisfaction indicators, recidivism rates, reporting trend analysis, and survivor

²⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 13: The Right of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence* (CRC/C/GC/13, 2011).

²⁷ *Just Rights for Children Alliance v S Harish* (Criminal Appeal Nos 2161–2162 of 2024, decided 23 September 2024).

²⁸ Law Commission of India (n 28).

rehabilitation outcomes. Only through holistic assessment frameworks can genuine effectiveness be measured. Annual impact assessments should examine not merely quantitative metrics but qualitative indicators including survivor well-being, social reintegration success, and perpetrator rehabilitation outcomes where applicable.

Fifth, POCSO requires complementation through statutory preventive frameworks—mandating age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in all schools, community sensitisation programmes led by accredited civil society organisations, and government-funded public awareness campaigns. Prevention, rehabilitation, and criminalisation must function as integrated components rather than relegating entire child protection burdens to criminal justice systems alone.²⁹ Educational curricula should incorporate age-appropriate modules on bodily autonomy, consent, safe and unsafe touch, and reporting mechanisms, empowering children with knowledge and vocabulary to identify and report abuse.

Finally, dedicated budgetary allocations for POCSO implementation require statutory protection against diversion. Currently, inadequate funding undermines infrastructure development, personnel training, and victim support services. Ring-fenced budgets with transparent utilisation monitoring would ensure that financial constraints do not compromise child protection effectiveness.

IX. CONCLUSION

POCSO was enacted with the ambition of transcending mere protection—creating not simply a penal statute but a comprehensive child-centred ecosystem of rights, remedies, and responsibilities. Realising this ambition demands candid acknowledgment of the Act's present limitations, political determination to implement structural reforms, and effectiveness reconceptualisation measured not solely by conviction statistics but by whether every child experiencing harm has been heard, supported, and empowered to reclaim dignity and safety. The journey from legislative promise to lived reality requires

²⁹ NCPCR (n 24); *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v Union of India* (2011) 5 SCC 1

sustained commitment, adequate resources, and collective societal determination to prioritise child welfare above institutional convenience or social discomfort.

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