

The Lost Child – Episode 2

How a team of researchers blew the lid off Muzzafarpur sexual abuse case

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In the previous episode, we travelled to the town of Muzaffarpur which made headlines last year when a social audit conducted by a team of researchers of Tata Institute of Social Sciences brought to limelight horrific cases of sexual assault being perpetrated against young girls, these young girls were living in the Balika Griha, a shelter home. In this episode, you will hear from Tarique Mohammed, Assistant Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Science, who was the lead researcher of this social audit.

Hi this is Padma Priya, your host for this show The Lost Child brought to you by Suno India and supported by Firstpost.

Last year, in May, Tarique and his team submitted the report to this social audit to the Bihar government which detailed multiple instances of abuse in over 15 shelter homes for children, women and elderly. I reached out to Tarique when we began research for this podcast to understand more about the audit and how it was conducted. Parts of this interview is in Hindi. You will find translations in the transcript available on our website www.sunoindia.in

PADMA: I know you were leading the team from TISS that blew the lid of this horrendous scandal from Bihar. And I know you probably have spoken a lot about it but can you sort of take us through the whole process like how did you discover this.

TARIQUE: So this particular institution was part of the 110 institutions for Social Welfare Department, Bihar Government and of course, this was you know the whole idea of conducting social audit came from a very different perspective actually. The whole idea of doing that social audit was to ensure to see if there were serious issues like the way what came out of Muzaffarpur but the original idea was also to ensure support for the organisation which were running these shelters so if there are good organisations kindly, genuinely trying to do good work but have problems, limitations in terms of its skills, in terms of handling the population that they were handling and if trainings are required or some administrative difficulties with the government so we have to look at all those factors. Idea was to see if the children or the women or the elderly people who are staying in the institutions, are they safe, are they happy, what is their feedback about the place?

PADMA: Can you tell me a bit more in terms of the non-verbal and verbal communication aspect that you are talking about and also if you could sort of describe how that shelter home looked like and how did it, you know when you entered I know it is not the part of one visit but say the first time when you actually got there what was the sense that you got there?

TARIQUE: Now if a home has 50 children and it is completely quiet for us that was a concern. In fact I will give you an example so we had this home where we reached there at our lunch time and it was extremely chaotic, it was extremely noisy that we could not even hear the person standing at the gate was telling the security person was asking our details so we were not able to hear him. And, even later on when we were speaking to the superintendent we had some 2 girls coming into her office you know pushing each other and then we heard another staff member saying baith jao theek se, I will punish you. But you know what we were not hearing what that staff was saying to children that I will punish you, what we were hearing was the noises that children were making. The fact that children were not listening to her was an indicator that she is probably saying it because we are there now one way of looking at that could be if in our presence the staff could say this much what could be going on in our

absence. The other way of looking at that situation was that you know if people were actually punishing these children they would have the fear about that person and the fear was not there. Now even in our households when you have 3-4 children it becomes chaotic. Now 50 children are there at a place and the place is completely silent, children are scared of saying anything, then you know in this particular home if there is reluctance on the staff to let you in, there is delay happening that can not be explained for some random reason that we are checking with this person, we are checking with that person, then you know there is something to hide, something you need time for then staff also speak to each other like say very small simple thing we are doing say if you go and you enter the superintendent's room and you are sitting there and obviously they will offer you some refreshments and maybe some of the children only will be bringing it. Now for you it might be you know just one boy bringing some chai but then that boy actually goes to the back and tells all other children that you know these people are the friends of this person or the administration, they have not come here for us and then you can cry to whatever extent but there is you now highly unlikely that children will be able to share anything with you. Then we were using things like say for example all institutions had been given say water purifiers by the government now we were carrying an empty water bottle with us and you know in the middle of the conversation when we are doing the FGDs focused group discussion with children just one of us would ask some child like bacche please pani ladoge thoda, and that person will get up, the child will get up and go. Now instinctively that child would get up and fetch water from jahan se bhi vo roz peete honge so we found that most of the children were getting water from the tap jo bahar aangan me laga hua hai. So maybe we were being shown a water purifier but maybe that is being used by the staff. So bacche jab sehme hue hain that also if they are not surprised with your visit, if they are already aware of your visit and then if they reluctantly speak or if they are little apprehensive that means something has been told to them about what they can speak to us and what they can't speak to us that itself is an indicator there is something wrong. Now another thing that would be very useful for anybody to look at is the way we look at children. No where we were going and telling like you know we have come with an authority and we will do this. We were going, we were introducing ourselves, we were seeking children's permission to speak to them and then we were telling them who we are. Then we were telling them about why we have been sent by the state, lot of the children also live with the understanding that the state does not care for them and that feeling of neglect, not being wanted results in lot of anger and often hate towards the state. So we were clearly telling these people that you know state wants you to be safe, government wants to know how you are doing and that is why we have been sent so there was one level of apprehension that we were removing by this initial conversation that we were doing with the children. Then we were giving them clear option of, because we did not know what the staff had told them so we told them that it is your choice please speak to us, please talk to us and share anything that you want to share but if you do not want to share that is also perfectly fine. You know you don't have to say anything just because we are here and you have been told by the administration that you should speak to us, you don't have to do that. Then we were also very clearly telling them that, maybe some children probably they might have been staying in institutions for very long time and have an understanding that nothing will change so we were also telling them that we are not sure what will change after what you will tell us and we can not guarantee what will happen with this report but what we can ensure is that whatever you tell us that will be a part of the report, whatever you give us consent for putting in the report that nobody will be able to make us remove that, that would be part of the report. This is the assurance that we can give you. Then we also sought children's health. We told them that maybe by the time something will happen you may not be here. You have gone through difficulty, you have gone through abuse, you may not be here by the time something actually happens, you will get out of this place but children who will come in future to this place they will be safe so please help us. Help us help the government in improving the place if there are issues. That is when lot of students start speaking up of course their trauma in this particular home was severe so children did not really speak up in a very direct in the sense that saying that this happened with me but there were a lot of indirect sharing where they were talking about incidents that they were, and they know of and that was

enough for us to flag it as a very important serious issue that needed to be investigated by appropriate authorities including you know medical assistance. Like say you know you might have read a lot of these children also had burn marks or cut marks on their bodies, now there was no way that we would have known about that because those things came out only when one 18:23 medical examination happened and because these burn marks and cut marks were also in their private parts you know we were not doing that kind of investigation. The whole purpose of this was very different but I think the larger, the ripple effect of this could be that I strongly believe that children across the institution, there are a lot of children going through similar abuse, probably never reporting because they feel nothing will happen but if justice is met in this case, I am sure you know a lot of other children will be able to speak up.

PADMA: when all these details started emerging about the scale of this abuse what went through your head.

TARIQUE: It has been an extremely disturbing phase then of course we read a lot of news about abuses happening to children. I mean it has been happening isse pehle bhi but you know it is like you read something, you see something on television it hits you for few seconds and then you carry on with your things but now that we know the children, you know it has been impacting us very very deeply and you know team has been extremely disturbed with what has been coming out you know it is very extremely unfortunate that nothing has actually changed even after you know such a massive tragedy because you should look at the monetary system that are in place, the mechanism that are there, the allocations that are there, nothing has changed. So even now it is like you know we are waiting, all institutions for us are good institutions till the time from somewhere some child will manage to let out and then report it to somebody. You know I think we are failing our children because you know after Bihar, there was something in Orissa happened and something happened in Orissa, there is something happened in Tamil Nadu. You know what are we doing? We are doing nothing and you know crime will still happen maybe you can say that but what has been the effort the least that any state could have done would have been to go and check. Speak to people, speak to these children and find out that they are okay. But we have not done even that much also so I mean as the time is you know we are really wondering if anything will ever change or anything will happen. You know even in this case also we don't know it is in the court so we can't really say much about it but in general even as a child care system that we have in the country what has really changed? You know you may want to analyze you know have there been any changes brought in by the government, by the state governments or the Central government to ensure that these kind of disasters are not repeating. Not even a single change has been brought in.

we met children in adoption centres ageing 3 or 4 years who would not say a word, bol nahi paa rahe hain. Now why is that happening. How does a child learn in a family, you know parents speak to, family members speak to, usko bolte hain kuch kuch bolte hain bache ye hai, aisa waisa you know mummy bolo papa bolo, pani bolo roti bolo. You know we make the child say words and that is how child learns and we realise that this is such a dangerous thing that you know the child is just growing in age there is no socialization, there is nobody to even play with that baby because that is not the profile of any of the employees there. You know that is not the job for any of the attendant there. Now this child is 4 years also par usko kuch bol nahi pa raha hai wo kyuki usne suna hi nahi hai kuch and this was so shocking. You know it is so easy to even the negligence the kind of neglect, they were specialised adoption agencies running without you know the medical worker now if I say this theek hai ek health worker nahi appoint hua hoga but when you see it in the context of the adoption agency then only you can realise that there are babies, and most of the babies would be on some medication, some syrup, some vaccination and there is no medical worker that has been appointed. Now it is only a aayas who have to give the medicine. And there is no system that has been made by the organisation

so what happens is ek ayya ne abhi dawa di 2 baje, jo 2 baje se 8 baje ki shift me ayi usne ake dubara dawa dedi usko so at times the child might be getting double dose or kabhi bilkul bhi nahi. Now this could be fatal for the child but for the agency even if something happens they can very easily pass off that a natural thing happening because kis ko farak nahi pad raha hai ki agar ye bacche survive nahi karte hain, marr jate hain to hum keh denge wo baccha bohot bimar tha you know hum keh denge baccha aisi buri halat me mila tha humko. Mila hoga buri halat me lekin buri halat me milne ke baad ek saal se apke pas tha, do saal se apke pas tha.

PADMA: Where do you think the state mechanisms are lacking you know having done this audit across 110 homes in one state where do you think you know what is happening exactly on ground? What are all the things that are actually lacking?

TARIQUE: See it is a very you know, there are very fundamental absence gaps that are there for example like you know we have a monetary mechanism right? And so there are officers that are supposed to visit. Now one way of like what this officer said, state is not doing enough. Now let us start with the kind of budget, the provisions that are there. Right now the state gives some 2000 rs per child for all expenses. Now the amount of that money that is being spent on their food is about some 1300 rs that they spend on food and rest of the other things. Now food needs a day and the expectation at the agency should be giving fruit a day, milk, egg you know how do you do that in 12 rs or 10 rs for a meal? That is impossible. So maybe everytime we will speak about diet that we give we will talk about yes we give them fruits, we give them milk we give them all nutritious meal you know because that is what our dietary chart says but you will not 32:38 the you know against the provisions that we have made, the advance that has been allocated. There are children who want to go to school in fact we have visited an institution where the institution was on the first floor, the school was on the ground floor. There was this boy who was so keen in studying that he had converted the old files of the organisation into painting books and has done lot of sketches and painted and written a lot of stories but he could not go to school because why? Because the fear was what if he runs away? Now can we really not have one additional staff which will take children to school and bring them back. You know the school says that hum zimmedari nahi lenge, the home says mere pas staff nahi hai. So children are, simply pade hue hain institutions me. Jo humara monetary system hai it is completely focusing on the infrastructure, administrative thing so humne jo as per JJ Act there are mandatory documents that have to be maintained, there are administrative procedures that have to be followed to hum ne wo rules ke hisab se wo documents, files bana li hain and we are maintaining those files. As an agency I am maintaining that file so as an officer who visits also sees those files only and asks me and goes back happily.

<Narration: This is an important point that Tarique makes. In the muzaffarpur shelter home case, there were 60 recorded visits made by social welfare workers. But questions need to be asked if the social workers indeed went and spoke to the girls staying there or simply looked at the files and ticked it off their to-do list things to do.

How come children are just languishing in the institutions for many years. When the child could tell us his address how come you know and the child has been there in the institution for 6 months, 8 months how come the institution does not know the address of the child you know which means nobody has spoken to the child or whenever the child probably tried giving the address usko kisi ne seriously nahi liya similarly we were saying that there has to be a social audit done for all institutions as a rule by an independent agency where and you know any kind of evaluation, there are regular evaluations also happening as an ongoing evaluation which government does for all institutions now any kind of evaluation should not be considered valid unless the users of the facility have said yes to it. You know if I as an auditor, say district child protection officer I go and give my report saying so and so home is good it should not be accepted unless the children of that home have said that it is good. That should

be, I will give you one example, JJ act asks for children's committee you know so every home has to make a former children's committee and there has to be a monthly meeting for that and those minutes of those meetings have to be documented in a register that has to be maintained now usually what happens, we were told that the officer would come or anybody visiting the institution will come and ask whether the committee has been formed, they will say yes. Meeting karate hain? Yes. Minutes banaye hain? Yes. Register dikhaiye. They will show the register and they are happy that yes it is a good organisation they have done this but what we were doing was slightly different. One of us would look at the document and look at the names of the members of the committee then we will message to other colleagues who were doing focused group discussions with children and then we would identify those children and ask questions that would reveal to us whether they know about this committee or not. So we found that there were so many places where the children's name were there in the minutes of those meetings, those registers that they were maintaining but children did not know anything about it. So just to maintain the record, that record has been maintained. So unless we speak to children, unless we make it essential that you know third party social audit will happen and that too with the involvement of the children, this will not change and it is a very simple things have to be done you just have to tell the child, communicate to the child that we care for you. You know you are not a unwanted, useless, worthless being which is a burden on the street. No, we want you to have a normal childhood and if this much we can communicate to the children you know I think it is not just about the immediate children, immediate times but also for future. **Just think of the problem that we will have if these children they grow 15-20 yrs later, when they will grow into adults, the kind of you know anger they have against the society.** That you know nobody cared for us, nobody you know bothered where we lived or not, I think that is a very dangerous situation that we are creating.

PADMA: have you seen any sort of changes, from any other state governments since this incident came to light and many others absolute after that like you said.

TARIQUE: Yeah so we recently we just finished field visits for Delhi institutions so Delhi commission for women also wanted us to audit all women institutions and girl child care institutions so we just finished the visits. Of course it was done by the Delhi women commission, we were doing only the they had asked us to do only the girl child and women institutions and not the other institutions and somebody, I mean we have been getting information from other places where unfortunately most states have not done the social audit but internally they have sent some officers to kind of check on things and so maybe to some extent that has happened but the kind of intervention or the corrective measures that should have been taken have not really been done infact, government of India was doing its assessment of the shelters through 39:56 and even there were large number of abuse cases that were reported but nothing has been done about it so yeah it is a sad scenario actually.

PADMA: Could you cause you know you spoke about the NCPR report, now could you tell me a bit more about this report. I mean I have read a part of that report umm the one that for me 40:28 that they have said that I think there are 50000 adoptable children. When I hear you say you know like you gave this instance of how a child could tell the address but the home was not doing enough and you know I am like having 40:42 doing this, when I am doing research for this I see many many cases, I hear out many such cases happening where you know the child perhaps is in a position to you know tell who their parents are, where they live but somehow the information is not going to the authorities and that family 40:58 is not happening so yeah just in terms of what you think were the key highlights of report itself and you know what has happened after that because ha ek report to public domain me aya the but in terms of way forward I have not heard of anything concrete so which is you know you are in it so maybe throw some light?

TARIQUE: I just know that this matter came up during one of the hearings in the Supreme Court where attorney for the government of India said, they gave a number specific I think some 1575 children who reported abuse in the institutions and when the bench asked what did the government do about it? They responded that we have forwarded the information to the state governments. I think you know if these are the irrespective of whose mandate it was though I don't believe it wasn't government of India's women and child development mandate, even if it was not I think we can not just say that state ko information humne dediya hai because I mean these are the children we don't know they continue to be in the same places, you know they continue to be abused even now so even I am not aware of any action has been taken and also if you see just like you know what happened yesterday this Chandrapur incident came out now again something will happen some arrest will happen. I think it is time that we also need to look at the larger 42:39 arrangements that we have. What stops us as a country, as a society to create structures environment where our children are safe. Why is it that so many children are getting abandoned you know I from my experience of visiting institutions I across that street I can safely say that at least 50% of these children can easily go back home only if the staff that is working in these institutions were a little sensitive, have little empathy towards the children feeling that yes they can go back home. I mean we still follow the system of you know when the child shares her information with me I send a postal card to the other state asking that okay you know this place exists in your state or not? I mean if I am really proactive what does it cost me I can just pick up my phone. And the sooner it is done, you know the chances of reintegration are higher because probably there would be a missing complaint, lodge hua hoga, probably the child would still be able to recall now, as the time will pass the child may not be able to recall so you know these little gaps where you know we take our own sweet time maybe you don't know even in the first few days if some kind of abuse happens in the child that itself can trigger a trauma where a child will not be able to share anything after that. I think it is all about whether we care or not. I think more than the you know more than anything else it is about whether we feel anything only for our child or we look at all children as our responsibility and we really want to work for their safety. You know how is it possible that you know it does nothing to us when we read about children being cut into pieces. You know they in this case also some 6yrs, 7 yrs, 8 yrs children have been raped and it does nothing to anybody of us? And I think be it the state or central government you know state as an entity is able to continue with this kind of apathy also because the society is apathy. A lot of these things are very preventable things but we do not do that and the biggest example of this I want to ask the government tell us one thing that has changed after Muzaffarpur? One thing that has been brought in as a change in the systems or in the mechanisms, in the safety processes, audits, anything. You know one thing have you given additional staff, given more counsellors, have you brought in some mental health treatment facilities there? Have you brought in any kind of better food, recreation? Anything? Any one change that has happened? Nothing has been done.

PADMA: Yeah I mean I think the apathy for me is the more shocking bit you know. And like they said the only reason it probably woke me up is because I end up asking myself this question ki any one of those children could have been mine but it should not work that way like we should care about every child it really does not matter whose child it is.

TARIQUE: See jo baccha institution me pohoncha hai wo bacha already suffer kar raha hai I mean wo bacha apni family se bahar hai wo har din ek darr me jee raha hai. Even if nothing is happening say ek hum ghar me like my brother's child she light bhi off hoti hai to darne lgti hai you know she does not go to room alone she is like some 4 years abhi to wo jayegi nahi to I am saying ki what makes her feel safe is ki ghar pe log hain. chachu hain, papa hai, mummy hai, daadi hai you know the family members. So kuch nahi hota hai even then also the child feels safe when people are there, when his or her family are there. The child wo already family setting se bahar hai, wo bhale hi abuse nahi ho raha hai institution me even then the child is vulnerable because that feeling of safety, that feeling of being cared for, that feeling of love that you know hum bache hum apko pyar karte hain, that feeling that

child is missing that so anyways his/her childhood is not normal and on top of that so hum sabke liye jitne zada bache institutions main reh rahe hain kahin na kahin that is also an indicator or a reflection of us, who we are. So bilkul bhi hume farak nahi padta hai warna apne bache ke lie sabko pyar hai lekin jo bacha sanstha me, kisi bhi tarah ki sanstha me pohoncha hai bhale hi bohut achi sanstha hai lekin wo bacha already aur jin circumstances me aya hoga to uske upar abuse hua hoga tab wo nikla hoga wahan se, trauma me agar maa baap se chut bhi gaya hai agar koi aur abuse nahi hua hai lekin chut gaya hai bichad gaya hai even that trauma wo bacha shayad abandonment ke sath crisis me life me grow krega wo. So these are very deeply rooted psychological impacts that child goes through and we are doing nothing, even in the institution what are we doing hum sirf wahan pe bistar aur khana hi provide kar rahe hain what are we doing? What is there to heal the trauma of the child? You know that is not even part of the programme. Ek bacha jisko kisine abandon kardia hai wo bacha shayad life bhar wo abandonment ke issues rahenge usko. But we are not doing anything to heal those traumas and unfortunately we are not even thinking about it.

Padma: Did you during your social audit also find any homes which were doing a pretty good job of taking care of children, I mean looking at them beyond just as inmates at a child care institution. Okay could you tell us a bit about that?

TARIQUE: Yes we did meet few institutions which were doing quite a good job and in fact this included both the government and non-government homes and again they were also doing very simple like for example this observation in Darbhanga it was a government facility only. The superintendent that was there you know every evening he would play with the boys there now the fact that he himself was playing with the boys meant the boys had access to him so if they had any complaints any staff or they were being troubled or anything they would directly tell him. On the other hand if there were any kind of limitations or restrictions of course he was also operating with the same amount of funds so he had imitations but because he was engaging with the children, he was playing with them directly everyday he was able to tell them that you know these are my limitations, he was able to tell them that you know we can not do this and the boys were able to accept that, the boys were able to see his point. Then he was taking all his meals with the children. The fact that he was eating with the children resulted in certain minimum standard of serving and cooking there. Then he was using children into gardening there and so he had made that campus with you know he would do a lot of plantation there. Similarly we met another institution where you know these people would they would use jo bhi unke friends hai dusre district main unko phone karke address verify kar lenge and then they will send a letter followed with a phone call saying hum letter bhej rahe hain aap inka pata bilkul laga dijiye. They would allow children to speak to their you know if there are people known. So small things, we have listen down those organisations also. Infact this particular you know the example I was giving that this place was very noisy this was in 54:15 Sarai girl's home where we saw that bachon ko darr hi nahi hai wo chilla rahe hai staff room ke upar murga bana denge man jao but usko hi dhakka de rahe hain. I mean 50 children jahan pe hongee it can not be a quiet place, it was extremely chaotic. Probably organisation was feeling a little uneasy ki hum log pata nahi kya likhenge but we thought if this is the environment, this is how children are supposed to be which means unke upar mar ka darr nahi hai, unko dara ke nahi rakha gaya hai they are doing their things. To wo jo unka natural setting ek dikh raha tha so then similarly we had we visited another institution which was bahot ache se they were looking after, they had very good adoption-ate also, there was this home where one of the staff has you know they would take them out for picnic, they would take the children out you know they would bring food from home, theek hai kuch bache ko kisi ko khane ka matlab very small little things where you know kisi bache ko kuch mann ho raha hai to usko hai acha theek hai hum tumko even if they are not able to serve immediately acha koi bat nahi hum us din tumhare liye wo banwa denge lekin tassali dena bache ko aram se itminan se samjhana and I think aisa to nahi hai ki gareeb ghar me bache nahi palte hain. In Fact the way I was looking at the entire process was also I was not so much bothered about what are they being served because maybe as an agency if I don't have enough

funds I may not be able to give you know very good kind of food but how am I being served? Wo khana kaise mujhe diye ja raha hai that was more important. You now aap bohot sada khana de rahe hain kyunki apke pas paise nahi hai theek hai lekin agar wohi khana hum respectfully de rahe hain, hum bache ko pyar se de rahe hain telling the child that you know it is the responsibility of the state, it is the responsibility of the society and that is why we are there for you. So the child does not grow with that inferiority feeling that you know we have met so many people saying kahan kahan se bache a jate hain you know like as if they are doing a favour on the child. Now that child is growing with the feeling that I am a burden on the state, so either he will develop anger against the state or he will develop extreme inferiority about self and both are dangerous. They are not healthy. Where as there are organisations who are telling them ki you know and they were trying to find jahan pe bache thode din a rahe the, family me ja rahe the. So we have listed down those organisations. Though the numbers were few but they were organisations which were doing very good work.

So can we really not instead of waiting for the incidents or reporting only on the incidents that are happening but can we really, can we ask about the larger structural questions and say why you know why can we not have independent agency for social audits, mandatory social audits across the country? Why we can not make involvement of children you know as mandatory for evaluating any institution? You know I think this is the least that we can do to protect our children, to ensure that they are safe, that they grow up they have a you know even if not a normal childhood but atleast give them somewhat happy childhood like you know they are not living with this feeling of inferiority or you know hatred towards people because then we will have a population growing up into you know these citizens who will have no connection with people, who will not feel that they are apart of us and it is I mean it will impact all of us, it is not that you know only the children are suffering, all of us will suffer with that.

In the next episode of The Lost Child, you will hear from Niveditha Jha, an activist based out of Patna who tells us that the Muzaffarpur shelter home case is a symptom of failing childcare system in the State as well as Bihar. She also highlights how the socio-economic and cultural systems are driving incidents such as these.