

## **Preface**

On 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2006, India woke up to the horror of what is now known as the infamous Nithari Case- the discovery of more than a dozen skeletal remains of a number of missing children in the village of Nithari, India on the outskirts of Noida, a planned industrial township in Uttar Pradesh near New Delhi. A rich and politically connected Punjabi businessman, Moninder Singh Pandher, and his servant, Surender Koli, were arrested by the Delhi Police and charged under various sections of the Indian Penal Code which included rape, murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy.

From 2004-2006, at least 38 people, mostly children, disappeared from the area, and residents have accused the police of refusing to hear, much less record, complaints about the missing. Further, the harassment of complainants and collusion with those that should have been apprehended were statements given by the parents of the victims when the crime was finally uncovered. A high-level committee established by the UP government to look into how the police handled the complaints from parents of missing children found two Senior Superintendents of Police, Noida, RKS Rathore and Piyush Mordia guilty of gross dereliction of duty.

Citing the police's criminal indifference, the report stated that FIRs were not lodged even in missing cases which involved minors. The report strongly stated that after the recovery of human skeletons from D-5, Sector 31, in Noida it became clear that the police had no information whatsoever about five victims whose skeletal remains were found. The final report further said, "There is a strong possibility that the reports (about the missing victims) were not lodged even after their kin had informed the police that they were missing. This is a grave error and indicates how this police station functioned."

The researcher was a Jr. MSW student placed with The Women's Protection Cell at The Baroda Urban Police Department at the time these events unfolded. With orders from the top for all cases of missing children to be re-opened across the nation, the spotlight was turned on the issue of missing children for the first time. Dr. Leena Mehta, fieldwork supervisor of the researcher, was instrumental in directing the researcher towards this issue and the multi-dimensional problems related to it.

With permission of the Police Commissioner of Baroda, Mr. P. C. Thakur, the researcher gained access to police data on missing children and joined the missing person's cell as they proceeded to investigate the reopened cases. This exposure provided the researcher with insights on police procedures undertaken on missing children cases, the various categories of children going missing and the impact on the parents. With little attention being given to this issue until Nithari, literature and research on missing children in India were few, and accurate data unavailable.

It was with this experience that the researcher realized the enormity of the problem. Without adequate data on how many children are actually missing, what are the causes for them going missing, measures needed to be taken to address these issues cannot be formed. Policy decisions have the capacity to bring about tangible improvement in the situation, but can only be taken based on reliable research studies. As research is a vital input for development, the need to study social factors which have the potential to make an impact and curtail the problem to a certain extent is essential. With these goals in mind, the research on missing children commenced in a small way and culminated in this doctoral thesis five years later.

### The Nithari Case: A grieving mother of a missing child in Nithari



### The drain where remains of 19 children were found in Nithari



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