

PHOTO CREDIT: SHANKKAR AIYAR

Pinki Virani

contemporary content in novella format. That too went on the best-seller list. So here I am, best-selling author and I am asked to do a third book. I have to do the right thing while writing because God has brought me to a point where it falls upon me to do so. I start research and discover and that 25 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls under 16 years have, and are being, sexually abused in India of which 50 percent are being abused by persons who hold their trust (in their own homes and around this space). I realise how simple it is for parents to ensure that this does not happen to their children. I come to the conclusion that if I have to write such a book I have to prove that the problem exists and then provide answers on how to deal with it. And I will have to stand up and say it happened to me. This would make me the first Asian woman to stand up and say so. Which means there will be many repercussions. So do I write it. Or not. If I don't, I save myself from all that is definitely going to happen to me in not-nice ways. But if I do, I save children who can be protected in the future and I give voice in validation to all those -- who are adults now -- who have been sexually abused not just in India but also Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and other Asian countries. So you see, it just fell upon me to write 'Bitter Chocolate'.

Do you think there is enough awareness regarding CSA?

Pinki Virani: A lot more needs to be done.

What, according to you, are the challenges facing parents who obviously want to protect their children from CSA?

Pinki Virani: The biggest challenge is to actually stop it from happening. Prevention. To prevent a child from being sexually abused is the most challenging part, especially in the light of how much more stealthier the abusers are becoming. The more the awareness, the greater the stealth. The greater the stealth, the more the abuser succeeds.

Can non government organisations play a role here?

Pinki Virani: NGOs do not enter middle and upper class homes, so there is no role for them to play in the upper strata of society.

Do you think the Indian legal system is sensitive to children who have suffered abuse? Are there likely to be laws in the near future?

Pinki Virani: No, not at all. Yes the laws are in the process of being drafted. And in some measure credit has to be given to the several parents who wrote to the law ministry and the prime minister's office -- after they read 'Bitter Chocolate' -- demanding that the laws be changed to protect their children. Though I continue to keep my fingers crossed that the new law will understand that the boy child needs as much protection as the girl child does. I must add here, it is not enough to have laws, every nation also needs Child Protection Courts and Child Protection Units where the children are not being dragged through adult courts.

How free do you think you are as a South Asian woman?

Pinki Virani: As much -- or as less -- as any other kind of person in the world. It helps to think of yourself as a human first, and then a woman; society responds accordingly and it generally creates a more empowered environment. This also helps in understanding that as a human being we come with both, the expectation of rights and the resultant responsibilities. I don't see why women should categorise themselves in fixed slots. For instance, I don't think of myself as an author, a journalist, or an activist, or a wife, or a sister, or just a friend. I am a human being, I am evolving, and I play many roles. More power to all of us to play as many positive roles as possible. It's one life; it needs to be lived with grace. ■