

**Stalking contains within it the seeds of a bigger and more violent crime**

Stalking is not an innocent past time; it is a dangerous form of sexual harassment. This was made clear yet again when a stalker burnt to death an engineer in Chennai after pursuing her against her wishes for nearly a month. The unemployed man attacked the victim, her mother and sister, an assault that led to Induja's death. While strong anti-stalking laws in the Indian Penal Code make following, making contact with, trying to foster an interaction or monitoring the movements of a woman a punishable offence, these have not helped women as much as they should have. Unfortunately, a first-time stalking offence is bailable; subsequent offences are deemed non-bailable. Though there has been a 50% rise in stalking over the last three years, the conviction rate is very low. But the truth is that stalking contains within it the seeds of a bigger and more violent crime which can take the form of acid attacks or murder. Some blame for this must go to mainstream cinema, especially from the south. In these movies, stalking is seen as part of the process of courtship. The notion is that the woman, after initially rebuffing the man, will yield in the end. Many men do not think that forcing their unwanted attentions on a woman is wrong. The police, too, must share the blame. Popular culture and social mores have conditioned them in such a manner that they do not take seriously allegations of stalking. The stalker is often emboldened by this and rejection tends to result in violent responses as seen in Chennai. Targets are picked for their vulnerability and on the assumption that the woman in question is unlikely to come forward and report the harassment. According to the law, a single incident of stalking can result in the offender being charged under section 354D of the IPC. But this has not proved to be deterrent enough. In the first six months of this year alone, 259 cases of stalking were registered in Delhi. Stalking is traumatic to the victim even if she is not physically harmed. It often prevents women going to college or work. The police must speed up filing charges and the offence be made non-bailable in the first instance. Once out after a first transgression, stalkers have been known to intensify their efforts at harassment. And popular culture must stop portraying what is a crime against women as being nothing more than a harmless rite of romance.

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