

# Behind The Screen: Cyberbullying And India's Fragmented Response

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## ABSTRACT

Behind every screen is a real person, yet cyberbullying continues to turn digital spaces into platforms of fear, humiliation, and harassment. This article examines how the Indian legal system still struggles to effectively deal with cyberbullying despite the rapid growth of social media and online communication. While existing laws under the Information Technology Act and the Indian Penal Code offer some protection, there is no specific law that directly addresses cyberbullying in a comprehensive manner. The article further discusses the emotional and psychological impact of cyberbullying on victims. It emphasizes the urgent need for stronger laws, faster reporting mechanisms, and greater awareness regarding online safety. In a world where one click can destroy someone's confidence, privacy, or even life, silence is no longer an option. Stronger digital protection has become a necessity, not a choice.

## KEYWORDS

Cyberbullying, Online Harassment, Digital Safety, Information Technology Act, Social Media Abuse

## INTRODUCTION

A 16-year-old student from Ujjain died by suicide in 2024, tormented by cyberbullies. His mother had reported the abuse to police. Officers consulted six different legal provisions across two statutes. However, none fit neatly or could move fast enough. He was gone before justice could begin.<sup>2</sup>

India stands at a digital inflection point. India was home to 500 million social media user identities as of October 2025, accounting for 34.1% of the total population.<sup>3</sup> Every day, millions access Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp to connect, learn, build businesses, and

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<sup>2</sup> Tragic Death of Ujjain Teen Priyanshu Yadav Due to Online Bullying, TIMES OF INDIA (Nov. 25, 2023), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/etimes/trending/tragic-death-of-ujjain-teen-priyanshu-yadav-due-to-online-bullying/articleshow/105511796.cms>.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Kemp, *Digital 2026: India*, DATAREPORTAL (Nov. 5, 2025), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-india>.

express themselves. It has given voice to the voiceless. Yet, for every story of connection, there is a story of cruelty. Behind the screens, a girl discovers her image has been doctored and shared without consent. A boy faces coordinated abuse for his identity. A woman receives death threats from anonymous accounts. A child is excluded and humiliated in group chats. Coordinated abuse targets those already vulnerable, including children, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, religious and caste minorities.

We have laws against obscenity, identity theft, defamation, stalking, and sexual harassment. However, when a 16-year-old from Ujjain was cyberbullied to death, the legal system had to borrow from all of these to address what happened and still fell short. These incidents reveal a larger void within India's legal framework.

### **CYBERBULLYING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A NEW FORM OF HARM**

Cyberbullying is deliberate, repeated harassment through digital platforms. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying spreads rapidly, multiplies across networks, and reaches thousands within moments. Major Forms of Cyberbullying has a wider connotation, including but not limited to harassment, cyberstalking, impersonation, doxing, non-consensual intimate images, trolling, exclusion, image manipulation.

Traditional bullying is limited to a specific physical setting such as a classroom or a bus stop. It is confined to a specific time. When a child leaves that place, the bullying stops and the incident fades. Cyberbullying knows no boundaries and it follows one home. A cruel message, once posted, is screenshotted, shared, reposted, and amplified across networks. The permanence is absolute.

Certain forms of cyberbullying create distinct psychological and physical risks. Cyberstalking creates a unique terror. The victim is being watched, but cannot see the watcher. The victim feels exposed, monitored, hunted. Impersonation occurs when an individual creates a fraudulent account in someone else's name or misuses someone's identity to deceive, defraud, or damage their reputation. Doxing involves the public disclosure of private information, including addresses, phone numbers, workplace details, or financial information without consent. Doxing transforms online harassment into real-world danger.

Similarly, trolling is when someone posts inflammatory or offensive comments online to provoke a reaction, upset people, or get attention. When dozens of people pile on with cruel

comments, the target feels attacked, humiliated, alone. Even if it's "just the internet," the pain is real.

Each form of cyberbullying requires different legal remedies. A comprehensive cyberbullying law must encompass all these forms. It must establish liability, provide remedies, and recognize that the harm caused by a fake intimate image differs from the harm caused by harassment, although both are severe. Only through comprehensive legal protection can victims find safety and perpetrators face consequences.

## **NUMBERS AND VULNERABILITY: CYBERBULLYING IN INDIA**

As per the McAfee "Cyberbullying in Plain Sight" report, a staggering 85% of surveyed children in India reported being victims of cyberbullying, making it the highest rate among the ten countries surveyed.<sup>4</sup> Uttar Pradesh alone reported 66,854 cases of cyberbullying in 2024, translating to an average of one case every eight minutes. According to Times of India, over two-thirds of the complaints, more than 45,000 were filed by individuals aged 16 to 25, highlighting the vulnerability of youth to online harassment and emotional abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Cyberbullying does not affect everyone equally. It preys on those already struggling to be heard. A teenager watching their identity take shape online suddenly finds themselves humiliated, isolated, excluded. A woman speaking up finds her body being used as a weapon against her. A queer young person, still discovering who they are, is mocked relentlessly for that very discovery.

For many, online abuse does not feel like "just words". A single post can invite slurs, threats and messages telling someone to leave the country. In a society marked by riots, lynchings, and communal violence, such threats carry a terrifying weight. What begins online can feel like the beginning of something far worse.

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to this harm. Imagine being 15, still figuring out who you are, what you look like, what you believe. One's worth feels tied to what their classmates think. Being mocked online doesn't feel like criticism of a photo. It feels like the entire world

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<sup>4</sup> McAfee, *Cyberbullying in Plain Sight: How Online Cruelty is Affecting Young People* (2024).

<sup>5</sup> *One Case of Cyberbullying in UP in Every 8 Minutes*, TIMES OF INDIA (April 15, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/one-case-of-cyberbullying-in-up-in-every-8-minutes/articleshow/120289739.cms>.

is rejecting and judging you. People watch their futures collapse in group chats they cannot control.

## THE LEGAL GAP: WHAT EXISTS VS. WHAT'S NEEDED

India does have laws that touch cyberbullying. The problem is that they were designed for different crimes. The Information Technology Act, 2000 was born in a different era, when the internet was still new to India.<sup>6</sup> When a teenager's fake profile spreads explicit lies about her, Section 66D exists to address impersonation.<sup>7</sup> But by the time police file a case, the damage is done. The lie has reached thousands and when the apology comes, it means nothing.

When death threats flood a teenager's inbox from anonymous accounts, Section 351 of the Indian Penal Code addresses criminal intimidation.<sup>8</sup> But proving who sent them remains difficult. Intimate images may be shared by hundreds of people, yet the law targets one person. What about the rest?

In 2015, the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act.<sup>9</sup> The provision had criminalized sending 'offensive' electronic messages. The Court found it unconstitutionally vague and an unjustifiable restriction on freedom of speech.<sup>10</sup> The reasoning was sound but the removal created a vacuum. Since then, there has been no clear statutory path to prosecute the deliberate, repeated, targeted cruelty that defines cyberbullying, particularly when it does not neatly fall within existing offences such as obscenity, defamation or identity theft. A person who is stalked across five platforms faces a harm that the current law does not address. The IT Act exists. But so does the silence of the victims it could not save.

## CONCLUSION

The need of the hour is clarity. Police must know which statute to invoke. Prosecutors must understand the elements of the offense. Victims must know they are protected. Perpetrators must know that consequences are real and swift. A teenager harassed today cannot wait three years for justice.

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<sup>6</sup> Information Technology Act, 2000, No. 21, Acts of Parliament, 2000 (India).

<sup>7</sup> Information Technology Act, 2000, § 66D, No. 21, Acts of Parliament, 2000 (India).

<sup>8</sup> Indian Penal Code, 1860, § 351, No. 45, Acts of Parliament, 1860 (India).

<sup>9</sup> Shreya Singhal v. Union of India, (2015) 5 SCC 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 10.

The current framework lacks a clear, statutory definition of cyberbullying that encompasses harassment, stalking, impersonation, doxing, non-consensual intimate image sharing, and coordinated abuse. A 13-year-old being cyberbullied is not the same as an adult receiving criticism. A woman being sent sexual threats is not the same as someone being disagreed with online. The law must recognize these distinctions.

Cyberbullying cases cannot wait years for resolution. Every state must establish dedicated fast-track courts with jurisdiction over these offenses and social media companies and messaging platforms must be held legally responsible. When a post containing abuse is reported, it must be removed within 24 hours or the company faces penalties. Platforms can do this because they have the technology and the resources. What they lack is the legal obligation to do so.

Digital literacy and cyberbullying awareness must also be taught in all schools. The time for borrowed provisions and ad-hoc solutions has passed. Behind every policy failure is a real person forced to bear its consequences. He was 16. He was from Ujjain. He needed a law. He is gone. Will we write it now, or wait for the next one?

