MP: NGOs Blow the Lid of Sexual Exploitation of Children at Tourist Spots
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Sravani Sarkar, Bhopal:

An independent study by three leading NGOs has exposed exploitation of children including sexual assault at two of India’s most popular tourist destinations, Ujjain and world heritage site Khajuraho, known for its temples dedicated to beauty and love.

Sexual exploitation of children by tourists in India is commonly associated with states like Kerala and Goa and the study is perhaps the first to reveal such goings-on in Madhya Pradesh.

appropriately, the findings were made public on World Tourism Day on Saturday in Bhopal.

The study, titled 'Exploitation of children in tourism — Child sexual abuse and child labour in tourism in MP', put the blame squarely on the authorities saying they're either ignorant or choose to ignore the matter".

The study said that apart from sexual abuse by tourists — both domestic and international — children in these two places are also engaged as child labour, forced to drop out of school, face physical violence, are pushed into criminal activities and forced to beg.

Prashant Dubey of Vikas Samvad, who was part of the study team, said poverty is one of the reasons for families to silently consent to this exploitation and thus the incidents go unreported.

The study hinted at a racket of tour operators and hoteliers as tourists were taken to nearby villages where they photograph minor girls. Later, "selected" girls were taken to hotels where they were abused, the study said quoting girls interviewed at a village near Khajuraho.

In Ujjain, children are made to sing and dance — often with suggestive gestures — for the entertainment of tourists, the study found.

The NGOs — including campaign and advocacy group Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS) and Child Relief and You (CRY) — have also come up with a string of recommendations for the union and state governments.

The major among them is acknowledging the role of tourism in exploitation of children and laying out a well-designed action plan by involving all agencies/departments to ensure the safety of children.

Subhendu Bhattarjee and Jaya Singh of CRY said that the findings would be shared with the authorities for follow-up action.

Neeraj Gupta, a social activist from Khajuraho, corroborated the study’s findings.

"The bigger concern is the rampant sexual exploitation of children in many forms and they are not reported because of poverty and other factors. The government needs to focus on this," he said.

Minister for women and child development Maya Singh, however, said the issue had not come to her notice yet.

"Let them submit the report to us. We would get it investigated and if there is even a small hint of such exploitation, we would take strict action," Singh added.
Khajurao, 410 km north of Bhopal, is famous for its cluster of 11th century temples famous for their erotic sculptures. On the other hand, Ujjain, around 190 km from the capital, is one of the country’s oldest seats of learning. It is best known for several temples including the Mahakal temple.