

Molesters prowl poorly lit streets in Anna Nagar

Ekatha Ann John, TNN | Jan 29, 2015, 01:31AM IST

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CHENNAI: The street leading to her house was so familiar that Anna Varghese thought little was amiss when a motorcyclist headed towards her. Moments later, the man, maneuvering the bike with one hand, reached out and groped her. "He laughed loudly and sped away. I screamed, but the road was deserted. I couldn't note his registration number either as the stretch was poorly lit," said the 26-year-old resident of 12{+t}{+h} Main Road in Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar.

Visibility may be bandied about as the police's forte, but the presence of khakhi on dimly-lit interior stretches in Anna Nagar is conspicuous by its absence. Although police booths have been set up in various neighbourhoods, women say they are often desolate. IT professional Amritha J was recently waylaid by a biker 500m from a police outpost in Shanthi Colony. "It is just a five-minute walk from the main road to my house. Although police presence at the booth is rare, I assumed just having one would be deterrent enough. I was mistaken," said the 24-year-old.

The man, who wore a helmet, roughly pulled her arm and molested her. "It happened around 9:30pm. I didn't know how to react. Even if I had called the police what do I tell them? How do I describe the man? It happened too fast for me to register any detail."

Police say they have policemen on bikes regularly patrolling the streets. "They all work in three eight-hour shifts. Besides, we have regular patrol vehicles stationed at specific points. "But it is not possible to be everywhere at the same time. We are doing the best we can," said a senior officer.

Many women in other parts of the city, especially on the outskirts, have similar stories. "Police keep talking about visibility. We don't need them just on the main roads. They need to be on the move and scour interior streets where most of these perverse men prowl," said Joyeetha (name changed), a 23-year-old software engineer in Thoraipakkam, a victim of molestation. Every time a bike comes close to her, the 23-year-old's arms go up to protect her chest. "I have heard of women being harassed on the streets, but I never thought it would happen to me, and so close to my house at that," she said. Joyeetha was walking from the bus stand to her house after work when two men on a bike came close. "The bike slowed when it came close to me. The man riding pillion reached out and grabbed me," she said.

Anoop Madhavan of Survival Instincts, a safety services provider that trains women in self-defence techniques, says there are studies to show that 70% of crimes against women happen within 10km of their homes. "The nearer they are to their homes, the more they drop caution," said Anoop. Besides wielding a pepper spray, he said holding a torch, too, can help. "The minute you feel someone is coming too close for comfort, flick on the torch. It will surprise and momentarily blind them," he said.

Even if the woman can't register finer details, Anoop said informing the police would help increase patrolling, along those stretches. "Also, make sure you have the phone numbers of patrolling policemen in your area. It helps save time," he said.

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