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Empowering Victims Through Peer Support- A Community-Based Approach Using Aa Meeting Principles

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Abstract

The conceptual development of victimology and recognition of victims under legal justice system took its time to reach India, impacting the coordination between victim and justice responses. In present time, the retributive approach of relief for victims has taken a turn towards restorative justice implementation by the introduction of new enactment of three new criminal laws. Still an imbalance between the victim's safety and the perpetrator's accountability can be observed as there is no acknowledgment of victims as a community. This absence of the victim's cultural relevance as a community directly impacts the key elements that contribute to the victim's restorative justice programs and support services. This lack of coordination between community readiness toward victims, survivors' services, and judicial responses has left no place for the survivors to turn. The victim justice initiatives are in their initial stage in the country despite of all the insight provided by victimology into the psychological, social, and legal needs of the survivors. It needs optimizing and some structural enhancements to establish a haven for victims as a community to safeguard them from secondary victimization and help them heal psychologically and socially. In this paper, an endeavor has been made to discuss the development of victims as a community by introducing Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Meetings model as a framework for survivors so that victim justice practices can effectively support survivors and restorative justice is taken a step forward towards therapeutic justice.

Keywords – mental healing, therapeutic justice, victim community, victim support programs, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The legal system from the perspective of victim rights in India has evolved significantly over the past few decades, marking a departure from earlier punitive paradigms that neglected the needs of those most affected by crime. Customarily, legal procedures inherited from colonial times were retributive in nature, concentrating overwhelmingly on the offender and the process of punishment, while the rights and emotional well-being of victims remained peripheral. The overarching framework of criminal justice system of the vast terrain of India continued to be dominated by retributive logic until the introduction of 2024 criminal acts. This adversarial system often marginalized the victims by rendering their role as mere witnesses and only focused on punishing the offender. It has largely limited the victim's role to just providing evidence, sidelining the deep emotional, social, and psychological effects that crimes have on victims and their communities. This narrative of victim, that is deep emotional, social, and psychological effects of crime, rarely received the legal attention it deserves. It is often shrouded in silence, stigma, and neglect rather than being recognized as 'persons' deeply affected by these ripple effects of crime. Therefore, the retributive justice system that inherently focused on punishment and deterrence, is frequently criticized for being unable to mend the personal grief or trauma inflicted upon victims. It is not only inadequate but also counterproductive to the healing process offered by a restorative system. While acknowledging the significance of restorative justice, the domestic evolution mirrored a broader global shift, India reflected the global trend by acknowledging the importance of victim rights. The global shift in jurisprudence and victimology has introduced restorative justice as a step above retributive justice. This shift

from a retributive to a restorative justice system has steadily redirected attention towards the need for a system which recognizes victims not merely as collateral in the proceedings, but as central stakeholders in the pursuit of justice. In doing so, it has challenged the historical system designed primarily to prosecute offenders and demand victims to stick to the role prescribed as mere spectators. It has also highlighted that this legal justice system failed to acknowledge the profound impact of crime on individuals by sidelining their narratives. These sidelined narratives are being recognized by the growing body of academic debate leading to the emergence of legal reform proposals aiming at bridging this gap by redefining the victim's role within the criminal justice system. The limitations of the traditional victim-centered model of treating each incident as an isolated event and each victim as an isolated entity have become increasingly apparent in recent years. Advocating for a broader approach by viewing the victim as part of a community rather than as an individual isolated by trauma is being done by the scholars, activists, and legal reformers. Academic discussions and comparative studies have consistently shown that a rights-based approach must be integral to the justice process, one that embraces the dignified treatment, reparations, and holistic healing of victims (Abed & Jayasree, 2020; Sharma, 2024). This reorientation serves not only to redress material losses but also to affirm their inherent dignity by empowering victims with participatory rights, legal aid, and compensatory mechanisms. . It is being argued by researchers that our current system, with its heavy reliance on punitive sanctions and procedural formalities, does not adequately address the broader spectrum of human suffering that trails beyond a verdict or sentence (George, 2022; Pandey & Ganguli, 2024).

In the aftermath of a crime, the interconnectedness that binds a community is overlooked inadvertently by the conventional system. This unintentional neglect reduces the victim to a passive recipient of justice instead of acknowledging them as active agents in the healing process—a perspective that calls for a fundamental paradigm shift. In contrast, the new approach emphasizes that crime is a facilitator of collective suffering and not an isolated misfortune. This modern approach emphasizes that an individual's victimization, their loss, and pain, extends beyond their right's violation. It is not just limited to the legal breach but extends to being an assault on their feeling of safety, trust, and personal identity. It also extends beyond personal sphere, rippling through families, neighborhood, and sometimes entire communities (White, J. W., & Sienkiewicz, H. C., 2018) (Parsons, J., & Bergin, T., 2010). This collective perspective, often sums up in the term- 'victim as a community', urging to recognize the effects of crime as multi-dimensional and that justice, too, must be multi-dimensional. The concept of 'victim as a community' propounds that a criminal act is not merely the harm inflicts on individuals but is, in many cases, a shared experience that binds a group together. This collective perspective challenges the conventional wisdom of placing the offender at the center of the justice system and invites the courts, policymakers, and society at large to take a holistic view of what justice for victims ought to comprise. This approach is an addition to the traditional model as it focuses on healing- 1) deep-seated emotional scars, 2) rebuilding trust within communities, and 3) forging pathways toward reconciliation along with providing monetary compensation or punitive measures. This collective healing concept aligns closely with the principles of restorative justice, which prioritize repairing the harm done over strictly punishing the wrongdoer (United Nations General Assembly, 1985).

Therefore, this study is motivated by the belief that the traditional compartmentalization of victimhood has led to a justice system that is often indifferent to the multi-dimensional impacts of crime. The insistence on treating each victim as an independent unit has contributed to an environment where the emotional and psychological aspects of victimization are neglected in favor of a rigid legalistic procedure. By putting forward the idea that victims can, and ultimately should, form a community, this paper challenges prevailing notions and provides a conceptual framework for a more empathetic justice system by reevaluate and reformulating the conceptual model of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Meetings. The paper suggests reforms which includes the establishment of victim support services, and the creation of therapeutic justice programs that actively involve victim communities in dialogues about healing and accountability. Through this paper researcher attempts to establish a space where victims of crime come together on a regular basis and share the details of their trauma in a safe, respectful, and anonymous forum. Rather than being forced into the isolated and often alienating environment of the courtroom, they would be given the opportunity to express their pain freely, learn from one another's experiences, and build resilience through mutual support.

Restorative Justice in India – Not Satisfactory

In India, the system was designed to exact retribution rather than to repair the social and individual harms caused by crime. In many cases, victims were treated merely as collateral in an adversarial process, with their voices often relegated to the periphery of judicial proceedings. This historical practice of restricting victim's role and lack of attention not only undermines victim's experience but also perpetuates a cycle of trauma that affects their ability to heal and reintegrate into the society (Mercurio, D. B., 1992). In a bid to redress this historical neglect of victim interests, sweeping legislative reforms were initiated in 2024. New criminal statutes—most notably those encapsulated in the recent enactments like the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita and the Bhartiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita—aimed to reorient the legal system towards a more victim-centric approach. These reforms have been introduced, to ensure that victims' rights are not merely an afterthought, intending to empower victims and with the expectation of foster an environment where victims could obtain both justice and emotional redress. Despite these promising reforms, the practical incorporation of restorative justice principles into India's legal framework has proven to be unsatisfactory. Restorative justice model falls short on the transformational ideals when applied within the existing retributive legal architecture. The discordance between the existing system and the demands of restorative practices is one of the primary challenges. The traditional criminal justice system focuses on formal adjudication and is built around fixed procedures. Even with the new victim-centric reforms, many of the existing judicial, administrative, and policing structures remain geared toward retribution. This rigidity in the underlying infrastructure does not support the necessary flexibility or resource allocation for a robust restorative process. Consequently, restorative justice initiatives often become tokenistic measures appended to conventional procedures rather than comprehensive frameworks that allow for genuine healing and reconciliation.

Regardless of the discordance, the 2024 legislative attempts at bringing significant improvements in victim protection measures which enhance the adversarial trial process rather than to foster an environment conducive to restorative practices. These enhancements in victim protection have largely been integrated into traditional court procedures, leaving little room for alternative methods that might prioritize the emotional and psychological aspects of victim recovery.

Community, Victims and Its Co-relation

The concept of community in reference to victim recognizes that people who have experienced trauma, violence, or systemic injustice often find strength and resilience in unity. While acknowledging the effects of being a victim, this perspective of viewing victims as a community emphasizes on the importance of community support, shared resources, and collective healing. To understand the intricate dynamics of resilience, advocacy, and social change, one needs to examine and explore the ways in which communities mobilize to support victims. This exploration not only shows the power of social solidarity, but it calls for a reviewing on how we comprehend and treat victims in our community.

Understanding victims as part of a community reframes the narrative surrounding trauma forging a collective identity in adversity. This shared identity can foster resilience, enabling members to support one another, advocate for justice, and mobilize resources. In this way, the community becomes a vital source of strength, offering emotional support and facilitating recovery. Furthermore, recognizing victims as a community brings attention to the systemic issues that contribute to victimization. By understanding victimization through a communal lens, we can better address the root causes of these issues. This perspective encourages a shift from solely focusing on individual recovery to advocating for systemic change that benefits the entire community. Presently, the rights of victims are divided on the bases of gender and age targeting specific section of the society. These gender and age specific provisions only benefit the group targeted by these laws leaving out other sections of the society. This bifurcation creates rights for various groups based on the legislation enforced to provide special protection to these recognized groups i.e. woman, children, third gender, etc. but does not recognize 'victim' in general as notably drawn in the Declaration of Basic Principles for Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1985. This international document lays out the rights of victims and emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to justice that goes beyond the adversities of punitive measures. Declaration of Basic Principles for Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power is referred for the reason it is the sole international document which deals with the rights of victims and victims only and India as a democratic country lacks one dedicated document that is for victims in general.

From understanding community as- “a group of people who have something in common” to changed dynamics as- “a collaboration of individuals creating a sense of belongingness for each other”, is the exact requirement of the time for the conceptual development of victims in practical world and the best way to incorporate that, in criminal system, is restorative justice (Cobigo, V., Martin, L., & McHeimech, R., 2016). It is an alternative to retributive justice which focuses on the needs of the victims, the responsibility of the offender, and the involvement of the community (Rousseau, D., 2025, March 3). It shifts the emphasis from the mere infliction of penalties to fostering dialogue, accountability, and ultimately healing. A natural synergy is added by recognizing the victim as part of a community within this framework. This recognition paves the way for restoring the victim to its original state i.e. healing and working toward reconciliation, thus restoring balance. This restorative approach is modern and innovative and carries with itself the promise of a more empathetic and inclusive justice system that not only punishes but also heals (Nagpal, M., & Rawandale, C., 2023). But the conceptual development of victims in practical world requires community-driven solutions and group-based interventions such as victim impact hearings, community mediation sessions, and restorative circles presenting victims with a platform to fully express the collective pain which is provided by therapeutic justice that represents a more modern and humanized approach to criminal law. In the Indian context, this paradigm shift is required where social structures and collective identities are embedded in the very fabric of daily life. In societies where community bonds are strong, transforming the approach to victimhood from an individualistic to a community-based one offers a more natural alignment with cultural practices and social expectations. When individual victims unite as a community, their voice for justice, help and support is amplified strengthening their advocacy that transcends the limitations of the courtroom. This unity not only acts as the first line of defence but also fosters an environment in which healing is a communal process rather than an individual struggle.

Therefore, by incorporate the concept of community for victims in the society enables them to find support and empowerment through a community network comprised of fellow survivors, family members, and even local activists. Rather than being isolated by the justice system into a solitary courtroom narrative, this network might function as a living entity—a community that shares in the pain, the planning for recovery, and the pursuit of systemic change through community meeting sessions and local restorative circles. Such an example, although simplified, reflects the transformative potential of considering victims as a collective rather than as isolated individuals bound by the narrow confines of traditional legal procedures.

Healing Beyond the Courtroom

From minimal attention to transformation found through introduction of several new criminal statutes in 2024, these reforms aimed to ensure that victims are no longer viewed as passive bystanders but are instead active participants in the justice process, empowered with rights that extend from initial investigation through to final adjudication (Sharma, 2024). While these legal reforms have undoubtedly advanced the discourse on victim rights and protection, still requires a paradigm shift—one that synthesizes elements of retributive justice with restorative interventions focused on healing and rehabilitation. However, even as the theory of elaborated restorative justice has gained acceptance internationally, its actual implementation in India has faced significant challenges. For many survivors, the traditional benefits envisioned by restorative programs such as direct victim-offender dialogue, community reconciliation, and holistic healing remain elusive. Prevailing models often lack thorough integration or tend to poorly adapt to local cultural and institutional realities. Therefore, the researcher posits that there is an immediate requirement for a specifically designed therapeutic justice model that includes or incorporates the effective elements of peer-support approaches from different domains. Drawing inspiration from the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting structure, the researcher suggests the implementation of ‘Victim Anonymous (VA) Meetings’ for the crime survivors in India to have a novel therapeutic justice intervention. The researcher, for such intervention, adopts AA Meeting model as it is well-known for its success in offering emotional, mental, and social support to those battling addiction. Researcher aims at providing such a model which presents participants with a secure and empathetic environment to share their experiences, attain emotional catharsis, and receive peer support while simultaneously engaging with formal judicial processes to obtain legal redress. With this integrated approach, the legal system in India promises a more comprehensive validation of victims’ rights, making space for both retributive and restorative elements of justice.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings have long been heralded as a successful model or an effective way to help people dealing with alcohol addiction recover. The idea behind these meetings is that support from others creates a structured environment where people can share their stories, encourage one another, and work together towards recovery. The core principles of AA include: (1) being anonymous, (2) holding each other accountable, and (3) being open about vulnerabilities. Most importantly, AA meetings create a safe space where

participants can think about their experiences, state their feelings, gain strength from the group/community, and deal with the shame that comes with addiction. The idea of Victim Anonymous (VA) Meetings arises as a logical progression when this approach is applied to the domain of victim support. This meeting format, inspired by AA but designed for those who have experienced crime, can bring symbolic, meaningful, and practical advantages. Here, crime survivors are offered a similar supportive structure where they can meet privately with peers who have endured comparable traumas. This approach not only encourages sharing of difficult experiences but also promotes resilience, understanding, and a forward-looking perspective. The anonymity inherent in the model helps mitigate the stigma attached to victimization, while structured sessions can guide participants toward both emotional healing and constructive engagement with the justice system. The adaptation of the AA meeting model to a victim support framework is premised on several key similarities between addiction recovery and trauma recovery. Both processes involve coping with personal failure, dealing with societal judgment, and navigating the isolation that often accompanies profound distress. In AA meetings, the success of the peer-support mechanism is, in part, due to the non-hierarchical and mutually empowering nature of the interactions; a similar dynamic is expected to benefit crime survivors who have frequently felt disenfranchised or devalued by a retributive system.

Till now the question- why there is a need for concept of AA Meeting (reconfigured for crime victim) was answered. The next step is to understand- what makes the concept of AA Meeting suitable to incorporate for victim healing as Victim Anonymous Meeting within India's complex legal and social milieu.

The steps necessary for implementing VA Meetings, identifying both anticipated benefits and potential logistical or cultural challenges are as follows:

- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** To allow survivors to share their experiences openly without fear of betrayal or further stigmatization, meetings will emphasize strict confidentiality. This structure is designed to create an environment of trust, where every participant's identity is protected.
- **Non-Judgmental Atmosphere:** The absence of blame is crucial. VA Meetings aim to concentrate on healing instead of blame by addressing the emotional aftermath and methods of personal recovery. Rather than assigning fault or dwelling on details of offense, the meetings center on strengthening the belief that healing is achievable despite past trauma. It advocates concentration on the emotional fallout and personal rehabilitation strategies.
- **Peer Support and Mutual Aid:** The model relies on a community-based approach where survivors share personal stories in confidence, validate each other's experiences, and provide constructive feedback. This makes them both the beneficiaries and the facilitators of emotional healing. This community-based approach could mean regular group meetings for the victims to not only recount their experiences but also develop strategies for managing triggers, stress, and re-traumatization. Participating in such meeting, by sharing their narratives and listen to others, fosters a collective understanding that transcends individual pain.
- **Structured Recovery Sessions:** Drawing from therapeutic group models, the VA Meetings will be organized into modules. These might include sessions on recognizing and processing trauma, techniques for stress reduction and mindfulness, and guided discussions on navigating the formal justice system. Each session is facilitated by a trained counselor, with the additional support of peer volunteers who have either undergone similar experiences or have been specifically trained as non-professional facilitators.
- **Integration with Formal Justice Processes:** While the primary emphasis lies on healing, the VA Meeting model also recognizes the importance of legal redress. Periodically, meetings may incorporate sessions that guide victims on how to effectively engage with legal proceedings, understand their rights, and participate in compensation schemes. This dual approach ensures that the emotional and legal dimensions of victimization are addressed in tandem.
- **Cultural and Contextual Sensitivity:** Given the diverse cultural landscape of India, VA Meetings will be tailored to respect and integrate local customs, languages, and social norms. This culturally informed approach is essential for enhancing the relevance and acceptance of the model across different regions and communities.

The VA Meeting model's success depends on these core principles stated above. When put together, these tenets create a solid basis for the model to function as a therapeutic justice intervention that not only validates the victim's experience but also actively promotes healing through organized therapeutic practices and communal solidarity. The operational design of Victim Anonymous (VA) meetings in India is based on these concepts which can be approached in stages with careful consideration of the various institutional and cultural contexts throughout India.

Conclusion

Incorporating an AA meeting approach for victims within the Indian legal and social system offers a promising avenue for addressing the numerous dimensions of trauma inflicted by crime. This model promotes a healing paradigm by questioning the conventional, retributive conception of justice and establishing a secure, encouraging, and organized atmosphere for victim survivors in which emotional, mental, and psychological healing may occur. AA groups are shared and led by peers, which creates a victim community that not only encourages individual healing but also gives survivors the tools to take an active role in seeking justice. To implement such a model would require major policy changes, legislative innovations, and cooperation from state organizations, non-governmental organizations, and mental health specialists. These legal reforms must be complemented by pilot programs and grassroots initiatives that highlight the real advantages of peer-led victim support, which has effects on judicial results that go beyond psychological healing. With the appropriate institutional backing and public-private partnerships, the AA-inspired model could transform victim support from an isolated, ad hoc effort into a cornerstone of restorative justice in India.

In closing, the AA meeting model adapted for victim support represents a novel, transformative approach for integrating emotional and psychological healing within the framework of legal justice. For a nation as diverse and socially complex as India, such an approach could redefine how justice is administered and experienced, paving the way for a legal system that not only punishes the offender but also acknowledges and addresses the deeper scars left on the fabric of society.

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