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Human Trafficking in India: A Violation of Basic Human Rights (2010–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking in India over the past decade and a half has emerged as a pervasive human rights crisis, affecting millions of vulnerable individuals. This paper examines trafficking in India from 2010 to 2025 using secondary sources, situating the issue within human rights and capability frameworks. We document the wide-ranging rights violations inherent in trafficking, review India's evolving legal regime (IPC §370/370A, ITPA 1956, POCSO 2012, etc.), and assess governmental and institutional responses, including Anti-Human Trafficking Units and national action plans. Case studies illustrate trafficking operations and rescue efforts. Our findings highlight rising incidence (e.g. NCRB-recorded cases rebounded by ~28% in 2021 over 2020), chronic conviction shortfalls (only ~16% of cases led to convictions in 2021), and systemic failures to protect victims' rights. We conclude that human trafficking in India constitutes a grave breach of fundamental rights – including liberty, bodily integrity, and security – and propose multi-pronged recommendations (legal reform, victim support, prevention through socio-economic measures, data systems, and cross-sector coordination) to address this continuing crisis.

Key Words : Modern Slavery, Human Right, Women, Child, Forced Labour.

Introduction

Human trafficking – the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of persons by force, fraud, or coercion – is a global problem and a severe violation of fundamental human rights. In India, trafficking has long been recognized as a crime and rights abuse, yet it persists on a massive scale. Scholars note that “trafficking in women and children is one of the worst abuses of human rights” (Shrivastava, 2017). The United Nations calls trafficking a “modern form of slavery” that deprives victims of liberty, dignity, and basic protections. India is identified as a major source, transit, and destination country in South Asia (Ghosh, 2009). Estimates suggest millions of Indians – primarily women, girls, and socially marginalized populations – have been trafficked into forced labor or sexual exploitation both domestically and abroad over the last decade. Trafficking in India intersects with deep-rooted social and economic challenges. Poverty, gender inequality, caste and tribal marginalization, and lack of education create fertile ground for traffickers. While trafficking contravenes India's Constitution (Article 23 bans “begar” and traffic in human beings) and numerous laws, enforcement and awareness have historically lagged. The significance of this issue grew in the 2010s as media exposés and NGO reports highlighted the vulnerability of migrants, children, and women to trafficking rings. The legislative landscape also evolved: for example, India amended its laws in 2013 to include Section 370 of the IPC, explicitly defining and penalizing trafficking, including bonded labor and forced organ removal.

Objectives:

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of human trafficking in India (2010–2025) as a human rights violation. We examine (1) theoretical perspectives linking trafficking to rights and capabilities; (2) empirical trends and patterns from official and secondary data; (3) geographic and demographic hot spots; (4) distinct forms of trafficking (sex, labor, child, bride, organ, etc.); (5) the human rights violated by trafficking; (6) India's legal and policy framework; (7) institutional and civil society responses; (8) illustrative case studies; (9) key findings; and (10) policy recommendations.

This study highlights how trafficking contravenes basic rights (freedom, security, dignity, childhood) and identifies measures needed to combat it.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing trafficking through Human Rights Theory emphasizes that every individual possesses inalienable rights – including the right to life, liberty, and security – recognized in international instruments (e.g. the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ICCPR) and India's Constitution. Trafficking inherently violates these rights: it involves deprivation of freedom (slavery/bondage) and often subjects victims to violence, coercion, and exploitation. For example, Ghosh (2009) frames trafficking as “one of the worst abuses of human rights”. This perspective demands that policies protect victims' rights and hold perpetrators accountable. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) provides another lens. This framework assesses individual

well-being in terms of real freedoms or “capabilities” (such as bodily health, safety, social participation, and agency). Trafficking strips victims of these fundamental capabilities. Girls lured into sex work lose their bodily integrity and future prospects; child laborers are denied education and health; bonded laborers cannot achieve economic security. Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities (life, bodily health, bodily integrity, etc.) are directly undermined by trafficking. For example, trafficking for forced marriage or sex robs victims of bodily autonomy and social equality. By adopting this approach, researchers emphasize that beyond legal definitions, trafficking should be seen as a failure to secure people’s basic freedoms and opportunities. Other frameworks include Gender Theory and Feminist Critique: trafficking disproportionately impacts women and girls, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality and demand for sexual exploitation. Understanding the supply-demand dynamics requires examining patriarchy and poverty. Intersectional theories highlight how caste, class, ethnicity, and migration status intersect to increase vulnerability. In summary, trafficking can be analyzed as a complex social evil in which human rights norms and human development freedoms are flagrantly violated, necessitating a multidimensional response (Rathour & Sharma, 2020).

Review of Literature

Empirical studies on trafficking in India have documented its scale, causes, and consequences. Many focus on the trafficking of women and children. A survey by Joffres et al. (2008) found that trafficking of women and girls for commercial sexual exploitation in India is a “gross violation of human rights”, and identified India as a significant source, transit, and destination in the region. Rathour and Sharma (2020) describe women’s trafficking as a “threat to gender equality,” noting that traffickers often prey on poor, rural girls with false job promises. They report NCRB 2015 data: 2,424 reported cases of women trafficking and 3,038 female victims that year, emphasizing the “inhuman” persistence of this crime. Irshad (2021), reviewing “bride trafficking,” points out this little-recognized form where women (often from impoverished regions) are sold in forced marriages. He notes bride trafficking is “rampant in India since eons” and linked to child marriage, domestic violence, and bonded labor. Scholarly works repeatedly link trafficking to bonded labor and child labor systems. For example, Ghosh (2009) emphasizes that trafficking intersects with child labor, bonded labor, and abduction patterns. Other studies highlight health and psychological impacts on trafficked persons (Mills et al., 2008) and the role of corruption and complicity in allowing trafficking to flourish.

Reports by major organizations complement academic research. The UN’s Global Reports on Trafficking (UNODC) situate India in global trends, while the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports (2020–2023) have repeatedly criticized India’s enforcement gaps (Tier 2/Watchlist status). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) compiles annual statistics, revealing that thousands of cases are registered annually across India. These show, for instance, a notable increase in reported cases in 2021 (2,189 cases) after a pandemic-induced dip in 2020. Press analyses of NCRB data underline systemic issues: in 2021 only ~16% of cases ended in convictions, and entire states (e.g. Telangana, Assam) reported zero convictions (Reddy, 2017). India-based human rights groups and NGOs (e.g. Prajwala, Bachpan Bachao Andolan, HAQ) have also produced reports. For example, the HAQ Center’s 2016 report estimated thousands of children are trafficked for bonded labor or begging each year. Media investigations in *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, *Times of India* and other outlets have exposed trafficking syndicates, often in partnership with law enforcement. For instance, Reuters (Nagaraj, 2016) reported an estimate that at least 300,000 children are forced to beg daily under trafficking rings. These secondary sources collectively paint a grim picture: trafficking in India involves multiple forms, is fueled by poverty and demand, and remains under-addressed despite laws on the books.

Methodology

This study relies exclusively on secondary data sources. We conducted a comprehensive literature synthesis drawing on: official government publications (NCRB Crime in India reports, Ministry of Home Affairs data releases), international reports (UNODC, ILO, TIP reports), and reputable media coverage (major Indian newspapers, Thomson Reuters Foundation, etc.). The Capability Approach and Human Rights Theory guided interpretation, while literature on trafficking trends provided historical context. In summary, this is a desk-review synthesizing existing research and data to offer a holistic view of trafficking in India (2010–2025).

Trends and Patterns (2010–2025)

Women and children trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation most severely impact the southern and eastern states of India (Geetashree, 2013). Affected states include Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Bihar, Gujarat, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. According to the 2021–2022 NCRB report, Telangana (391) and Maharashtra (295) have the highest number of human trafficking cases. Meanwhile, child trafficking has been reported in almost all states, with West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Assam being the most affected (NCRB Report, 2021).

A recent United Nations report revealed that India has 12.6 million child labourers. In recent years, India has emerged as a country where girls from neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh are trafficked, only to be sent to Europe and the Arab nations. India is increasingly being viewed as a country where women are unsafe, with the worst record in cases of human trafficking.

According to a survey conducted by the international organization Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2011, India ranked as the fourth most dangerous country for women in the world, a finding also corroborated by the CBI.

According to the NCRB annual report of the Government of India for the year 2010, 3,422 cases of human trafficking were reported, a number that consistently increased, reaching 6,877 cases in 2015 and 8,132 cases in 2016. Of the 15,379 victims in 2015, 9,034 were minors under 18, and in 2016, of the 14,183 victims rescued, a significant portion was also under 18. In 2015, West Bengal recorded the highest number of cases, followed by Assam (NCRB Report, 2016).

However, according to the NCRB report, these numbers started to decrease in 2017, with only 2,854 cases reported. By 2022 (the latest data of NCRB), the number of human trafficking cases had reduced to 2,250. In 2022, out of the 6,036 victims, 2,878 were under 18, with Telangana (391 cases) and Maharashtra (295 cases) having the highest number of cases. The troubling part is that these statistics don't reveal how this improvement is being achieved. Could the reason be that, for some reason, fewer cases are being registered? In the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Human Trafficking Report 2022, India was classified under Tier-2. The report indicates that the Indian government has not yet met the minimum standards required for the elimination of trafficking. However, India's situation is better than in previous reports. Following the report, the government took action against forced labour and sexual exploitation cases. Still, the failure to prevent forced labour and sexual crimes in government-run shelters remains a serious issue. Despite various bills related to the prevention, protection, and rehabilitation of human trafficking brought by the Indian government between 2010 and 2022, these measures have not yet been fully effective.

In short, the 2010–2025 trend lines show an overall increase in reported trafficking amidst persistent enforcement gaps, underlining a growing human rights emergency.

Regional and Demographic Analysis

Human trafficking in India exhibits clear regional patterns. Border states and those with large migratory populations are especially affected. West Bengal (bordering Bangladesh) has historically been a major source and transit state. In the 2000s, West Bengal alone accounted for a large share of cases, as traffickers crossed into India from Bangladesh. Assam and other Northeast states (Manipur, Nagaland) are similarly vulnerable, with flows into urban centers like Delhi or to Bangladesh/Myanmar. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh also rank high due to poverty and cross-border trafficking from Nepal (Mishra, 2015).

In South India, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have emerged as hotspots. By 2021, Telangana topped national case counts. Hyderabad (Telangana) has drawn attention for its media industries and was the site of high-profile rescues (e.g. large brothel raids in 2009). Maharashtra (especially Mumbai and Nagpur) is a major destination: girls from poorer states are brought to cities for sexual exploitation. Gujarat and Rajasthan have also been source states, often for cross-border rackets involving Arab and African brothels (as reported in media).

Demographically, victims skew young and female. The majority are from the most marginalized communities (Scheduled Castes, Tribes, and low-caste groups) (Geetashree, 2013). Children are trafficked for both sexual exploitation and forced labor (begging, peddling, factories). For example, one case study documented networks luring adolescent girls from Delhi train stations to Jammu for unpaid domestic work. Adult women (often widows or divorcees) are trafficked into urban sex work or forced marriages. There is also a recognized "cycle" of trafficking within families: children of trafficking survivors may themselves be at risk.

Forms of Trafficking

Trafficking in India takes many forms, all of which constitute slavery-like exploitation. The main categories include (Mishra, 2015):

Sex Trafficking: This is the most visible form, involving the forced prostitution of women and girls. Victims are lured by false job offers or abducted, then sold into brothels or forced to work as dancers or escorts, Rathour & Sharma (2020).

Labor Trafficking (Forced Labor): People (often men and older boys) are coerced into work in agriculture, factories, construction, mining, or brick kilns. Although bonded labor is illegal under India's Bonded Labour Abolition Act (1976), it persists in remote areas. Even domestic servitude (i.e. "house-help" forced labor) is common, especially for tribal and rural migrants. For example, the 2025 Delhi case involved boys taken as bonded workers from railway stations.

Child Trafficking: Children (below 18) are exploited for multiple ends: sexual abuse, forced begging, petty crime, child labor, and illegal adoption.

Bride Trafficking (Forced Marriage): Increasingly recognized is the trafficking of women as "brides," often to satisfy skewed sex ratios in certain regions or for dowry trades (Irshad, 2021).

Organ Trafficking: Although less well documented, there are cases of poor individuals being coerced or deceived into donating organs (usually kidneys) for transplant. The Transplantation of Human Organs Act (1994) outlaws organ commerce, but black-market organ trafficking rings have been exposed where traffickers profit by arranging illegal transplants (often for foreign recipients).

Human Rights Violations Involved

Human trafficking implicates a broad spectrum of human rights violations. At the most fundamental level, it violates the right to freedom from slavery and forced labor, enshrined in both the Indian Constitution (Article 23) and international covenants. Victims are often held against their will, beaten, or coerced (rights to liberty, bodily integrity, and security are denied). Trafficking also breaches the right to life and health: sexual and physical violence,

exposure to HIV/AIDS, and hazardous labor conditions endanger victims' lives. For instance, trafficked sex workers suffer repeated sexual violence and health abuse; forced laborers are denied safe working environments. Children lose their right to education and childhood (rights to development and education), being forced into work or sexual exploitation instead.

Theoretical analyses link trafficking to deprivation of dignity and autonomy. Rathour & Sharma (2020) emphasize that trafficking "runs counter to gender equality" and violates constitutional and human rights guarantees. In victims' own words (as reported by NGOs and media), trafficking feels like "death while alive" – a stripping away of all freedoms. Internationally, trafficking is recognized as a modern form of slavery. Mills et al. (2008) state that over 80% of trafficked persons are funneled into forced sex work, underlining how trafficking is intertwined with sexual violence and exploitation. Legally, every trafficking case involves violation of multiple Indian laws protecting rights: the victim's right to safety (POCSO Act 2012 for children), right to livelihood (bona fide employment), and right to life with dignity (Article 21 of the Constitution). By treating human beings as commodities, trafficking negates all these rights. Even consent becomes irrelevant under anti-trafficking laws: Indian law requires proactive victim identification regardless of alleged consent (reflecting a non-punitive, human rights approach).

In summary, trafficking in India undermines fundamental human rights – freedom, dignity, equality, security, and development – across all categories of victims. Scholars conclude it is "a gross violation of human rights", and combating it is both a moral and legal imperative.

Legal and Policy Framework

India has a multi-layered legal framework addressing trafficking. The Constitution itself prohibits trafficking: Article 23(1) states "Traffic in human beings and beggar and other similar forms of forced labour are prohibited". Building on this, several statutes cover various aspects of trafficking:

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) 1956: Originally enacted to combat prostitution, it remains the main law against sex trafficking. It criminalizes running brothels, soliciting, and procuring women for prostitution.

Indian Penal Code (IPC) §370/370A (2013): This amendment replaced older provisions with comprehensive anti-trafficking offenses. Section 370 defines trafficking to include physical or sexual exploitation, slavery, servitude, and forced organ removal. The law covers trafficking of adults and minors, Indian nationals and foreigners, and prescribes strong penalties (10 years to life imprisonment for aggravated offenses, including trafficking of children).

Other Related Laws: The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976 makes forced labor illegal; the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 (and its amendments) helps prevent forced marriages of minors (an element of bride trafficking). The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012 addresses child sexual abuse (many child trafficking victims fall under this law). The Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act 1986 and Transplantation of Human Organs Act 1994 are also relevant (organ sale is criminal under the latter). Together, these laws cover nearly all forms of trafficking and its consequences.

Policy-wise, India adopted a National Action Plan on Human Trafficking and established institutional mechanisms. Since 2006, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) created an Anti-Trafficking Nodal Cell to coordinate efforts. MHA funds and supervises Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) in state police departments; by 2021 there were about 768 AHTUs in 20 states/UTs. Central advisories and Standard Operating Procedures have been issued (e.g., SOPs for child trafficking cases in 2013) to sensitize law enforcement. The government also runs victim rehabilitation schemes (e.g. shelters, vocational training) and a missing children hotline (1098). In 2021–22, there were legislative proposals (e.g. the Anti-Trafficking Bill, 2021) seeking to consolidate laws, though some critics argue these focus too much on punishment and neglect root causes (Sikora, 2021).

Despite this framework, implementation gaps are widely noted. Many states lacked AHTUs for years, and training of police is uneven. The judicial system has few special courts dedicated to trafficking, leading to delays. NGO experts and media have pointed out the urgent need for a dedicated anti-trafficking law (beyond ITPA) that centers victims' rights. Nonetheless, India's legal framework is among the broadest in the world for trafficking, reflecting both international treaty commitments (e.g. Palermo Protocol) and domestic human rights obligations.

Institutional Mechanisms and Government Efforts

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is the nodal agency for anti-trafficking policy. It regularly convenes inter-state meetings and monitors AHTUs. Under an MHA "Strengthening Response" scheme, funds were allocated to establish AHTUs in 270 districts. The MHA also sponsors public awareness campaigns and workshops for police. At the state level, specialized Anti-Trafficking Units or Anti-Human Trafficking Cells (in Delhi, Karnataka, etc.) investigate cases. The Ministry of Women and Child Development collaborates with police for rescue operations and provides financial assistance to victim survivors (schemes like Ujjwala). District Child Protection Units (DCPU) are to assist rescued children. On the prosecution side, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) issues guidelines on victim identification and protection.

However, critiques point to weak enforcement: courts are overburdened, many cases languish without trial, and convictions are rare. For example, in Telangana (2014–17), over 1,134 cases led to 1,081 arrests but zero convictions.

At the international level, India cooperates with neighboring countries through extradition treaties and joint task forces (e.g. with Nepal and Bangladesh border patrols). India has also enacted legislation to prosecute traffickers operating abroad (for example, Section 370 permits prosecuting even if act occurred outside India). In 2020, India ratified UN trafficking protocols (the IPC amendments brought it into alignment).

In sum, institutional efforts include creation of Anti-Trafficking Units, multi-sectoral committees, central advisories (such as those listed by MEA), and rehabilitative services. The government publishes periodic statistics (via NCRB) and press releases (such as the July 2024 PIB release on child trafficking). While structures exist on paper, the key challenge remains turning them into effective action on the ground.

Role of Civil Society and Media

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media have played crucial roles in combating trafficking. Many NGOs specialize in rescue and rehabilitation: for example, Prajwala (Hyderabad) runs a shelter network for sex trafficking survivors, and Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Kailash Satyarthi's group) focuses on child labor and trafficking. These NGOs often work with police to conduct raids, document cases, and pressure authorities. They also provide legal aid and psychosocial support to victims. An innovative example is the Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation's Bicycle Caravan project: since 2020 former child laborers ride bicycles through villages in Bihar and nearby states to spot and tip off trafficking cases. In one week, volunteers rescued about 60 children and helped arrest nine traffickers.

Case Studies (2010–2025)

Operation Rakshane (Bengaluru, 2011): Bengaluru police, along with NGOs, launched “Rakshane” to tackle child begging linked to trafficking. Over several months, teams discreetly documented street children's routines and identified bogus begging rings. In a coordinated action, authorities rescued 300 children in a single day.

“Bicycle Warriors” Campaign (Bihar, 2020): As noted, in mid-2020 Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi's foundation mobilized rescued former child laborers to patrol villages on bright yellow bicycles. They used community informants to tip off police about children being prepared for trafficking. In one week, volunteers rescued about 60 children across Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Delhi–Jammu Trafficking Ring (2025): In 2025, Delhi Police uncovered a syndicate trafficking vulnerable minors and laborers from Delhi to Jammu & Kashmir. The investigation, prompted by missing persons reports, revealed that agents lured two schoolgirls from Old Delhi railway station and transported them to Srinagar as domestic workers and bonded laborers.

International Domestic Servitude Case (2013): A Dhaka-based trafficking network operated through India's Kolkata and Hyderabad, where poor Bangladeshi women were promised jobs but ended up in forced prostitution.

Local Bride Trafficking Case (2018): In one state-level investigation, police uncovered a group arranging marriages of tribal girls (some under 18) to wealthy men in cities or Middle Eastern countries.

These case studies demonstrate the diversity of trafficking scenarios in India: they range from large rescue operations (Operation Rakshane) to grassroots patrols (Bicycle Caravan) to police intelligence stings (Delhi–Jammu). They also reveal the typical modus operandi of traffickers (false promises, networked agents, profit-driven exploitation) and the difficulties victims face.

Key Findings

From the reviewed sources and data, several key findings emerge:

High Incidence with Low Justice, Predominance of Women and Children, Geographic Hotspots, Diverse Forms of Exploitation, Legal & Institutional Gaps and Irresponsibility of Civil Society, these are majorly responsible for human trafficking in India.

In summary, the evidence portrays trafficking in India as both widespread and deeply entrenched. While awareness and legal frameworks have improved, basic human rights of trafficked persons remain grossly violated, and perpetrators often evade justice.

Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, the following policy and programmatic steps are recommended to combat human trafficking in India:

Strengthen Legal Enforcement and Justice, Victim-Centered Services, Data and Research: Improve data collection, Prevention through Socioeconomic Measures, Demand Reduction, Cross-Border and Inter-State Cooperation, Legislative Improvements and Engage Civil Society & Media.

Implementing these recommendations – many of which have been echoed by human rights groups – can help India honor its obligations to protect basic rights and ultimately reduce the scourge of trafficking.

Conclusion

From 2010 through 2025, human trafficking in India has proven to be an alarming and persistent violation of basic human rights. The evidence from official reports, academic studies, and journalistic investigations paints a consistent picture: India remains a hub for multiple forms of trafficking, and the human cost in lost freedom, safety, and dignity is immense. Trafficking victims – overwhelmingly women and children – suffer abuses that strike at the

core of constitutional and international rights guarantees. Despite a broad legal framework (IPC, ITPA, POCSO, etc.) and institutional mechanisms, enforcement has lagged and traffickers often go unpunished (as reflected in dismal conviction rates).

This review underscores that trafficking cannot be treated merely as a crime wave; it is a multifaceted human rights crisis intertwined with poverty, inequality, and demand for exploitation. Addressing it requires not only tougher laws and better policing, but also socio-economic strategies to empower vulnerable groups and reduce incentives for traffickers.

Ground-breaking civil society initiatives (such as community patrols and survivor networks) demonstrate the power of collective action, but lasting change demands state leadership and accountability. In conclusion, preventing and eliminating human trafficking in India is both a moral imperative and a human rights obligation. As multiple analysts have noted, trafficking victims deserve the same fundamental rights to freedom, safety, and self-determination as any citizen. Protecting those rights will require sustained commitment across government agencies, communities, and civil society. Only then can India begin to eradicate this “social evil” and ensure justice and dignity for its most vulnerable citizens.

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