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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## BRIDGING THE STRUCTURAL DIVIDE: EVALUATING THE EFFICIENCY AND CHALLENGES OF INDIA'S SECURITY FORCES IN COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Mahendra Singh Rathore, Sheetal Arora and Gopal Nath Karna

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### Abstract

India is a unique country in terms of geographical and socio-economical differences and hence, there is a continued and increasing threat of human trafficking in the country which is the most rampant human rights violation in the world. The paper analyses the working dynamics, position and roles of the Indian Security Forces in combating human trafficking and its institutional issues. 104 security personnel and experts participated in the mixed methods approach. To consider the difference between the perceived importance of policing on the one hand and the practical obstacles encountered at operations on the ground. The key findings of the study identified an important "Capacity Building Paradox": 96.8% of all security personnel surveyed saw anti-trafficking training as a key component of their work but almost 80% of those surveyed have not taken such training. In addition, the study concluded that systemic issues emerged with the crime-to-courtroom approach, such as the practice of jurisdictional fiction, judicial delay, and lack of victim protection. The paper underlines the critical need for bridging the gap between the victim and the police in implementing a technologically advanced and victim-centric approach by all level of police and the importance of institutionalising it at all levels of police to overthrow the contemporary and techno-driven trafficking syndicates for sustainable effect.

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### Introduction:-

Traffic in persons, commonly called trafficking in persons, is one of the most serious forms of human rights violation and is sometimes called "modern-day slavery," impacting millions of people around the world. It is an illegal business operation that consists of recruiting, transporting and exploiting individuals through coercion, abductions, or deception. Trafficking in persons in India is a multi-faceted problem with commercial sexual exploitation and bonded labour and domestic servitude as the outcomes. The security personnel on the ground - local police, BSF, Special Forces, and those with greater expertise like the NIA. The role of the NIA is enormous and include not just intelligence collection, rescue operations, but also ensure prosecution of criminals. Trafficking, however, is developing into a sophisticated network that's digitally informed, and internal security systems have to diversify to navigate this. The purpose of this paper is to assess the current role of such forces, to discuss the gaps existing between them and the other players and identify their appalling nature and then putting forward some

practical remedies which can make the policies framed by the government much more effective in combating trafficking in India. Over time, human trafficking has evolved not only in ways in which it is carried out but also the purposes for which these activities are carried out has changed, the primary reason being forced labour. Global data indicates that between 2019 and 2022, instances of forced labor have surged by 47%, overtaking sexual exploitation which was earlier the main reason for human trafficking, as the most prevalent form of trafficking (UNODC, 2024). Even though the trends have changed, legal systems have struggled to keep pace with the evolving crime. The conviction rates for exploitation for the purposes of labour remain disproportionately low, when compared to those for sexual offences. While women and girls still constitute the majority of victims of human trafficking, at 61%, their exploitation is increasingly diversifying; many are now being forced into domestic servitude alongside different forms of sexual abuse (UNODC, 2024).

Trafficking can be done for various overlapping reasons, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, criminal activity, begging, and organ removal. The adaptability of criminal networks is evident in North America, where 8% of victims in 2022 suffered from multiple exploitation involving both labor and sex (ILO, 2023). Meanwhile, Southeast Asia has witnessed digital exploitation, where young people are lured by fraudulent job offers and then forced to operate online financial scam centers. Human trafficking for the purpose of forced labour accounts for 42% of global trafficking cases, affecting sectors like agriculture, construction, and mining (Walk Free, 2023). Despite males being most frequently targeted for human trafficking, females are quantitatively more in the isolated and unregulated sector of domestic work. This issue is predominantly more common in the acute conflict zones and low-income areas across Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The lack of successful prosecutions suggests a significant gap in global enforcement of measures against human trafficking.

Other way round, sexual exploitation remains a prominent threat, representing 36% of human trafficking cases in 2022. This remains a highly gendered crime, with women and girls making up over 90% of those affected (UNODC, 2024). Since 2019, there has been a notable spike in these cases across North America and Europe, often for the purpose of producing digital abuse content and materials. Similarly, forced criminality remains another area of major concern where victims are coerced into drug trafficking or cyber fraud, specially for male victims in Western Europe and Asia. Other supporting factors for human trafficking include demand of individuals for the purpose of forced marriage, prevalent in parts of South Asia and Africa, and forced begging, which mainly targets children in North Africa and in the Middle East (UNODC, 2024). Lastly, human trafficking for the purposes of organ trafficking represents the most extreme end of the spectrum. Though such cases are relatively rare with only 175 reported cases across 25 countries between 2017 and 2023, it generally involves highly sophisticated international syndicates that are difficult for law enforcement agencies to dismantle (WHO, 2024). These ever-evolving trends necessitates modernisation, technology-driven legal frameworks in order to protect the most vulnerable populations.

### **Literature Review:-**

The academic literature surrounding human trafficking is ripe with literature both in its more basic works and in more modern context specific literature. Kathryn Cullen-DuPont's *Human Trafficking* (2009) concludes with the backdrop of historical context and the laws put in place by the Palermo Protocol to combat trafficking. A number of scholars in India have emphasized that there are structural vulnerabilities like educational inequalities, caste based discrimination, poverty, which lead to trafficking within many socio-economic institutions.

The bilateral agreements with the South Asian neighbors and the possibility of “cyber-enabled” exploitation are mentioned in recent literature. Other scholars such as Khushi and Singh (2025) have faulted the disconnect between legislative intention and enforcement in the context of a legislative framework like the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and enforcement reality characterised by the presence of corrupt and weak enforcement institutions. Below the mark empirics conducted by Nair outside of contact time indicate that anti-trafficking operations are not adequately effective, with less than seven percent of law enforcement officers adequately trained. This desegregation of the work on human trafficking, for better or worse, reinforces the need to go beyond just criminalizing human trafficking and to achieve a more comprehensive and thorough approach to human security. All the literature that was present was not simply or mainly about legal definitions, but was growingly interdisciplinary, more than just structural and psychological complexities. Empirical research in the Indian context, for example, identifies gaps in systems, which are significant. As the number of victims of human trafficking (VHTs) from the marginalised communities continues to rise, Nair (n.d.) also points to a critical shortage of specialised training among the law enforcement, with less than 7% of them being trained in anti-trafficking. Likewise, Vidushy (2016) explores the trends in the dataset maintained by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for the period between 2010 and 2014,

and how quantitative measurements in the context of national issues such as human trafficking can be inadequate in measuring the true extent of underreports. These methodological issues were also emphasized on a global scale by Weitzer (2015), who argues for greater transparency in indices of important countries, but recommends more localized studies, based on the case at hand and the urgency of the moment.

The dark side of globalization and organized crime is also a key theme of contemporary literature. Bales (2007) compares trafficking with other variables on a national level, such as corruption, poverty and conflict in various regions in the world. Sarkar (2011) discusses the pressure of migration as an issue of exploitation in both India and Europe, and Peulić (2017) argues that it poses a threat to individual and state security. Significant advances in the past have expanded its focus to digital can now include the digital; for instance, the Students Journal on Transnational Organized Crime (2025) asks: How can trafficking be extended from trafficking of persons to that of the digitally connected world and what does this mean for cases of cybercrime, money-laundering, and narcotics substance-abuse/transmission? Apart from enforcement of anti human trafficking measures, there is a need to address the health and dignity of survivors of human trafficking. The significance of particular derogatory legal terminology in primarily this context is discussed by Godoy et al. (2025), which documents its effects on the survivors' understanding and willingness to seek assistance and urges for the lawmakers to use a more inclusive approach. Alhajji et al. (2023) further argue that psychiatric and Psychosocial training need to be incorporated into medical education and the ambulance already has to support the best interests of an individual who has been subjected to trafficking in persons.

Finally although stepping stone studies such as Cullen-DuPont (2009) offered important descriptive baseline data for trafficking in this case, contemporary studies have challenged the structures of state response to trafficking. The current pool of literature shows that trafficking is intricately associated with technology and economic changes globally. Going forward the biggest shift in research challenge is the need to move from criminalisation to a new framework of human security, with researchers needing to be more attuned to surviving subject's actual experiences in as much detail as they are to gathering concrete data.

### **Research Methodology:-**

**To enable a comprehensive view of the anti-trafficking landscape in the present day scenario, this study adopted a dual approach integrating Descriptive and Exploratory research designs.**

- **Population:** The study focused on security personnel of the rank of Sub-Inspector and above as they are empowered to act as Investigating Officers as well as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) of Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and in police academies.
- **Sampling:** A mixed-method sampling approach was employed for a total sample of N=104. Stratified Random Sampling was applied to field-level command to ensure proportional representation of ranks, while Purposive Sampling was used to target senior experts for deep strategic insights.
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews provided both quantitative (likert scale) data and qualitative narrative responses.
- **Data Analysis:** Quantitative data was processed through software-aided statistical analysis, while qualitative narratives were evaluated using Thematic Analysis to identify implicit patterns regarding operational hurdles and training gaps.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation:-**

The analysis reveals an evident mismatch between institutional intent and ground-level execution as far as matters relating to human trafficking are concerned.

### **Perception vs. Operational Reality:-**

There is unanimous agreement (96.8%) in the respondents that security forces are vital in reducing human trafficking. However, this confidence is tempered by frequent hurdles: only 22.8% of respondent personnel report never facing challenges, while 31.5% of respondents encountered them in the majority of cases. These difficulties are primarily caused as a result of severe manpower shortages, judicial delays, and the intimidation of victims by organized gangs.

### **The "Capacity Building Paradox":-**

One additional area of weakness identified is a lack of expertise. Dealing with incidents and trafficking victims with a psychological nuance and informed by trauma was a top priority to them but only 78.9% of workers surveyed said

they have had special training on how to deal with incidents and trafficking victims. Feedback for curricular instruction is extremely positive with 92.9% stating that "Very Good" or "Excellent" a clear message that the focus is on the quantity of curricular instruction that is reported, not its quality. It would be highly effective if majority of the personnels involved in combating human trafficking are given training associated with human trafficking.

**Technological Readiness:-**

Today's organized offenders in human trafficking employ sophisticated communication and psychopathic Internet marketing strategies. More than 90% of respondents expressed that they believe Artificial Intelligence (AI) can significantly help in identifying hotspots and collecting information on transit, while 82% of respondents have not participated in any program on information technology (IT) in human trafficking investigation activities. This lack of training serves a strong case for improving a lot in terms of operational efficiency and implementation of technology in such investigations.

**The legal and prosecution maze:-**

The most common problem with anti human trafficking measures and policies is that they cannot lead to a conviction. More than half of the staff say there is long term disagreement about the current legal framework. Indian court cases are not very proactive, and so organized wreckers are able to intimidate or pay witness, often the traumatized subject of the case. In this way, the legal system unwittingly disadvantages the victim, failing to ensure prompt trials, the protection of witnesses, or other measures.

**Role of Intelligence Gathering:-**

Gathering intelligence remains an important aspect of effectively countering human trafficking networks. To achieve such efficient operation, the security forces should transition its approach from reactive policing to proactive policing. Around 45.9% respondents agreed that Human Intelligence is the most common method of intelligence gathering. Intel sharing across organisations received 18.9% thematic mentions by the respondents making it 2nd largest thematic mention. The security machinery at play understands the importance of intelligence. The data also indicates that though funding for digital forensic is necessary, investment in information networks, community policing and ground level relationship building comes out to be the best strategy for early detection and network disruption in matters of human trafficking.

**Best Practices in dealing with Human Trafficking:-**

Overall, the data shows that a multi factor approach to trafficking is emerging, with a greater emphasis on providing both safety and supports for the immediate needs of victims while providing proactive ways of addressing trafficking. It proved to be a practice of collaboration between the agencies, as a need to remove the operational problems were seen by establishing networking between these agencies and NGOs, and welfare committees. It is backed up by a reliance on technological intelligence (OSINT), cyber tracking and a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach that focuses on psychological first aid, rather than just extracting information. Additionally, the standardisation of specialised units and community-based initiatives applying prevention indicate a shift towards standard prevention at the ground level. The results have pointed out the significance of the existence of a modernized framework that secures the safe life against human trafficking by creating approaches of investigation, which should be rigorous.

**Precautions in cases of Human Trafficking:-**

Research on the actions taken by the security forces when dealing with human trafficking prosecutions shows a complex multi-dimensional environment. The statistical decision for which protocol was in use, and the qualitative impression of officers' mindset was captured in the study by using a mixed methods analysis of the 61 detailed responses provided about the issue. Track and trace, security and privacy of victims, were the most salient quantitative data that confirmed the track and trace with strong concern (29%), closely followed by compliance with legal and procedure (21.7%). Other key areas such as trauma-informed care and coordination across agencies were also well represented, balancing the tactical and humanitarian aspects.

The qualitative results found that when it comes to "safety," the topic goes past the actual rescue, with the people strongly involved in safeguarding identities and halting retaliation and social stigma. It is a delicate balancing act of being both empathetic, as a first responder and being at the same time a stakeholder of evidence in a case inevitably going to prosecution. In addition, significant frequency with which partnership with NGOs and Child Welfare Committees were mentioned is an indication that some understanding exists that police is only one of many pieces

of the puzzle. As a whole, it demonstrates the current shift with an emphasis on changing the paradigm in the policing process from mere enforcement to a broader and constantly evolving process that addresses the psychological well-being of victims as well as co-salvation.

### **Ethics and Awareness in matters related to Human Trafficking:-**

In this study mixed methods approach was utilized to evaluate security institutions' process of preventative outlooks and internal moral principles. The study finds that coverage of the policy is quite minimal as the structured data information about the awareness programmes shows that whereas the descriptive feedback reveals ethical guidelines, there is a wide gap between the policy and the reality. Thematic coding was used as a method of analysis, whereby the data were first cleaned to ensure the validity and then responses to the qualitative items were coded to estimate personnel perceptions of institutional integrity. Attracting their attention when they are not expecting it. The quantitative data revealed a significant turnout which has not been witnessed in the community. Some 60.9% of respondents said they had no knowledge of public awareness campaigns being carried out by security forces indicating the public is not yet in the grip of an awareness campaign as security forces are mostly reactive. The results suggest that preventive works for involvement in community-based practices and sensitisation programs are not widespread, although a negative one is a confirmation that a small number (39.1%) are involved in such activities.

### **Internal Ethics: Knowledge vs. Instinct:-**

**In general, the comments on moral directions were grouped into three categories:-**

**The Communication Gap:** Nearly half of the thematic mentions (48.8%) were from personnel without knowledge of any existing guidelines, indicating that a guideline "definitely should be put in place. This indicates that, even if there are directions at the ministerial level, they are not at the operational front line.

**Compartmentalized Awareness:** On the other hand, 32.6% did demonstrate a high technical literacy to specific MHA advisories, Juvenile Justice Act etc. and the NIA protocol. This indicates that legal expertise ripples in pockets but no expertise is shared on a common platform.

**Humanistic Morality:** The third group (18.6%) focused on "soft" ethics and was interested in issues of gender sensitivity, confidentiality of the victim, and dignity for the victim. While not using the language of any statutes, these officers showed a natural comprehension of adopting a trauma-informed approach.

### **Institutional Implications:-**

A security force is unequally divided and good-hearted is the basis for the analysis. Inside, there is a conflict to convey ethical guidelines and outside there's a conflict on the other side to launch public outreach. It is clear that first responders need a professional and sensitive response to trafficking, but not all first responders have been trained the same, or the same first responder might not have the same resources to draw upon to make more effective use of their instincts. This boost is essential for anything to change in the relationship between police and community if they are to be part of a more proactive, community-integrated policing.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion:-**

India's motivation on combating human trafficking is high but the capability is sometime very low and disjointed that makes the fight against human trafficking difficult in the country. It is asked of the security forces and their ways two things: they must "break networks", and they must "guardians" and restore the lives of the victims. This needs to change, and it is essential for a transition in policing, from reactive to intelligence-led, proactive policing.

### **Key Recommendations:**

All the personnel in AHTUs and Border Outposts should be trained in the POCSO act, trauma-informed interviewing and digital forensics and not an "optional extra". Siloed intelligence needs to be overcome by a single centralised database to be built with AI, correlating faces at all transit centres with known financial networks of transit traffickers.

Ensuring Protection is no token effort: In victim-centric budgets, it is important that resources are specifically allocated to have emergency medical kits, civilian clothing and secure transport of victims during police rescues. Efficient processing of "legal grind" in Fast-track Courts: Concerning issue of human trafficking, the Fast-track Courts must have priority and should not create apprehension for the survivor to give evidence. Improve Inter-Agency cooperation & Internationals Synergy: Replace the diplomatic treaties with cooperative sharing of

intelligence through joint task force to Bangladesh and Nepal and other neighboring countries to counter against Intra-national supply chain. If these changes are not institutionalised then the security forces will never be a comforting shield, ensuring justice to the least of the nation's people in India.

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