

Bridging the Structural Divide: Evaluating the Efficiency and Challenges of India's Security Forces in Combating Human Trafficking.

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.

1. 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

33 criminals. Trafficking, however, is developing into a sophisticated network that's
34 digitally informed, and internal security systems have to diversify to navigate this.
35 The purpose of this paper is to assess the current role of such forces, to discuss the
36 gaps existing between them and the other players and identify their appalling nature
37 and then putting forward some practical remedies which can make the policies framed
38 by the government much more effective in combating trafficking in India.

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40 Over time, human trafficking has evolved not only in ways in which it is carried out
41 but also the purposes for which these activities are carried out has changed, the
42 primary reason being forced labour. Global data indicates that between 2019 and
43 2022, instances of forced labor have surged by 47%, overtaking sexual exploitation
44 which was earlier the main reason for human trafficking, as the most prevalent form
45 of trafficking (UNODC, 2024). Even though the trends have changed, legal systems
46 have struggled to keep pace with the evolving crime. The conviction rates for
47 exploitation for the purposes of labour remain disproportionately low, when compared
48 to those for sexual offences. While women and girls still constitute the majority of
49 victims of human trafficking, at 61%, their exploitation is increasingly diversifying;
50 many are now being forced into domestic servitude alongside different forms of
51 sexual abuse (UNODC, 2024).

52 Trafficking can be done for various overlapping reasons, including forced labor,
53 sexual exploitation, criminal activity, begging, and organ removal. The adaptability of
54 criminal networks is evident in North America, where 8% of victims in 2022 suffered
55 from multiple exploitation involving both labor and sex (ILO, 2023). Meanwhile,
56 Southeast Asia has witnessed digital exploitation, where young people are lured by
57 fraudulent job offers and then forced to operate online financial scam centers.

58 Human trafficking for the purpose of forced labour accounts for 42% of global
59 trafficking cases, affecting sectors like agriculture, construction, and mining (Walk
60 Free, 2023). Despite males being most frequently targeted for human trafficking,
61 females are quantitatively more in the isolated and unregulated sector of domestic
62 work. This issue is predominantly more common in the acute conflict zones and low-
63 income areas across Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The lack of successful

64 prosecutions suggests a significant gap in global enforcement of measures against
65 human trafficking.

66 Other way round, sexual exploitation remains a prominent threat, representing 36% of
67 human trafficking cases in 2022. This remains a highly gendered crime, with women
68 and girls making up over 90% of those affected (UNODC, 2024). Since 2019, there
69 has been a notable spike in these cases across North America and Europe, often for
70 the purpose of producing digital abuse content and materials. Similarly, forced
71 criminality remains another area of major concern where victims are coerced into
72 drug trafficking or cyber fraud, specially for male victims in Western Europe and
73 Asia.

74 Other supporting factors for human trafficking include demand of individuals for the
75 purpose of forced marriage, prevalent in parts of South Asia and Africa, and forced
76 begging, which mainly targets children in North Africa and in the Middle East
77 (UNODC, 2024). Lastly, human trafficking for the purposes of organ trafficking
78 represents the most extreme end of the spectrum. Though such cases are relatively
79 rare with only 175 reported cases across 25 countries between 2017 and 2023, it
80 generally involves highly sophisticated international syndicates that are difficult for
81 law enforcement agencies to dismantle (WHO, 2024). These ever evolving trends
82 necessitates modernisation, technology-driven legal frameworks in order to protect
83 the most vulnerable populations.

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85 **2. Literature Review**

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

93 The bilateral agreements with the South Asian neighbors and the possibility of
94 “cyber-enabled” exploitation are mentioned in recent literature. Other scholars such as

95 Khushi and Singh (2025) have faulted the disconnect between legislative intention
96 and enforcement in the context of a legislative framework like the Immoral Traffic
97 (Prevention) Act and enforcement reality characterised by the presence of corrupt and
98 weak enforcement institutions. Below the mark empirics conducted by Nair outside of
99 contact time indicate that anti-trafficking operations are not adequately effective, with
100 less than seven percent of law enforcement officers adequately trained. This
101 desegregation of the work on human trafficking, for better or worse, reinforces the
102 need to go beyond just criminalizing human trafficking and to achieve a more
103 comprehensive and thorough approach to human security.

104 All the literature that was present was not simply or mainly about legal definitions,
105 but was growingly interdisciplinary, more than just structural and psychological
106 complexities. Empirical research in the Indian context, for example, identifies gaps in
107 systems, which are significant. As the number of victims of human trafficking (VHTs)
108 from the marginalised communities continues to rise, Nair (n.d.) also points to a
109 critical shortage of specialised training among the law enforcement, with less than 7%
110 of them being trained in anti-trafficking. Likewise, Vidushy (2016) explores the
111 trends in the dataset maintained by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for the
112 period between 2010 and 2014, and how quantitative measurements in the context of
113 national issues such as human trafficking can be inadequate in measuring the true
114 extent of underreports. These methodological issues were also emphasized on a global
115 scale by Weitzer (2015), who argues for greater transparency in indices of important
116 countries, but recommends more localized studies, based on the case at hand and the
117 urgency of the moment.

118 The dark side of globalization and organized crime is also a key theme of
119 contemporary literature. Bales (2007) compares trafficking with other variables on a
120 national level, such as corruption, poverty and conflict in various regions in the world.
121 Sarkar (2011) discusses the pressure of migration as an issue of exploitation in both
122 India and Europe, and Peulić (2017) argues that it poses a threat to individual and
123 state security. Significant advances in the past have expanded its focus to digital can
124 now include the digital; for instance, the Students Journal on Transnational Organized
125 Crime (2025) asks: How can trafficking be extended from trafficking of persons to

126 that of the digitally connected world and what does this mean for cases of cybercrime,
127 money-laundering, and narcotics substance-abuse/transmission?

128 Apart from enforcement of anti human trafficking measures, there is a need to address
129 the health and dignity of survivors of human trafficking. The significance of particular
130 derogatory legal terminology in primarily this context is discussed by Godoy et al.
131 (2025), which documents its effects on the survivors' understanding and willingness to
132 seek assistance and urges for the lawmakers to use a more inclusive approach. Alhajji
133 et al. (2023) further argue that psychiatric and Psychosocial training need to be
134 incorporated into medical education and the ambience already has to support the best
135 interests of an individual who has been subjected to trafficking in persons.

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

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146 **3. Research Methodology**

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

- 150 ● Population: The study focused on security personnel of the rank of Sub-
151 Inspector and above as they are empowered to act as Investigating Officers as
152 well as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) of Anti-Human Trafficking Units
153 (AHTUs) and in police academies.
- 154 ● Sampling: A mixed-method sampling approach was employed for a total
155 sample of N=104. Stratified Random Sampling was applied to field-level

156 command to ensure proportional representation of ranks, while Purposive
157 Sampling was used to target senior experts for deep strategic insights.

158 • Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews provided both quantitative (likert
159 scale) data and qualitative narrative responses.

160 • Data Analysis: Quantitative data was processed through software-aided
161 statistical analysis, while qualitative narratives were evaluated using Thematic
162 Analysis to identify implicit patterns regarding operational hurdles and
163 training gaps.

164 **4. Data Analysis and Interpretation**

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

167 4.1 Perception vs. Operational Reality

168 There is unanimous agreement (96.8%) in the respondents that security forces are
169 vital in reducing human trafficking. However, this confidence is tempered by frequent
170 hurdles: only 22.8% of respondent personnel report never facing challenges, while
171 31.5% of respondents encountered them in the majority of cases. These difficulties are
172 primarily caused as a result of severe manpower shortages, judicial delays, and the
173 intimidation of victims by organized gangs.

174 4.2 The "Capacity Building Paradox"

175 One additional area of weakness identified is a lack of expertise. Dealing with
176 incidents and trafficking victims with a psychological nuance and informed by trauma
177 was a top priority to them but only 78.9% of workers surveyed said they have had
178 special training on how to deal with incidents and trafficking victims. Feedback for
179 curricular instruction is extremely positive with 92.9% stating that "Very Good" or
180 "Excellent" a clear message that the focus is on the quantity of curricular instruction
181 that is reported, not its quality. It would be highly effective if majority of the
182 personnels involved in combating human trafficking are given training associated
183 with human trafficking.

184 4.3 Technological Readiness

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

193 4.4 The legal and prosecution maze.

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

201 4.5 Role of Intelligence Gathering

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

213 4.6 Best Practices in dealing with Human Trafficking

214 Overall, the data shows that a multi factor approach to trafficking is emerging, with a
215 greater emphasis on providing both safety and supports for the immediate needs of

216 victims while providing proactive ways of addressing trafficking. It proved to be a
217 practice of collaboration between the agencies, as a need to remove the operational
218 problems were seen by establishing networking between these agencies and NGOs,
219 and welfare committees. It is backed up by a reliance on technological intelligence
220 (OSINT), cyber tracking and a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach that focuses
221 on psychological first aid, rather than just extracting information. Additionally, the
222 standardisation of specialised units and community-based initiatives applying
223 prevention indicate a shift towards standard prevention at the ground level. The
224 results have pointed out the significance of the existence of a modernized framework
225 that secures the safe life against human trafficking by creating approaches of
226 investigation, which should be rigorous.

227 4.7 Precautions in cases of Human Trafficking:

228 Research on the actions taken by the security forces when dealing with human
229 trafficking prosecutions shows a complex multi-dimensional environment. The
230 statistical decision for which protocol was in use, and the qualitative impression of
231 officers' mindset was captured in the study by using a mixed methods analysis of the
232 61 detailed responses provided about the issue. Track and trace, security and privacy
233 of victims, were the most salient quantitative data that confirmed the track and trace
234 with strong concern (29%), closely followed by compliance with legal and procedure
235 (21.7%). Other key areas such as trauma-informed care and coordination across
236 agencies were also well represented, balancing the tactical and humanitarian aspects.

237 The qualitative results found that when it comes to “safety,” the topic goes past the
238 actual rescue, with the people strongly involved in safeguarding identities and halting
239 retaliation and social stigma. It is a delicate balancing act of being both empathetic, as
240 a first responder and being at the same time a stakeholder of evidence in a case
241 inevitably going to prosecution. In addition, significant frequency with which
242 partnership with NGOs and Child Welfare Committees were mentioned is an
243 indication that some understanding exists that police is only one of many pieces of the
244 puzzle. As a whole, it demonstrates the current shift with an emphasis on changing the
245 paradigm in the policing process from mere enforcement to a broader and constantly
246 evolving process that addresses the psychological well-being of victims as well as co-
247 salvation.

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250 4.8 Ethics and Awareness in matters related to Human Trafficking

251 In this study mixed methods approach was utilized to evaluate security institutions'
252 process of preventative outlooks and internal moral principles. The study finds that
253 coverage of the policy is quite minimal as the structured data information about the
254 awareness programmes shows that whereas the descriptive feedback reveals ethical
255 guidelines, there is a wide gap between the policy and the reality. Thematic coding
256 was used as a method of analysis, whereby the data were first cleaned to ensure the
257 validity and then responses to the qualitative items were coded to estimate personnel
258 perceptions of institutional integrity. Attracting their attention when they are not
259 expecting it.

260 The quantitative data revealed a significant turnout which has not been witnessed in
261 the community. Some 60.9% of respondents said they had no knowledge of public
262 awareness campaigns being carried out by security forces indicating the public is not
263 yet in the grip of an awareness campaign as security forces are mostly reactive. The
264 results suggest that preventive works for involvement in community-based practices
265 and sensitisation programs are not widespread, although a negative one is a
266 confirmation that a small number (39.1%) are involved in such activities.

267 *Internal Ethics: Knowledge vs. Instinct*

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

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

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

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

281 *Institutional Implications*

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

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294 **5. Conclusion and Suggestion**

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

301 *Key Recommendations:*

302 All the personnel in AHTUs and Border Outposts should be trained in the POCSO
303 act, trauma-informed interviewing and digital forensics and not an "optional extra".

304 Siloed intelligence needs to be overcome by a single centralised database to be built
305 with AI, correlating faces at all transit centres with known financial networks of
306 transit traffickers.

307 Ensuring Protection is no token effort: In victim-centric budgets, it is important that
308 resources are specifically allocated to have emergency medical kits, civilian clothing
309 and secure transport of victims during police rescues.

310 Efficient processing of "legal grind" in Fast-track Courts: Concerning issue of human
311 trafficking, the Fast-track Courts must have priority and should not create
312 apprehension for the survivor to give evidence.

313 Improve Inter-Agency cooperation & Internationals Synergy: Replace the diplomatic
314 treaties with cooperative sharing of intelligence through joint task force to Bangladesh
315 and Nepal and other neighboring countries to counter against Intra-national supply
316 chain.

317 If these changes are not institutionalised then the security forces will never be a
318 comforting shield, ensuring justice to the least of the nation's people in India.

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