

Human Trafficking in India: Legal Gaps and Enforcement Challenges

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Abstract: This research paper examines the legal framework, systemic gaps, and enforcement challenges related to human trafficking in India. It analyses international instruments, national laws—chiefly the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956—and recent legislative efforts aimed at addressing trafficking in persons. Using recent reports, case law, and policy documents, the paper identifies substantive lacunae in criminalisation, victim protection, data collection, inter-agency coordination, and cross-border cooperation. The study concludes with concrete recommendations for legal reform, institutional capacity building, victim-centric policies, and community-level prevention strategies.

Keywords: Human trafficking, India, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, victim protection, enforcement.

1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and a complex organised crime that involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Trafficking takes multiple forms in India including sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, forced marriages, organ trafficking and trafficking of children for various exploitative purposes.

2. Definitions and Forms of Trafficking

The definition of trafficking used internationally is primarily derived from the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol), which supplements the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The Protocol's

definition has become the global standard for distinguishing trafficking from related crimes such as smuggling.

In the Indian context, legal instruments and judicial pronouncements employ varying terminologies—perpetrators are described under offences related to prostitution, kidnapping, slavery, forced labour, or bonded labour—leading to fragmentation in legal responses. Primary forms observed include:

- Sexual exploitation and commercial sexual exploitation
- Forced labour in factories, brick kilns, and agriculture
- Domestic servitude
- Trafficking of children for exploitation and begging
- Trafficking for organ removal
- Forced or deceptive marriages with exploitative intent

3. International Legal Framework

India is party to several international instruments and is influenced by global standards on combating trafficking. The Palermo Protocol (2000) sets the tri-partite approach of prevention, protection and prosecution and places emphasis on victim-centred responses, international cooperation, and border control measures.

Other international instruments and institutions including the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF and the UN Human Rights mechanisms provide guidance, data, and technical assistance to strengthen national responses. The UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons provides periodic, evidence-based assessments of trafficking patterns and state responses.

4. Indian Legal Framework

At the national level, the principal legislation historically used to address trafficking for commercial sex has been the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA), 1956. ITPA criminalises activities connected with commercial sexual exploitation, procurement, and brothel-keeping, and provides for detention and rescue measures. However, the Act's focus on 'immoral traffic' and prostitution narrows its reach when addressing the wider spectrum of trafficking.

Several other Indian laws intersect with trafficking offences, including:

- The Indian Penal Code (IPC) provisions such as sections on kidnapping, abduction, slavery and forced labour;
- The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976;
- Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012;
- The Transplantation of Human Organs Act, 1994 to prevent organ trafficking;
- Labour laws and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act.

Recognising the limitations of existing statutes, the Government of India and civil society have advocated for standalone comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation. Various draft bills—the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill (2018 and later versions)—

have sought to create a dedicated framework criminalising trafficking broadly, strengthening victim support and rehabilitation, and providing clearer institutional roles.

5. Gaps in the Law

Despite the presence of multiple statutes addressing aspects of trafficking, important legal gaps remain:

- A. **Fragmented legal framework:** India lacks a single, comprehensive anti-trafficking statute that aligns fully with the Palermo Protocol's modern definition. Existing laws are scattered across sexual offences, labour, child protection and medical statutes which complicates investigation and prosecution.
- B. **Narrow criminalisation:** The ITPA and certain IPC provisions focus more on prostitution or specific exploitative acts rather than the broader elements of trafficking (recruitment, transport, control and exploitation) used globally. This can hinder prosecution where elements like coercion or deception are not explicitly captured.
- C. **Victim identification and protection:** There are inconsistent procedures for identifying victims of trafficking, particularly adults who may be misclassified as offenders under prostitution-related laws. Safe repatriation, shelter, and long-term rehabilitation schemes are often underfunded or inadequately implemented.
- D. **Burden of proof and evidentiary hurdles:** Proving elements such as 'means of control' or coercion is challenging in court, and victims commonly withdraw complaints due to fear, stigma, or economic dependency.
- E. **Lack of comprehensive data and coordination:** Absence of a centralised, reliable database on trafficking incidents, prosecutions and convictions impedes policy evaluation. Inter-agency coordination among police, labour inspectors, judiciary, and child protection agencies is often ad hoc.
- F. **Weak cross-border cooperation:** Given India's porous land borders and regional migration flows, inadequate bilateral mechanisms with neighbouring states complicate rescue and repatriation.

6. Enforcement Challenges

In practice, enforcement faces multiple obstacles:

1. **Capacity constraints in law enforcement:** Police and investigative agencies often lack specialised training on identifying trafficking indicators, conducting victim-sensitive interviews, and gathering admissible digital and circumstantial evidence.
2. **Corruption and complicity:** Reports have identified instances where corruption or collusion by local officials and law enforcement have facilitated trafficking networks or impeded rescue operations.
3. **Socio-economic vulnerability:** Poverty, lack of education, caste and gender inequalities, and internal migration make large segments of the population vulnerable to traffickers.
4. **Stigma and victim-blaming:** Survivors—particularly of sexual exploitation—face social ostracism, which discourages reporting and sustained participation in prosecution.

5. Judicial delays and low conviction rates: Slow court processes, weak prosecution strategies, and low conviction rates reduce deterrence.
6. Technological challenges: Traffickers increasingly use online platforms, social media, and encrypted communication for recruitment and advertising; law enforcement's technological response is often reactive and under-resourced.
7. Protection vs. punishment dichotomy: Female adults found in prostitution are sometimes treated as offenders rather than victims, leading to detention instead of rehabilitation.

7. Case Law and Illustrative Examples

Indian courts have progressively interpreted trafficking-related offences with an eye on victim protection, but jurisprudence remains fragmented. Landmark cases have emphasised the need to treat trafficked persons as victims deserving of care and not merely as accused under prostitution-related provisions. Additionally, public interest litigations and judicial directives have often driven policy action in areas such as trafficking for organ removal and child trafficking.

8. Comparative Perspectives

Comparative examination with jurisdictions that have enacted comprehensive anti-trafficking laws—such as the UK's Modern Slavery Act (2015), Australia's measures and several EU member states—reveals the benefits of integrated frameworks that combine robust criminal provisions with victim support, transparency in supply chains, and independent anti-trafficking commissions. These models also underline the importance of mandatory victim identification procedures, non-punishment clauses, and specialised prosecution units.

9. Recommendations

This paper recommends the following measures to strengthen India's response to human trafficking:

1. Enact a comprehensive, standalone anti-trafficking law aligned with the Palermo Protocol that clearly defines trafficking, criminalises all forms of trafficking, and ensures non-punishment of victims for offences committed as a result of being trafficked.
2. Institutional reforms: Establish specialised anti-trafficking units at national and state levels with multi-disciplinary teams—law enforcement, prosecutors, social workers, and psychologists—and create a centralized data repository.
3. Victim-centred procedures: Implement standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification, immediate medical and psychosocial support, long-term rehabilitation, livelihood assistance, and legal aid.
4. Training and capacity-building: Regular, mandatory training for police, border personnel, labour inspectors, and judiciary on contemporary trafficking patterns and victim-sensitive practices.
5. Strengthen cross-border cooperation: Negotiate bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries for joint investigations, information sharing, and safe repatriation.
6. Technology and corporate responsibility: Regulate digital platforms to prevent facilitation of trafficking, mandate reporting mechanisms, and encourage corporate due diligence to disrupt supply-chain exploitation.

7. Community-based prevention: Invest in education, economic empowerment, and awareness campaigns targeting high-risk communities and migration corridors.
8. Data and research: Fund longitudinal studies and create a transparent national database on trafficking metrics, prosecutions and rehabilitation outcomes to inform policy.

10. Conclusion

Human trafficking in India persists due to a mix of legal fragmentation, enforcement weaknesses, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and evolving criminal strategies. While India possesses several laws that touch upon trafficking-related conduct, the absence of a cohesive, victim-centred anti-trafficking statute aligned with international standards constrains effective action. A multi-pronged response—legislative reform, institutional strengthening, victim protection, cross-border cooperation and community engagement—is essential to curb trafficking and restore dignity to victims.

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