



Vulnerable borders, hidden lives: Human trafficking across the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal

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Abstract

Cross-border human trafficking between India and Bangladesh, particularly through West Bengal, remains a persistent and complex challenge. This study examines the socio-economic factors, trafficking routes, and institutional responses to this transnational crime. West Bengal's porous border, spanning over 2,200 km, facilitates the illegal movement of victims, primarily women and children, for forced labour, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. Through a mixed-methods approach involving survivor interviews, law enforcement data, and NGO reports, this research identifies key patterns in trafficking operations, including the use of informal border crossings, fraudulent employment offers, and familial coercion. Findings reveal systemic vulnerabilities such as poverty, gender discrimination, and weak governance that perpetuate these crimes. Despite existing legal frameworks like the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and bilateral agreements between India and Bangladesh, enforcement remains inconsistent, with low prosecution rates and inadequate victim rehabilitation. The study highlights gaps in cross-border coordination, victim protection, and preventive measures, emphasising the need for stronger policy implementation. Recommendations include enhanced border surveillance, community-based awareness programs, and improved inter-agency collaboration to disrupt trafficking networks and support survivors. By providing empirical evidence on trafficking dynamics in West Bengal, this research contributes to broader discussions on human security and transnational crime in South Asia.

Keywords: Human trafficking, India-Bangladesh border, West Bengal, forced labour, sexual exploitation, transnational crime, victim protection

Introduction

Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and a growing concern in South Asia, with India and Bangladesh being significant source, transit, and destination countries. The India-Bangladesh border, especially in West Bengal, is a critical hotspot due to its porous nature, socio-economic disparities, and weak law enforcement. An estimated thousands of individuals, predominantly women and children, are trafficked annually across this border for forced labour, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. The shared cultural and linguistic ties between the two regions further complicate detection and prevention efforts, as traffickers exploit these similarities to deceive victims.

West Bengal's strategic location and long, poorly monitored border make it a prime transit route for trafficking networks. Districts such as North 24 Parganas, Malda, and Murshidabad report high incidences of trafficking, with victims often lured by false promises of employment, marriage, or better living conditions. Poverty, lack of education, and gender inequality exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly in rural areas where economic opportunities are scarce. Traffickers capitalise on these conditions, using coercion, fraud, and even familial complicity to transport victims across the border.

Despite international and national legal frameworks—such as the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol), the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA), and the Juvenile Justice Act—enforcement remains inconsistent. Challenges include corruption, inadequate resources, and limited cross-border collaboration. While NGOs and civil society organisations play a crucial role in rescue and rehabilitation, their efforts are often hampered by bureaucratic delays and insufficient funding.

This study aims to address gaps in existing research by providing a localised analysis of trafficking dynamics in West Bengal. It seeks to:

1. Map trafficking routes and identify modus operandi used by criminals.
2. Examine socio-economic and institutional factors that perpetuate trafficking.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of current legal and policy responses.
4. Propose actionable recommendations to strengthen prevention, prosecution, and victim support.

By combining empirical data with survivor narratives and policy analysis, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of cross-border trafficking in West Bengal. The findings are intended to inform policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and NGOs working to combat human trafficking and protect vulnerable populations. Ultimately, this study underscores the urgent need for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to address this humanitarian crisis effectively.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to comprehensively analyse cross-border human trafficking between India and Bangladesh through West Bengal. The triangulation of data sources ensured methodological rigour and enhanced the validity of findings.

Study Area

The research focused on three high-prevalence districts in West Bengal:

1. North 24 Parganas (key border crossings: Petrapole, Haridaspur)
2. Malda (key border crossings: Mahadipur, Sonamosjid)
3. Murshidabad (key border crossings: Farakka, Lalgola)

These districts were selected based on

- Highest reported trafficking cases (NCRB 2021-22 data)
- Proximity to major transit routes
- Presence of active NGO interventions

Data Collection Methods

1. Primary Data Collection

- **Survivor Interviews:** Conducted 35 in-depth interviews with rescued victims (25 female, 10 minors) through partner NGOs, using trauma-informed protocols
- **Key Informant Interviews:** 15 interviews with:
 - Border Security Force (BSF) personnel
 - Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) officers
 - NGO workers (Sanlaap, Goranbose Gram Bikash Kendra)
- **Focus Group Discussions:** 8 FGDs with community members in high-risk villages

2. Secondary Data Collection

- Analyzed 120 case files from West Bengal Police (2018-2023)
- Reviewed NCRB crime reports (2015-2022)
- Examined NGO rescue and rehabilitation records
- Compiled media reports on trafficking incidents

Sampling Strategy

- Purposive sampling for survivor interviews (ensuring diversity in age, trafficking experience)
- Snowball sampling to identify hidden populations
- Stratified random sampling of police case records

Data Analysis Techniques

1. Qualitative Analysis

- Thematic analysis of interview transcripts using NVivo
- Case study analysis of selected trafficking patterns
- Process tracing of trafficking networks

2. Quantitative Analysis

- Descriptive statistics of reported cases
- Spatial analysis of trafficking routes using GIS mapping
- Time-series analysis of trafficking trends

Ethical Considerations

- Obtained ethical clearance from the institutional review board
- Used pseudonyms for all survivors
- Provided counselling support during interviews
- Secured informed consent with NGO mediators

Limitations

- Underreporting of cases due to stigma
- Limited access to active trafficking networks
- Potential recall bias in survivor accounts

Results

Trafficking Patterns and Trends

1. Demographic Profile of Victims

Gender distribution: 68% female, 32% male

Age breakdown

- 12-17 years: 42%
- 18-25 years: 38%
- 26+ years: 20%

Socio-economic background

- 78% from families earning <\$2/day
- 62% had less than primary education

2. Trafficking Routes and Methods

Primary crossing points

- Riverine routes (40% of cases)
- Forest areas (30%)
- Official border crossings (20%)
- Railway routes (10%)

Common deception tactics

- Fake job offers (55%)
- False marriage proposals (25%)
- Familial coercion (15%)
- Kidnapping (5%)

3. Destination Analysis

Domestic destinations

- Kolkata brothels (35%)
- Delhi/NCR factories (25%)
- South India domestic work (20%)

International destinations

- Middle East (15%)
- Bangladesh itself (5%)

Institutional Response Analysis

1. Law Enforcement Data

Case registration trends (2018-2023)

- 1,250 FIRs filed
- Only 320 charge sheets submitted
- Mere 45 convictions obtained
- Average investigation duration: 14 months
- Case attrition rate: 74%

2. Border Security Effectiveness

BSF interception statistics

- 2018: 120 rescues
- 2022: 85 rescues

Challenges reported

- Limited night vision equipment
- Staff shortages (30% vacancy rate)
- Corruption allegations (12% of cases)

3. Victim Rehabilitation Outcomes

Shelter home data

- Average stay duration: 8 months
- 65% received vocational training
- Only 40% reintegrated successfully

Mental health impacts

- 72% showed PTSD symptoms
- 55% reported depression

Spatial and Temporal Trends

1. Geographical Hotspots

- North 24 Parganas: 45% of cases
- Malda: 30% of cases
- Murshidabad: 25% of cases

2. Seasonal Variations

Peak trafficking months

- Pre-monsoon (March-May): 40%
- Post-harvest season (Nov-Jan): 35%

Low season

- Monsoon months (June-Sept): 25%

Key Case Studies

1. Brothel Trafficking Network (2021)

- Modus operandi: Fake modelling agency
- Victims: 22 girls aged 14-19
- Route: Basirhat->Kolkata->Mumbai
- Outcome: 3 arrests, network still active

2. Child Labour Ring (2022)

- Victims: 35 children (12-16 years)
- Destination: Delhi garment factories
- Rescue operation: 18 children recovered

Statistical Findings

1. Trafficking Methods Frequency

Method	Percentage
Fake job offers	55%
False marriage	25%
Familial coercion	15%
Kidnapping	5%

2. Prosecution Outcomes

Stage	Percentage
FIR registered	100%
Chargesheet filed	26%
Conviction obtained	3.6%

3. Victim Rehabilitation

Aspect	Percentage
Received counseling	68%
Vocational training	65%
Successful reintegration	40%

Emerging Trends

1. Digital Facilitation

- 30% of recent cases involved social media luring
- New platforms: TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp

2. COVID-19 Impact

- 40% increase in familial coercion cases
- Decreased interception rates (2020-21)

3. Changing Demographics

- Rising cases of male child trafficking (15% increase)
- New destination sectors: fishing, construction

Challenges Identified

1. Systemic Issues

- Poor inter-state coordination
- Victim blaming in the judicial process
- Inadequate witness protection

2. Operational Constraints

- Limited forensic capabilities
- Language barriers in cross-border cases
- Slow extradition processes

Discussion

Structural Drivers of Trafficking

The findings reveal how deeply entrenched socio-economic factors facilitate cross-border trafficking. The 78% of victims coming from households earning below \$2/day underscores poverty as the primary vulnerability driver. This aligns with Gupta's (2020) ^[11] study on economic determinants of trafficking in South Asia. The high proportion (42%) of minor victims, particularly girls aged 12-17, reflects intersectional vulnerabilities combining poverty, gender discrimination, and lack of education - a pattern consistent with UNICEF's (2021) ^[6] regional analysis.

Border security challenges emerge as critical enabling factors. The 30% vacancy rate in BSF positions and the lack of night vision equipment explain why 70% of crossings occur through unmanned riverine and forest routes after dark. These operational gaps correlate with Rahman's (2019) ^[12] findings on border management weaknesses in developing countries. The persistence of official border crossing points (20% of cases) being used despite surveillance suggests possible corruption, supported by the 12% of cases involving complicity allegations.

Evolving Trafficking Modalities

The study documents significant shifts in trafficking methods. While traditional deception tactics (fake job offers at 55%) remain dominant, the emergence of digital recruitment (30% via social media) represents a dangerous evolution. This digital transition, accelerated by pandemic-induced lockdowns, matches INTERPOL's (2022) ^[19] global trend reports. The rise in male child trafficking (15% increase) for the fishing and construction sectors challenges conventional gender-focused prevention strategies and requires programmatic adaptation.

Institutional Response Gaps

The dismal 3.6% conviction rate exposes systemic failures in the justice delivery mechanism. Case attrition occurs at multiple stages - only 26% of FIRs reach the chargesheet stage, and merely 12% of those result in convictions. This judicial paralysis stems from three key factors:

- Victim retractions due to intimidation (observed in 40% of cases)
- Lack of forensic evidence (only 15% of cases had DNA proof)
- Prolonged trial durations (average 3.5 years)

The rehabilitation system shows mixed effectiveness. While 68% of victims receive counselling, the 40% successful reintegration rate indicates post-rescue support remains inadequate. Shelter home data reveals critical gaps in family reconciliation processes and economic rehabilitation.

Comparative Analysis with Regional Contexts

West Bengal's trafficking patterns show both similarities and distinctions compared to other border regions:

- Like the Nepal-India border (Shrestha 2021) ^[13], familial coercion features prominently (15% of cases)
- Unlike the Myanmar-Thai border (Lee 2020) ^[14], sexual exploitation dominates (65%) over labour trafficking

- Similar to Pakistan-Iran routes (Khan 2022) ^[21], official complicity emerges as a recurring theme

Policy Implementation Challenges

The research identifies three implementation gaps in anti-trafficking measures:

1. **Prevention:** Awareness programs fail to reach high-risk groups, with 80% of victims reporting no prior knowledge of trafficking risks
2. **Protection:** Only 35% of victims accessed government compensation schemes due to bureaucratic hurdles
3. **Prosecution:** Special courts handle only 12% of cases, while regular courts face 3-5-year backlogs

Successful Interventions Analysis

The community alert system pilot's 30% reduction in trafficking cases demonstrates the effectiveness of grassroots surveillance. This aligns with UNDP's (2022) ^[20] findings on community-based prevention models. Similarly, the fast-track court initiative's success in reducing trial duration offers a replicable model, though sustainability concerns remain given its limited scale (only 5 courts operational).

Emerging Threats and Future Directions

Two concerning trends demand urgent attention:

1. **Technology-facilitated trafficking:** The use of encrypted platforms like WhatsApp for coordination requires upgraded cyber policing capabilities
2. **Climate change impacts:** Preliminary data suggest increased trafficking from climate-affected Sundarbans communities, requiring further study

Theoretical Implications

The findings support Cohen and Felson's (1979) ^[18] Routine Activity Theory - traffickers exploit:

1. Suitable targets (economically vulnerable populations)
2. Absence of capable guardians (weak border security)
3. Motivated offenders (high profit, low risk)

However, the study also highlights the need to incorporate digital dimensions into traditional trafficking frameworks.

Conclusion

This study provides comprehensive empirical evidence on the complex dynamics of India-Bangladesh cross-border trafficking through West Bengal. The research establishes that trafficking persists as a function of structural vulnerabilities (poverty, gender inequality), institutional gaps (weak border security, judicial delays), and evolving criminal tactics (digital recruitment). While existing legal frameworks are robust on paper, implementation failures at multiple levels - prevention, protection and prosecution - enable trafficking networks to operate with relative impunity.

Key findings reveal disturbing trends: the increasing involvement of technology in trafficking operations, rising cases of male child exploitation, and the impacts of climate migration on vulnerability patterns. The 3.6% conviction rate underscores the urgent need for judicial reforms, while

the 40% rehabilitation success rate calls for strengthened victim support systems.

The study demonstrates that effective solutions require multi-sectoral coordination. The success of community alert systems and fast-track courts points to promising interventions that could be scaled up. However, sustainable progress demands addressing root causes through poverty alleviation, education access, and gender empowerment programs.

Future research should investigate the role of digital platforms in trafficking operations and the intersections between climate migration and vulnerability. Policymakers must prioritise border security modernisation, victim protection mechanisms, and cross-border cooperation frameworks. Only through such comprehensive approaches can the cycle of cross-border trafficking be effectively disrupted, protecting vulnerable communities and upholding human rights in the region.

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