



## Cross border human trafficking between India and Bangladesh: A focus study of the state of West Bengal

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### Abstract

Human Trafficking is the trade of human beings for profit. It is one of the most heinous crimes which violates the fundamental human rights of individuals and treats them like a commodity. This phenomenon is not limited to a particular country or region but spread all over the world. It runs by well-organized transnational organised criminal groups. South Asian region is largely affected by the crime of human trafficking. In this connection, the cross-border trafficking between Bangladesh and India on high and affected the bordering states like West Bengal. There are multiple factors which contribute to this crime like the longest porous land border of India with Bangladesh, illegal unregulated cross-border migration, labour trafficking etc. Several studies covering human trafficking in India claimed that the majority of women in West Bengal brothels especially in Kolkata are Bangladeshi nationals. West Bengal also received the largest number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh. This crime is not only violating the human rights of individuals but also creating a security threat to India. This paper will analyse the cross-border human trafficking between India and Bangladesh with a focused study on the Indian state of West Bengal. It tries to find out all the factors, patterns and proposed solutions to the cross-border human trafficking between both nations. The methodology of this paper will be descriptive, historical, and analytical.

**Keywords:** Cross border, India and Bangladesh, human trafficking

### Introduction

India shares the longest land border with Bangladesh. The border between India and Bangladesh is not fully blocked the movement of persons across the borders. The porous border between both countries creates the possibility for the trafficking of persons also. Human trafficking of women and children has increased dramatically in Bangladesh in recent years. According to various sources, between 400 to 500 women and children are trafficked across India's twenty transit points. They are almost all sold into servitude, prostitution, or forced labour. Bangladesh had a patchwork of legislation spread across various statutes. It eventually passed the "Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act of 2012" to combat human trafficking throughout the country (Moniruzzaman, 2021: 1) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Human trafficking is one of the burning topics of contention between India and Bangladesh, consequently becoming the destination of a conflict between them. The porous border between the two countries has been used by traffickers

numerous times to carry out their activities easily. Checkpoints and security staff are scattered too widely, exacerbating the problem. According to a UN Development Program assessment, 50,000 women from Bangladesh are trafficked to India annually across these porous borders. Along with Pakistan, India, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, Bangladeshi women and children are also trafficked there for domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, and debt servitude (UNDP, 2007: 10-11). Quantifying the number of Bangladeshi victims trafficked into India is no easy task. One of the researches suggests that approximately 200,000 to 300,000 trafficked victims from Bangladesh live in India under CSE. This study also estimates that 10,000 to 20,000 victims are trafficked from Bangladesh to India annually for CSE (Joffres *et al.*, 2008: 5) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Another study found that in the last ten years up to 3,000,000 women and children aged between 12 to 30 years, were trafficked from Bangladesh to India (Khan, 2019: 44) <sup>[12]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Routs of the Indo-Bangladesh border used by traffickers

Districts	Routs of Trafficking from Bangladesh to India	Major Destinations in India
Dinajpur	Biral, Amtoli Hakimpur, Hilli, Komolpur,	Balurghat, Hilli, Radikapur
Brahmanbaria, Comilla	Gopinathpur, Chouara	Agartala
Jessore	Goga, Shalkuna, Bahadurpur, Benapole	Kalini, Kurulia, Bonabari, Bongaon
Nawabgan	Shibgan	New Farakka
Lalmonirhat	Mogholhat, Hatibandha, Burimari	Gitaldaha, South, Shitalkhuchi
Khustia	Pragpur, Dhotarpara	Baharampur
Nilphamari	Thakugonj, Chatna, Chilahati	Jalpaiguri
Panchagarh	Banglabandha, Baroshashi, Tetulia	Haldibari, Islampur, Manikganj, Fulbari
Jhenaidah	Talsar, Jadabpur, Samkur	Shantipur, Krishnanagar, Ranaghat

Source: (Shamim, 2001: 15).

A study conducted by Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) found that 2.7 percent of victims of CSE in India are Bangladeshi Nationals. If this data applies to the more than 3000,000 prostitutes in India, we found that approx. 81,000 victims are from Bangladesh (Khan, 2019: 44)<sup>[12]</sup>. It is true that finding out the exact no of trafficked victims of trafficking is so difficult simultaneously, it is also true that many women and children are trafficked from Bangladesh to India. There are so many reasons behind the cross-border sex trafficking between both countries. One of the major reasons is the supply of girl children from poor families to richer ones to provide them services including sexual pleasure (Samarasinghe, 2012: 7)<sup>[18]</sup>. In relation to the cross-border trafficking from Bangladesh, India serves as both transit and destination points for the trafficked victims. The Border Security Force operates 20 official checkpoints in India (BSF). They are unsuccessful in maintaining rigorous vigilance over movements across the border since they are few and widely dispersed. Crossing the boundary between Bangladesh and West Bengal is a consistent occurrence for several people. As a result, keeping track of people's movements is highly challenging. Illegal entries by traffickers are well-known, and there is a widespread belief that they are shielded. Several businesses have sprung up to help with these cross-border moves; each journey could cost as little as 50 Rupees per individual (Asian Development Bank, 2003 16 & 23)<sup>[2]</sup>.

People can easily cross the flat landscape with the help of a well-organized bribing scheme. Furthermore, numerous passports system makes it simple for Bangladeshi girls to enter Kolkata brothels, and traffickers and border village residents have a tight relationship. Women are detained in West Bengal and Orissa once they arrive in India. They may be sent to the Middle East, Kolkata, Bashirghat, Delhi, Mumbai, or Agra after being graded and sorted before being sold to pimps (BNWLA, 1998; Gazi *et al.*, 2001: 11)<sup>[7]</sup>.

Throughout the colonial period, eastern and western Bengal people moved between these parts of the region in pursuit of work, stability, and other causes. The natural order of things was upset by the imposition of an artificial barrier in a land with a common past. The partition line slashed a society that had always been very mobile, and after the partition, previously regarded as totally natural movements, were declared illegal as cross-border movements. The newly established boundary spanned over 4096.7 kilometres and sliced through everything that had previously been everyone's economic lifeblood. Agricultural grounds, markets, railways, important roadways, and populous communities and common areas were all included. The porous and frequently indistinguishable Indo-Bangladesh border has resulted in a slew of challenges that have strained relations between the two neighbors (Van Schendel, 2004: 191)<sup>[21]</sup>.

With the establishment of trade in Bengal in the early nineteenth century, people from across the state arrived in quest of work (Chatterjee, 1993: 159)<sup>[4]</sup>. With the expansion of the urban working and labour classes, market needs became one of the most important factors in transforming the character of prostitution in Bengal. Sonagachi, Asia's oldest and largest red-light district, gained fame as a result of all of this (Banerjee, 1998: 2)<sup>[3]</sup>. According to him, Sonagachi, formerly Sonagaji, was chosen after a Muslim peer named Sona Ullah Gaji, whose tomb still stands in front of the area's entrance. During the British colonial

period, prostitution increased more in Calcutta and West Bengal in comparison to the other cities and states of India (Nag, 2001: 4025)<sup>[15]</sup>. The city of Calcutta, then the capital of India under the British East India Company, had 655 prostitute-owned homes out of a total of 7433 residences in the city, all of which were situated around the city's 44 main routes, according to a census record from 1806, at the time. A renowned Tagore family member ran the brothel at 235 and 236 Bow Bazar Street in North Calcutta, which offered 43 flats for sex workers for Rs. 140 per month (Mukherjee, 1977)<sup>[14]</sup>.

### **A Focus Study of the State of West Bengal**

Women and children are trafficked domestically and internationally, with the East Indian state of West Bengal acting as a source, a transit location, and a destination. Along with northeastern states like Assam, the state also borders Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Sikkim. It shares international borders with its neighbours, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Because of its location, demographic limits, and socioeconomic disparities, West Bengal is particularly susceptible to people trafficking. Though there are no reliable statistics on the scope of trafficking, there is actual knowledge about the routes, regions, tactics, and main targets of trafficking. As hotspots for women and child trafficking, UNICEF names a number of districts, including Murshidabad, Howrah, Dinajpur (South and North), Nadia, 24 Parganas (South and North), and Midnapur (Ghosh, 2009: 728)<sup>[8]</sup>. According to Ghosh (2009)<sup>[8]</sup>, the main targets of trafficking in west Bengal encompass different communities like the poor Muslim, Hindu SCs, and STs, and among them are mostly landless households, farming cultivators, tea gardeners, and low-paid seasonal workers. It has not left also illegal migrants, illiterate people, dropout students, orphans, and widowed women who succumb to this condition due to extreme dowry demands.

Almost every district in West Bengal is prone to human trafficking. North Bengal's trafficking-prone districts include Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North and South Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, and Malda. These districts share international boundaries with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, and trafficking has been recorded in tribal regions, tea fields, and border areas. Other vulnerable locations prone to trafficking are the districts of North and South Twenty-Four Parganas. The settlements are spread out because the regions are in the Sunderban area. In West Bengal, 14,000 adults and children disappeared in 2011. Most of them are thought to have been recruited by the massive human trafficking industry that has made West Bengal its home (Sarkar, 2014: 490)<sup>[20]</sup>.

### **Geographical Location of West Bengal**

The geographical location of North Bengal facilitates cross-border trafficking, and Siliguri is a significant transit hub for the north-east. The distant and secluded tea estates of Jalpaiguri provide enough opportunity for agents to both hire and convey new recruits without public attention or opposition. Under the pretense of offering work in remote regions, child trafficking from tea estates occurs. Traditional ways of trafficking females, such as child marriages, sham marriages, abductions, and kidnappings, are now rarely practiced. This is because the tea garden *adivasis* do not marry their daughters young, and adult men and women's preferences largely determine marriage. This starkly

contrasts other West Bengal regions like Malda, where child marriage is the most common form of trafficking (Ghosh, 2011: 212) <sup>[9]</sup>. In the context of West Bengal's plantation industry's developing difficulties, it appears that child trafficking and other sorts of crimes against minors are more than just societal issues (and similar to other sick industries in the post-reform era). It is a symptom of a much larger societal problem. There is a clear correlation between increased labour transportation to urban areas and human trafficking (Ghosh, 2014: 65) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Adivasi children, both boys, and girls, primarily from the Oraon, Munda, and Santal tribes, are the primary targets of the human trafficking racket. Poverty appears to be the primary cause. Furthermore, because Adivasi families comprise on average five members, financial constraints drive parents to direct their children to work at a young age. The tribal boys 'and girls' inadequate literacy precludes them from seeking alternate employment opportunities. Agents entice fathers by offering them booze and/or cash in exchange for an advance. A family that accepts money from an agent in exchange for their child's transportation loses the moral right to involve the community in any wrongdoing, at least at first (Ghosh, 2014: 61) <sup>[10]</sup>.

The latest data published by NCRB in 2020 indicate that the number of cases of human trafficking declined slightly in West Bengal. In the comparison of the data of different years by NCRB, 172 cases of human trafficking were stated in 2018 in the state, in 2019, it falls to 120. With the 59 cases reported in 2020, West Bengal is improving the situation of trafficking in persons. 71 people, including women, men, and children, were trafficked in 2020 in West Bengal (NCRB, 2020: 984-985). Research conducted in different red-light districts in West Bengal found that 7 percent of prostitutes are Bangladeshi Nationals (Sarkar, *et al.*, 2008: 223) <sup>[19]</sup>. An estimated that almost 50,000 sex workers are there in West Bengal, and about half of them work in Kolkata (Nelson, 2003: 1) <sup>[17]</sup>.

### Major Challenges to Combat Cross-border Trafficking

The major causes are the largest land boundary between India and Bangladesh, population overload, illegal migration, and poverty. This crime may be explained by another approach called the Demand and supply approach. In this context, demands are demand for cheap labour and commercial sexual services. Supply-side are those factors which compel the people to migrate or make them more vulnerable to trafficking such as poverty, unemployment, political unrest, civil war etc.

Cross-border migration and human trafficking, notably the use of women for commercial sex labour, have become global issues since the 1990s. Due to the presumption that they were 'followers' of male migrants, women were first ignored in migration research (Donato *et al.*, 2006) <sup>[6]</sup>. Numerous investigations have shown that legal and illegal immigrants pay the immigration officials who frequently act dishonestly and traffic immigrants (ILO, 2004). One of the levels of exploitation is the distinction between human trafficking and illegal migration made possible by people smugglers; human smuggling is only "mostly voluntary." Numerous studies have demonstrated that even legal migration can involve dishonesty and legal infractions by both migrants and migration agents, which could quicken the trafficking process (Andrijasevic, 2007) <sup>[1]</sup>. Numerous research that distinguished between migration and

trafficking came to the conclusion that while it is expected for rights violations and exploitation to halt once a migrant reaches their destination, this is not the case with human trafficking. Under the custody of the traffickers, the victim of trafficking is treated like a slave and exploited (Derks *et al.*, 2006) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Conclusion

All eight of the countries that make up South Asia share a number of conditions that are nearly identical to those in which human trafficking occurs. All of these conditions—poverty, unemployment, corruption, illegal immigration, social and ethnic variety, uneven treatment of women, lax law and order, and political instability—are present in all of the countries that contribute to the region's consistent pattern of trafficking.

The oppressive approach being used in South Asia to tackle human trafficking must be replaced with a rights-based one. The heart needs blood to beat properly. Any legislative framework that maintains the core human rights principles is the lifeblood of anti-human trafficking initiatives. It is not sufficient to only pass sound legislation; it also needs to be effectively applied. Police, prosecutors, and judges must obtain specialised training in order to successfully implement anti-trafficking laws. State trust is a prerequisite for any South Asian nation's successful and cooperative endeavour. South Asian nations shouldn't place the blame for victims of cross-border trafficking on one another. In order to better victim rescue, prevention, repatriation, and prosecution, they should collaborate in constructive conversation. South Asian nations will be able to approach the issue of trafficking from a humanitarian perspective in addition to their narrow national interests if they engage constructively. As a result, the scope of collaboration in information sharing and exchange, operations, rescue, investigation, repatriation, prosecution, and other connected domains related to combating human trafficking will automatically broaden.

Hundreds of thousands of NGOs, INGOs, and civil society organisations are working across South Asia to combat human trafficking. All of these NGOs and civil society groups are renowned for their productive participatory work environments. They are interacting directly with the people while working on the ground. They also play a vital role in raising public awareness of human trafficking. Some of the largest organisations operating in Bangladesh are listed below.

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