

Vulnerability, Human Trafficking and Human Rights issue in the Northeast India

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Abstract

Over the centuries the life of the vulnerable sections in the society has been victim of evil practices. The issue of human trafficking is such an ancient evil practice which is also prevalent in modern period. Women and children of vulnerable communities have been constant victims of this inhuman practice. In modern period the issue of human trafficking has turned into a transnational crime adversely affecting every continent and earned the epithet of modern slavery. Hence, the human trafficking has been emerged as an issue of global human rights concern. Case of India is also not exception. In the global map of trafficking, India in general and the Northeast region of the country in particular have been marked as hotspot of this phenomenon. In the last few decades the trend of human trafficking in the country has been rising abruptly. The vulnerable communities including women and children are the prime victims of the trafficking in the country and as well as in the Northeast region. Innumerable diverse factors are promoting the inhuman trafficking in the region, which range from societal to economic and political causes. The trafficking leads to the gross infringement of the human rights of these vulnerable groups in the region. Therefore, in this article, an attempt has been made to examine vulnerability, human trafficking and the nature of violations of human rights of vulnerable groups in the Northeast India.

Keywords: Human, Trafficking, Rights, Vulnerability, Northeast India, Assam

1.0 Introduction

Since the ancient time vulnerability¹ of people in a society makes them victim of countless evil practices. The vulnerable groups of population include the elderly, children, teen agers, misguided youth, illiterate and poor, internally displaced people and also women.

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Their vulnerability makes them susceptible to the trafficking² and makes it much easier for the traffickers to gain control over the former. The human trafficking³ has been an evil practice since ancient time and takes different forms in different periods of history and society.

The issue of human trafficking has a long history. Since historical time it is known existing in the society in different forms. The practice of human trafficking is a trade of human beings mostly women and children, to engage in commercial sexual act and as a forced labourer; which leads to the violation of their human rights. The practice of human trafficking was prevalent during the period of Greek city states. In the Greek state and other kingdoms of that and women were trafficked primarily for the purpose of prostitution. At first the phrase “traffic” was coined to indicate the ‘white slave trade’ in women. The practice was predominant during the middle ages. Thousands of women and children from East Prussia, the Czech lands, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia were brought for sale in the slave markets annually. These markets were based in Italy and southern France. In the later part of the Middle Ages another phase of trafficking had occurred, when European women and children were trafficked to be sold in Italy and Middle East. Undoubtedly, human trafficking is not a modern practice; it exists over the centuries (Ahmad 2022: 7-8).

Ancient India was not an exception to human trafficking, an inherent evil in human civilisation. Since later Vedic times, the tradition to offer woman as a *daksina* to a Brahman together with other items like cattle, chariots etc, had begun. This practice subsequently commodified women. The women accepted as *daksina* were sexually exploited and sold like slaves or prostitutes. (Singh 2007: 167). That was the first record of human trafficking in India. The ancient religious custom of *devdasi* is also a form of woman trafficking. In this practice minor girls were offered to temples to be married to god. After being faced exploitation by the temple priests, the *devdasis* were trafficked to the brothel for prostitution. (Dkhar 2015: 7).

As has been argued, the tradition of human trafficking constitutes from ancient time. No doubt, the issue of women and children trafficking has emerged as a fiery issue in the country, for in the past decades, the cases of human trafficking in the country have been rising rapidly. The vulnerable communities including women and children are reportedly falling victim to the trafficking. The record of the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), as cited by Monideepa Banerjee (2017) presents that in 2016 a total of 8,312 cases of human trafficking were reported in India. In the same year 23, 117 trafficking victims were rescued (Gol2018). The trend of human trafficking in the country is presented in table 1.

Jayanta Bhattacharya (2023) also has also cited the report of the NCRB and presented that in between 2019-21, 1.3 million women and girls went missing in India. In 2019, almost 82,619 girls and 3, 29,504 women; in 2020, 79,233 girls and 3,44,422 women and similarly in 2021,90,113 and 3,75,058 girls and women were reported missing (Bhattacharya 2023). These missing cases of girls and women can be attributed to the linkages with the trafficking because of the fact that India has appeared as a place of

origin, destination and corridor for both internal and external trafficking. (Ahmad 2022: 59). Individuals from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal are trafficked to India and along with them persons of the country are being trafficked to the regions like West Asia, North America and European countries (Dixit 2017: 27).

Table 1: Human Trafficking Cases in India

Year	No. of trafficking cases registered under Indian Penal Code (IPC)
2017	2,854
2018	1,830
2019	2,088
2020	1,714
2021	2,189

Source: U.S. Department of the State (n.d.(a) & n.d.(b))

In India, some specific areas have been emerging as the hotspots of human trafficking. Alarming as it would appear, the metropolitan cities, places of tourist interest and manufacturing centres have been transforming as the epicentre of women and child trafficking (Ahmad 2022: 67). One such epicentre concerning the inhuman practice of the trafficking is the Northeast, a less developed and insurgency-stricken region of the country.

With this backdrop the present article makes an attempt to sketch the nature of trafficking and its connection with vulnerability and human rights issue in the Northeast India.

The present study is descriptive in nature and primarily is based on secondary sources of data collected from the various published and unpublished sources like journal, reports, books, articles, etc. The authors having interest on the topic and belonging to Assam have gained information from participation in discussions at various platforms and from instances of trafficking cases around.

1.1 Human Trafficking in the Northeast: A Brief Account

The Northeast of India comprises eight states-Assam, Arunachal Pradesh Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The region's total land surface is 2,62,185sq.kms. Despite rich in natural resources, economically the region is less developed. The uniqueness of this region unlike other parts of India is that its boundaries share with international borders of foreign countries like China occupied Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. This uniqueness has been the cause of making this region a fertile ground of human trafficking and a sensitive issue in the region(Das 2016: 9) and the country. Several interrelated factors contribute to human trafficking in the region, which include prostitution, business, smuggling, bonded labourers, entertainment industries, drugs trafficking etc. (Roy 2010: 71). In the Northeast region trafficking takes place at two stages. First stage is internal market including trafficking within the region and the country. Its internal dimension includes inter-district movement in the region and the

moment to other states of the country. Internal trafficking occurs when individuals from conflict ridden rural areas are taken by the traffickers to the metropolis like Mumbai, Delhi, etc. for the purpose of domestic services and also for organ trade. Secondly, at international level, women from the region are trafficked to South East Asian countries for diverse objectives like employment in drug trafficking, labour work, bar and in prostitution (Roy 2010:68). The region has been the place of origin, destination and transit point of trafficking. Its emergence as a hotspot in the region is an indication of broader socio-economic troubles in it. However, ignorance about complicity of the issue, callous nature of people who can make a change and lack of sincerity at different levels stand as a stumbling block in dealing with this crisis (Boruah & Roy 2021: 299). This has been a causal factor of the proliferation of human trafficking in the Northeast.

Incidence of the Northeast's human trafficking drew attention after a study on child labour which was conducted in 2002 (Ahmad 2022: 68). Regarding the trafficking in the region the founder of the Impulse NGO, Hasina Kharbiv agrees with the fact that most of country's international borders thought this region open and unmanned at several points. This vantage weakness makes the Northeast a unique and distinct region of trafficking as compared with the rest of India; the organised human trafficking syndicates operating undetected take advantage of this weakness (Zimik T 2015: 265). On 29 September, 2022 while talking at a consultation on combating human trafficking in the Northeast, Rekha Sharma, the Chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW) was in agony for the reason that women and young girls from the region are lured with job assurance, transported to metropolitan cities and then pushed to the flesh trade by the notorious traffickers' rackets despite the existence of stringent measures against the heinous human trade. This statement of the NCW chairperson vividly manifests serious nature of the issue of human trafficking in the region (Digital Desk 2022) particularly of women and girls who are vulnerable by themselves and who also generally belong to vulnerable groups.

Trafficking of the members from vulnerable groups from the Northeast region and bordering countries is an issue of serious concern that has unable to attract general public attention as it deserves. Places like Pangsang and Dimpaur in Nagaland and Moreh in Manipur have emerged as the major cross-border conveyance and demand centres. Trafficking of women and children from Assam and Bangladesh to Myanmar and other South-East Asian countries takes place via Moreh (Zimik 2015: 266). Again, reversely women from countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar are trafficked into Assam, and then trafficked out to the rest of India and foreign countries. Allegedly, trafficking of women from Assam to foreign countries like China, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Thailand and other countries are taking place. (Ray 2015: 312).

In the region the prime victims in human trafficking are members of the vulnerable communities and groups comprising women, girls and children. Over the years the human traffickers have been targeting these vulnerable groups, taking the chance of their vulnerability. However, the scenario of trafficking cases varies in every state in the region. In Meghalaya, as per the information from Director General of Police (DGP), nineteen cases of human trafficking were registered between 2016 and (Our Reporter 2023). The Chief Justice of Meghalaya High Court, Justice Mohammad Yaqoob Mir has

acknowledged the existence of highest incidence of child trafficking in the coal mine areas of Jaintia hills of Meghalaya (IANS 2018).

In case of Manipur, human trafficking has been gaining its grounds from the last couple of decades. The state has emerged as a convenient transit route for the international trafficking and a safe place for traffickers. Moreh in the state has become the epicentre of trafficking Indian and Nepalese girls and women and some men as well to Myanmar, and from there, to Middle East, West Asia and South East Asian countries (Niumai 2021:6). In 2019, Manipur police rescued 32 men and 151 women, 40 women belonging to Nepal, from the trap of the traffickers. The case reveals the emergence of Manipur as the hotspot of international trafficking (Choudhury 2019). In Mizoram between 2000 and 2022, 35 trafficking cases have been registered in the state, and a total of eighty-nine girls and six boys have been rescued, while sixty-four traffickers have been arrested (Vanlalruata 2022).

In the context of Tripura during January 2022 to August 2022, 2968 women and 263 minor girls went missing which allegedly the cases of are trafficking (Digital Desk 2022). Moreover, on 29 December 2023, National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested four persons who coordinated with traffickers working from across the international border to facilitate illegal infiltration of persons of Bangladeshi origin into India. The accused were also found to have forged Indian identity documents for the trafficked individuals from across the borders into India (The Hindu Bureau 2023). This case in Tripura is exposing the rampant cross border trafficking in the state. The state of Nagaland is also not exception to trafficking. During the period 2016-2021, 24 trafficking cases were registered (Odyuo 2021).

Conversely, human trafficking scenario in Assam has its own distinction. In the region, Assam accounts for highest number of human trafficking cases. Over the years, thousands of women, girls and children have been constantly missing from the state thereby earning the epithet of the “hotbed of human traffickers” from all over the country (Chakraborty and Chakrabarty 2013: 258). In Assam truckers have used the highway routes to carry trafficked girls. During 1986-2007, a total of 3,184 women and 3,840 girls went missing from the state. During 2009-2011 another 5,000 women were supposed to be trafficked. (Ray 2015: 306). The Women and Child Development Minister of Assam, Ajanta Neog, stated that in Assam altogether 481 children were trafficked from various parts during 2017-2022. She also revealed out of a total of 759 missing children in the state since 2017 a total of 666 were rescued (PTI 2023). Parashar in his report cites the NCRB figures on trafficking in Assam and mentions that in 2018 Assam recorded 308 cases of human trafficking—the second highest figure in the country after Maharashtra. In 2019, the number remained 201, secured third position in the country, while in 2020 the state recorded 124 cases, which is seventh highest in the country (Parashar 2022). In 2021, the state ranks the highest in the Northeast region and third in the country regarding human trafficking with as many as 203 reported cases. In the same year 349 persons were arrested in this connection (India Today NE 2023).

1.2 Causes of Trafficking

The above data reveals that Assam has been the hotspot of human trafficking in the Northeast region. In all of these cases the prime victims are members belonging to economically vulnerable groups like women and children. There are a number of contributing factors making the region as the nucleus of the trafficking in the country by making the vulnerable groups as the prime victims. However, the causes are varying in nature across the states in the Northeast due to the diversity in the region. An analysis of these causes can be presented as below:

1.2.1 Poverty

Poverty is one of the major causes of human trafficking victimising the vulnerable groups in the Northeast including the state of Assam. Related to poverty is lack of employment opportunity which is also a contributing factor. According to the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) 2023 report, 19.35% of total population in Assam, 27.79% in Meghalaya, 15.43% in Nagaland, 13.76% in Arunachal Pradesh, 13.11% in Tripura, 8.10% in Manipur, and 5.30% in Mizoram are multidimensionally poor.(NITI 2023). The state aggregate however is not true representation of the extent of poverty and inequality among communities, regions and families. But the fact is that, recorded or unrecorded, numerous women and girls from Northeast region travel to unknown destinations with strange folks in search of work. By taking advantage of the situation of poverty and unemployment traffickers exploit them and separate them from the home. Again in the work place trafficked women and children suffer unaccountable forms of affliction (Roy and Barua 2021: 301). Hasina Kharbih, an anti-trafficking activist expressed that Northeast India has a high percentage of people below poverty line which makes it a vulnerable area at risk of human trafficking (Mishra et al 2013: 348). The DGP of Meghalaya also cited poverty as the cause behind human trafficking (Meghalayan Bureau 2023). In the region landless people and displaced people due to the erosion and flash flood are falling in the trap of the traffickers. Landlessness, absence of alternative job opportunity and low wages in the tea garden, cause tea garden labourers easy target of the traffickers who lure them to provide employment in the cities or outside the states. Traffickers purchase young girls with meagre amount of rupees, and promise parents to take care of the children's education and sell them (Raina 2017).

1.2.2 Unemployment

Another factor responsible for trafficking of vulnerable groups in the Northeast region in general and Assam in particular is the issue of unemployment problem. (IANS 2018). The Northeast region is industrially one of the backward areas in the country. Despite the main stay of the economy; agriculture sector fails to generate adequate employment opportunities. Highlighting the issue of unemployment, traffickers induce the members of the vulnerable groups to provide excellent profession with lucrative salary outside Assam; such allurements finally drags women into their trap (PTI 2021).

1.2.3 Alcoholism

It is a crucial issue in the villages of Assam and in the hills of the Northeast. In its study Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) found that rampant alcoholism in the tea garden areas in Assam holds high propensity of trafficking of the children; mostly the children of parents who were alcoholic. The study found that an alcoholic father does not hesitate to sell their daughters for money (TISS 2019: 18&19).

1.2.4 Recurring Natural disasters

Natural disasters like flood are recurring in nature. There are also human made disasters caused due to insurgency. Both of natural and human made disasters cause people economically vulnerable and encourage trafficking in women in the region. Disaster causes mass displacement of people, compels people to take shelter in relief camps. Consequently, the traffickers get the opportunity to trap the victims of disaster (Kengurusie 2017). Flood is a recurring phenomenon in Assam and it leads to displacement of the people in large scale; as a result, the flood hit areas emerge as the hotspot of trafficking. (Ray 2015). The havoc caused in flood can be appreciated from the data of one year. It is recorded that 88 lakh people were affected by floods in the state in 2022 (Das 2023). The state's perpetual flood problem has provided fertile ground for child trafficking by causing huge displacement (Akhtar 2015). During post flood period human trafficking networks become vigorously active in Assam. The locals are engaged by the traffickers to identify vulnerable targets and to captivate them with promises of jobs, money or marriage. How flood is a primary boost for trafficking is a common cause recognised by NGOs working in the region (see Deb 2020).

1.2.5 Conflict

Conflict is a dangerous contributing factor to displacement, poverty and to the condition of vulnerability, and thereby to human trafficking in large scale. Conflict destroys traditional economy, and due to fear of life thousands of people migrate in search of economic and life security. The thought of migration as a strategy to avoid insecurities becomes the solid ground for trafficking (Ray 2015: 314). It will be not preposterous to argue that insecurity and risk to life and property due to prevalence of ethnic violence, internal armed conflicts, etc. have made the region traffic prone. Various rebel groups in the region harnessed the opportunity of conflict and recruited huge number of children as comrade. The female recruits of rebel groups who escaped stated that they were used to be forced to perform sexual act with their superiors and leaders of other rebel groups who visited the camps (Roy & Barua2021: 298).

1.2.6 Family Issue

Swamya Ray in her study found that in Assam girls and women became victim of sex trafficking due to domestic factors. Some of the victims belonged to families where either of the parents were dead or had remarried. The economic and emotional vulnerabilities, negligence, etc. compelled girls from these families into sex trafficking (Ray 2015: 310).

1.2.7 Lure of Marriage

Lure of Marriage promotes human trafficking, especially women trafficking in the region. Due to uneven sex ratio in states like Punjab and Haryana, Assam emerges as the fertile centre of trafficking of young girls as brides to these states (Kengurusie 2017: 120). Commonly, this form of trafficking is known as “bridal trafficking”. Sometimes, the traffickers establish relationship with illiterate and poor women through mobile or agents and promise a lasting and happy marriage. But in the post marriage period traffickers sell the women outside of Assam. According to news published in *Northeast Now*, in June 2018, police rescued seventeen girls from Kamrup district who were victim of fake marriages. The lovers of these girls encouraged them to run away to marry. Fake marriage ceremony was held with the presence of fake *kazis* or gurus and the girls, believing in the marriage fell in the trap of the trafficker during their travel to other places with their husbands (NE NOW 2018b).

1.2.8 Demand for housemaid

Rapid urbanisation, working couple in nucleus family and increased participation of family members of joint families in livelihood pursuits have necessitated service of the domestic help; this is increasing the need for female children in particular to be used as house maid. The employers compel these children to work under abusive, unhygienic and harmful conditions (Kengurusie 2017: 120). In the conflict ridden Bodoland Territorial Council region in Assam, women and children are enticed to metro cities and also to foreign countries such as Bhutan and Nepal to work as domestic helps. It is not an exaggeration to state that the Northeast is a source region of domestic servants for Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, etc. The agents recruiting domestic servants are active in the region (Roy 2010: 69-70).

Besides, some other factors are responsible for trafficking members of vulnerable groups in the Northeast region in general and Assam in particular. Growth of tourism industries in Assam and other parts of Northeast, mining, exploitative work conditions in tea gardens, physical features of women of Northeast including Assam with mongoloid features are some factors promoting trafficking in the region (Ray 2015: 319).

These are miscellaneous factors which are mainly responsible for trafficking in general and female trafficking in particular. To prevent the menace of trafficking the state government in Assam has shown its commitment. “Anti-human trafficking units have been created at district headquarters, child welfare committees have been created in districts, and special juvenile police unit have also been created” (Borah 2020:2034). Again in the region several NGOs are pro-actively engaged to fight against this evil. Meghalaya based Impulse NGO network is a trailblazer in this field. It has been operating rescue and rehabilitation of trafficked victims (Wangchuk 2018). In Assam an NGO, namely Nedan Foundation is also working against the practice of human trafficking (NE NOW NEWS 2018).

1.3 Conclusion

Human trafficking known as modern form slavery has been infringing the rights of the vulnerable communities across the world. The Northeast region of India is not an exception and is an example of the loci of vulnerability across communities and regions. Vulnerability is the outcome of deprivation of human rights and reflects in poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, limited or non-accessibility to health care and so on. In other words, vulnerability is the condition of absence or violation of human rights in the form of deprivation of entitlements, which in turn stands at the root of trafficking. Vulnerability deprives people of decent life and security network, and makes them susceptible to any assurance or possibility, real or pretention, that promises escape from it. Violation of human rights causes vulnerability which in turn acts as a push factor to the practice of trafficking. Vulnerable people are more prone to fall in the trap of trafficking.

The post trafficking life of the victim is not conducive for him or her to enjoy even basic human rights as are included as fundamental rights in the Constitution of India. Trafficked person often is comparable with that of the slave and trafficking is the modern form of the institution of slavery.

There are six fundamental rights in the constitution of India. The victims of trafficking are denied the rights to enjoy these constitutional rights. Furthermore, during the post trafficking phase they are unable to enjoy their basic human rights like right to freedom, liberty, free speech and expression, right to education, right to life with dignity, right to equal wages, right to health, right to privacy, right to self-determination, right to legal remedies, right to redressal of grievances. The victims suffer extreme physical and mental abuse depending on the nature and place of work. This includes rape, forced abortions, forced prostitution, physical torture, insufficient food, unhygienic living and so on.

To combat this inhuman practice initiatives are taken both at the international and national levels and at government and civil society levels. Government of India has taken different measures to combat this brutal form of violence. The state governments in Northeast region have been taking up different steps to combat human trafficking in the region. The state government in Assam has been taking various initiatives like creation of anti-human trafficking units at district headquarters; district child welfare committees have been created; special juvenile police unit have also been established. In the region various NGOs have been pro-actively engaged to prevent the trafficking. The role of Meghalaya based Impulse NGO network is a significant initiative in the field. In Assam several NGOs are also working against the practice of human trafficking.

Despite the stern measures and efforts by the state governments and NGOs and civil societies in the region trafficking have been a recurring phenomenon. Over the decades the trend of trafficking in the region is in rise. Hence the question is raised: has state as an agency failed to curb the menace of trafficking? Or can involvement of large number of Civil Societies or NGOs be necessary to prevent it?

There is legislation, agencies and other actors working to stop trafficking. But still it continues and is on the rise. This happens because there is demand and supply market in this regard and intermediaries between demand and supply. Vulnerability is the factor influencing supply. The demand side has several reasons like demand for cheap labour, domestic help, sex market, and so on. The intermediaries also have their reasons; for them trafficking is a source of “employment”. Above all, there is a mentality that does not find alternative to fulfil the perceived or actual demand for a decent living and other sources of employment; rather it takes resort to this practice that sustains it. So legislation against trafficking cannot be an effective measure to arrest the crisis. Factors influencing demand, supply, involvement of intermediaries and mentality as well have to be considered together to fight against trafficking.

In addition, awareness campaign against trafficking on moral, ethical and human rights ground is crucial. Change in mind is more important than change in physical conditions which cause trafficking.

Notes

1. In this article vulnerability is conceptualised as a condition where the people are deprived of entitlements essential for decent living and enjoying human rights. In simple terms it is a condition of exposure to risks such as physical and emotional attack; it is a poorly equipped condition for self defence and coping with risks; it is a condition of multi-dimensional deprivations.
2. Trafficking is an illegal mode of transactions. But in this article it refers to use of coercive, deceptive and seductive ways to transact human beings with an illegal purpose. It involves exploitation, torture, etc. of transacted humans and is thus a criminal practice.
3. Article 3 (a) of UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) of the protocol defines human trafficking in terms of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another coercion, for the purpose of exploitation (*see* Ahmad 2022:5).

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