

Investigating Possible Government Misreporting from 2009-2020 of Data on Human Trafficking in India

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Abstract: *Human trafficking is defined as the movement of people from one place to another through force or coercion into situations of exploitation, usually for the economic benefit of traffickers. Rates of human trafficking in India are high, with poverty and a lack of job opportunities being among the main causes. Data reported by the National Crime Records Bureau has been called into question by many prominent news organisations, activists and NGOs. This study will evaluate the accuracy of government reported data using literature on human trafficking in India from 2009-2020.*

Keywords: human trafficking bonded labour, sex work, National Crime Records Bureau, government reporting

1. Introduction

The National Crime Record Bureau is a body of the Indian government, tasked with compiling and releasing reports of the incidence and rate of crime occurring across India. Accusations of inaccuracies and intentional misreporting have been levelled against the NCRB for a variety of crimes, one of which is human trafficking. Given that government decisions and public opinions are formed off of reports on the rate of a crime occurring, it becomes necessary to question government data when it seems incorrect. This study will look at possible explanations for fluctuations in government data from the year 2009-2020 in an attempt to ascertain whether government data on the rate and incidence of human trafficking can be trusted.

2. Literature Survey

2.1 Definition

A challenge in analysing human trafficking in India is the differing definitions of human trafficking that exist. For the purposes of this paper, the definition stated in the abstract - the movement of people from one place to another through force, coercion or deception into situations of exploitation, usually for the economic benefit of others - will be used. This definition is similar to both the definition used in the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking In Persons, Especially Women and Children [1], adopted in November 2000, and many of the most widely cited literature concerning human trafficking in India. Both cases where no consent were given, and cases where consent was coerced in some way (grooming, consent taken from a minor, choice made on the basis of inaccurate information) will be considered acts of human trafficking as in all those cases the consent was incomplete/invalid. In cases where a different definition is being discussed, the alternate definition will be mentioned.

The overlap of human trafficking with other crimes such as kidnapping and child marriage due to the similarities in the harm that inflicted on the victims and the process used

means some of the data used in this paper may have cases that are wrongly identified. An effort has been made to look at these similar crimes individually as well in order to increase the accuracy of the evaluation, but there is still likely to be some number of misreported cases.

2.2 Factors

One of the biggest factors driving trafficking is the vulnerability of victims due to poverty and economic instability. Many individuals are targeted with the assurance of better pay, employment, and comfortable lives, especially using narratives about increased opportunities in a big city.[2] Increased rural to urban migration due to structural and disguised unemployment in the agricultural sector and a failure on the part of the government to address land fragmentation [3] has led to many people being vulnerable and falling prey to those promising good jobs in the city or, once they go to cities, often are met with economic situations that cause them to opt into bonded labour and/or be vulnerable to trafficking. The domestic bonded labour of migrant labourers, especially women, is common in large cities. A study conducted among rescued trafficking victims in Mumbai reported that 55% of victims were trafficked with the promise of economic opportunity. [4] A joint report by the ILO and the United Nations Children Fund estimated that a 1% rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7% increase in child labour - many children fall prey to traffickers or are willingly sold by their parents due to their family's economic position being precarious. [5] These economic factors have been exacerbated by COVID-19. [29]

A lack of quality education also seems to be a large factor in trafficking, especially in children. A study conducted in Manipur found that 56.4% of children who were trafficked were promised free school education and free boarding and 7.7% promised skill training. [6]

Family dynamics also contribute to trafficking. Orphaned girl children, even if they are in the care of relatives, are extremely susceptible to trafficking [7]. Studies also point to a trend of gender-based mistreatment by family members leading to increased vulnerability to trafficking and also that

Volume 11 Issue 3, March 2022

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a lack of acceptance by family after an act of sexual violence can lead to women being vulnerable to trafficking. [8] 49.4% of sex workers interviewed in a study reported some sort of familial disruption (domestic violence, marital separation) as the reason behind their vulnerability. [4]

Rates of trafficking are also higher for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes due to relatively lower rates of educational attainment as well as economic stability, and due to traditions, such as the devadasi, jogin system and gujjar marriages that often ends up forcing unwilling girls into sex work. [9]

2.3 Process

Drugging and kidnapping are common practices, making up approximately 16.9% of cases in Mumbai. Practices also include promising the families of girls that they will be married and then pushing them into prostitution. [10] The same Mumbai study reported that 8% of individuals were lured with the promise of marriage. Threats and/or use of violence are also extremely common.

Individuals are often trafficked from public settings, with 22.3% being taken from public transit stations, followed by 26.8% from their home and 21.4% from their workplace. Transport used is varied with no preferred method between the use of public transport such as railways and buses and private transport. [4]

While reports on the status of trafficking during the pandemic are few, there does seem to be a consensus that COVID-19 exacerbated an already growing trend of human traffickers moving online to both establish contact with and exploit individuals. Children being left without supervision on the internet and parents distracted with financial instability are especially vulnerable. With a Child Protection Fund report stating that consumption of “sexually abusive material of children” increased on the internet by 95%, suggesting that many moved towards using it in the face of the pandemic limiting physical interactions. This switch to increasing use of the internet is likely to make it far harder for authorities to crackdown on instances of trafficking and make it easier for traffickers to establish contact with victims, especially children. [11] [12]

2.4 Geographical Distribution

85-90% of trafficking in India is intra-national [13]. Common source states tend to be Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, with Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Assam, Manipur and Madhya Pradesh all seeing increases in human trafficking, with the destinations being scattered across the country. [14] In the North-East, political instability and ethnic violence resulting in protracted armed conflict, the recruitment of child soldiers and the effects of a prolonged imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act are all cited as factors behind high levels of trafficking. [6]

Trafficking across international borders, particularly from Nepal and Bangladesh, is quite common. An assessment conducted by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) displayed that many young girls from

rural areas in Bangladesh and Nepal are often taken across the Indian border under the pretext of marriage but then sold into prostitution. There is also a trafficking outflow from South Asia. The UNODC reports that 12% of detected victims trafficked from South Asia were taken to the Middle East, followed by 5% to Western and Southern Europe.

2.5 International Trends

While literature differs on the exact increase, the vast majority of literature suggests an increase in human trafficking in the last few years. This has been attributed to the escalation of armed conflict in many regions and specifically the exodus it caused in the Mediterranean, the “Safe Third Country” policy practiced by the United States Government which left many without a shot at asylum, and border closures due to the pandemic increasing the risk and cost of travel. Additionally, the economic situation caused by the pandemic has made many more people vulnerable for traffickers. [33] [34] [35]

2.6 Government Responses

India criminalises trafficking that involves any act of sexual and/or physical exploitation under Section 370 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Bonded Labour is also criminalised in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act and the Bonded Labour System Act. Sex trafficking in particular is prosecuted under other laws such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. Most of these laws had stringent punishments, often including 7+ years of prison time. [15]

Prosecution in India is quite lacking. Trafficking cases under the Indian Penal code on average only started trial 5.9 years after they were reported, which could often lead to crucial evidence being lost. Police reporting also tends to be inconsistent - NGOs have documented cases where FIRs were not filed in cases of trafficking such as in spas in the DCR region, with some estimates saying that the police did not file FIRs in more than half of all bonded labour nationally. Courts set up to hear POCSO cases, which numbered 664 in the April of 2019, have seen reports of judges and prosecutors having no training or expertise in POCSO crimes. The government has only detected 313,000 bonded labours since 1976, a long way short of the estimate of 8 million that NGOs agree on. 17 of 36 states and Union Territories did not identify any bonded labour cases in 2017 or 2018, which was also when the government registered an unprecedented drop in human trafficking cases. [16]

Police and government officials abusing their power to act as customers, corruption and excessive use of force towards both consensual and non-consensual, trafficked sex workers are well documented. A 2018 report by the Bihar state government founded cases of abuse in all 100 government shelters in the state, leading to investigations that implicated three state officials including the chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee as well as reports that the CBI did not investigate high-level officials that victims identified as being complicit (claims were later denied by the CBI).

The government also works in cooperation with numerous NGOs. A lot of literature supports this, outlining the importance of NGOs in prevention by raising awareness, especially in rural areas, about the process used to trafficking individuals, reducing demand by sensitising communities to the mistreatment of women and in rescue and rehabilitation by filling in the gaps (building shelters, helping with rehabilitation and mainstreaming) where government systems fail. [10] State governments through the Ujjawala [21] program and Swadhar Greh [22] program have established shelters in partnership with NGOs [23] but have actually seen decreases in open shelters from 2018 - going from 148 shelters to 134 and 514 to 413 respectively. There are also reported instances of politicians misusing the license to reroute funding to political organisations Many NGOs also report that government funds were delayed by more than a year and that centres set up by the government were hard to access for sex workers. There is also a lack of oversight over these centres, but government run and those run in partnership.

The government does not release official data on rates of rehabilitation, but most signs seem to point to the rate being quite low due to the type of care given to trafficked victims. 91% of Ujjawala and Swadhar Greh [24] homes in Odisha and 56% in Delhi NCR did not have proper registration, making it impossible to properly regulate them. Out of 38, 503 trafficking victims identified between 2010-2018, judges only offered compensation to 102 of them. "Release certificates" issued by the central government that were meant to give them assistance and compensation were not implemented properly in most states and were also contingent upon the trafficking case's prosecution being successful, which could take years. Only 2300 certificates were given out between March 2018 and March 2019. There are also reports of the government forcibly keeping adult trafficking victims in shelters, hurting their chances at rehabilitation. [15][16]

The UNODC Report on Trafficking [17] released in 2020 reports that the pandemic led to a large increase in human trafficking. Through an analysis of 233 trafficking court cases reported in 2020, they point that out that economic need led to recruitment, with many victims being trafficked when they were facing a lack of or a reduction in basic resource availability. All of these are things that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. News channels in India have also reported an increase in trafficking cases due to the pandemic. [18] The government in response advised state and Union Territories to set up Anti-Human Trafficking Units and better exist ones - pre-pandemic, only 225 AHTUs existed with only 27% being operational. However, studies seem to indicate that AHTUs have largely been unimpactful, with a lot of attention being misdirected to voluntary sex workers due to the law often conflating the two.[19] [20].

The above information seems to indicate that there has been no government action/response that would justify a large decrease in trafficking during the period from 2015-2020 and that the pandemic, given that government actions were inadequate, would have likely led to a serious increase in trafficking.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the trends in human trafficking in India, data reported by the NCRB in both their annual reports and their special report on Missing Women and Children were used. Data was selected until 2020 due to the fact that, at the time of data collection, the 2021 report was not yet released. Analysis was comparative both to the number of cases/victims in previous years and to other crimes that share similar characteristics and can be reduced by similar policies such as child marriage, kidnapping and sexual assault. A "--" has been used to indicate instances where the NCRB did not provide data for a particular field in a year. Literature has been used to evaluate the trends demonstrated by government data.

The rationale behind each of the data fields looked at:

Missing people - human trafficking cases where the involvement of a trafficker has not yet been ascertained are often reported under missing people. Additionally, government actions that reduce the number of missing people, like increasing the ease of reporting to the police, increased police surveillance are actions that are likely to intercept trafficking and reduce trafficking victims as well. [25]

Kidnapping - similarly to missing people, trafficking cases can be reported as kidnapping, and similar measures tend to stop both.

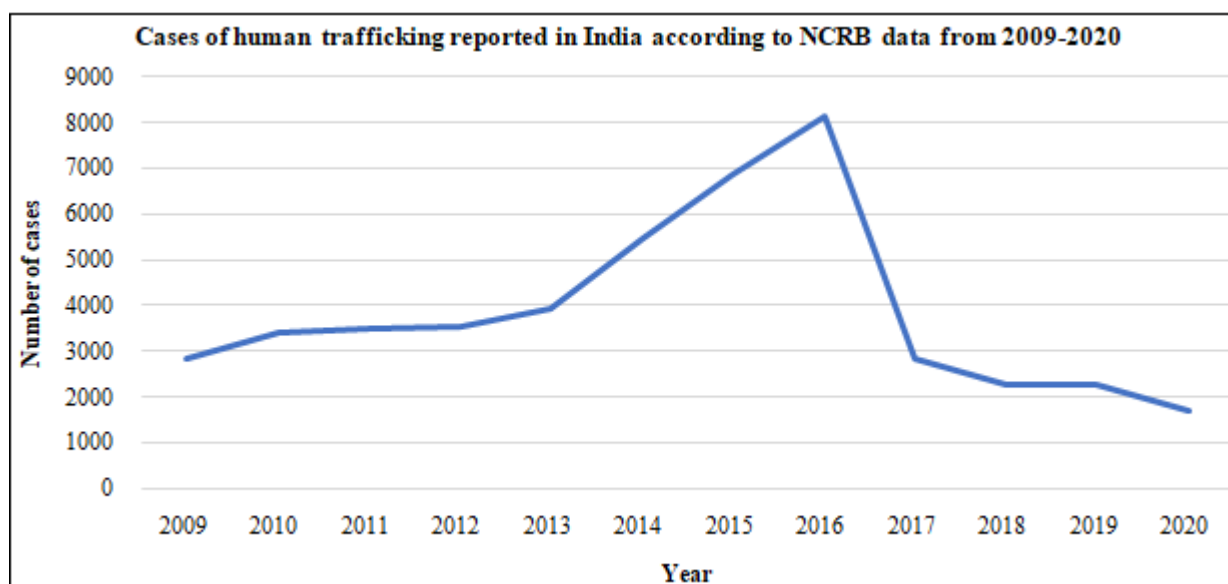
Child Marriage - A lot of individuals that are trafficked are done so for the purpose of marriage or are married off at some point in the process. The UNODC report on human trafficking states that forced marriage was the form of exploitation after trafficking with the third-highest frequency after sexual exploitation and forced labour.

Rape - Cases of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation are often reported under rape. Additionally, many awareness campaigns surrounding sexual exploitation work on increasing respect for women and measures to increase reporting of trafficking involve making it easier for women to approach the police, which should decrease the number of rape cases as well. As discussed in Background information, sexual violence is also a cause behind many women being vulnerable to trafficking,

4. Results

Table 1: NCRB Data on cases and victims of various crimes from 2009-2019[29]

Incidence/ Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Human trafficking (Victims)							18629	15379	5900	5788	6616	4709
Cases reported	2848	3422	3517	3554	3940	5466	6877	8132	2854	2278	2260	1714
Adult	-	-	-	-	2610	3250	3668	6345	2365	2954	3702	2487
Children	-	-	-	-	1330	2216	3209	9034	1498	2834	2914	2222
Rescues	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	23117	5789	5264	6571	4680
People arrested	-	-	-	-	-	95	3078	10815	5528		5128	4966
Missing people	33860	39148	44664	47592	65461	77237	82999	290439	305267	347524	380526	337662
Missing women	26187	30172	35565	38262	52225	58492	52076	174021	200357	223621	248397	199612
Missing transpeople	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	346	564	40	5
Rescues	-	-	-	-	-	51760	58233	229381	321138	332754	348608	332483
Missing children	9678	11373	16607	14487	32726	29926	30923	63407	63349	67134	73138	108234
Missing girls	7978	8799	13635	-	26354	-	-	41067	42691	47191	52049	28976
Missing transpeople	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	103	159	15	25
Rescues	-	-	-	-	-	27473	32651	-	70440	22239	71253	64573
Kidnapping	33860	39148	44664	47592	65461	77237	82999	88008	95893	105734	105037	84805
Child marriage	5	60	113	169	-	147	293	326	395	501	525	785
Kidnapping for marriage	16225	18354	22050	24681	30045	30979	31829	33855	24139	24487	25824	24543
Rape	21, 397	22172	24206	24923	33707	36735	34651	39068	32559	33356	32033	28153
Attempted Rape	-	-	-	-	-	4232	4437	5732	4154	4097	3944	3820

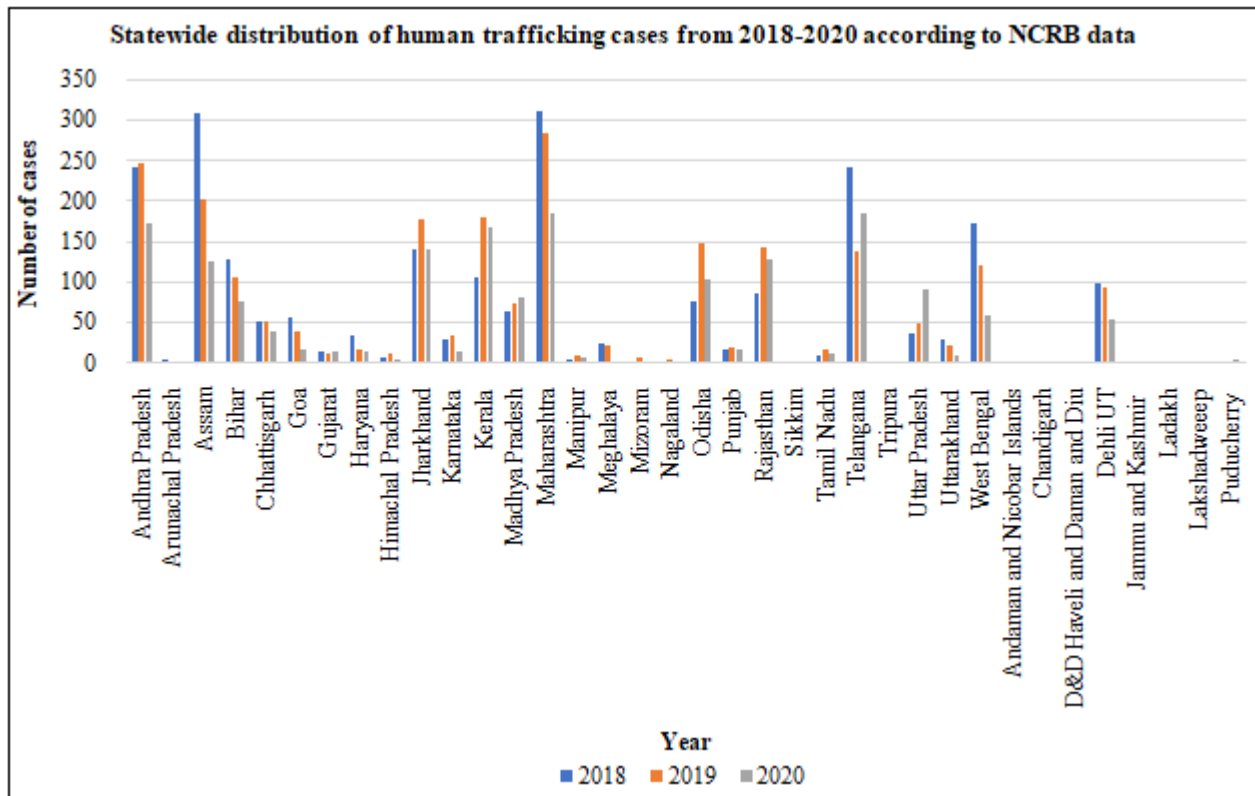


Graph 1: Cases of human trafficking reported in India according to NCRB data from 2009-2020

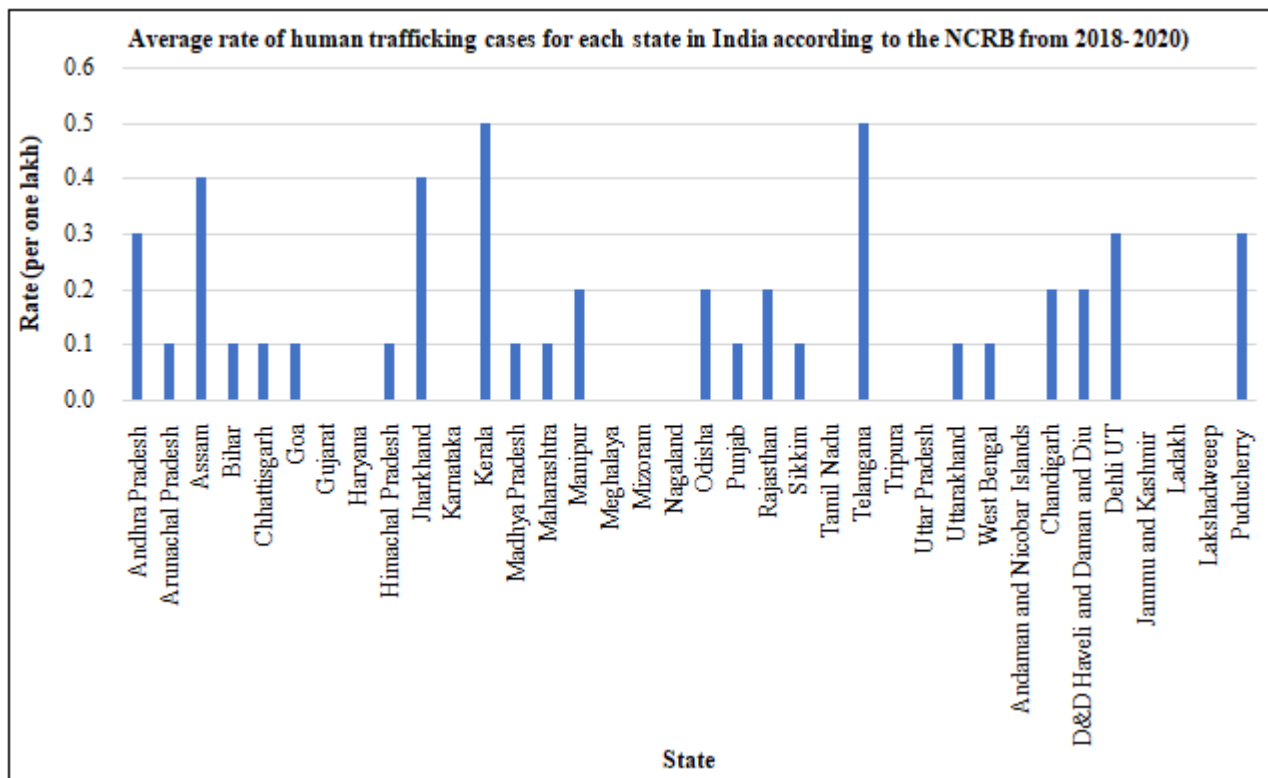
Cases of human trafficking over the last decade seem to have risen steadily from 2009-2015, before beginning to decrease in 2015 and showing a sharp decrease from 2016 to 2017 (2017 had 38% of the estimated victims and 35% of the cases reported that 2016 has). The number of victims increased again between 2018-2019 (though cases did not increase) and reduced again in 2020 despite the pandemic.

Almost half of human trafficking cases appear to have been done for the purpose of sex trafficking - in 2017, 45.99% of all cases involved sexual exploitation, and the category of

“forced labour” was 50.3%. Data is not available for every year between 2009-2019, so it is hard to ascertain from NCRB data alone that this is the distribution of human trafficking cases in India, but this corroborates available literature on the topic which states that trafficked victims are most often forced into bonded labour or exploited for sex work. Some other non-governmental estimates [15] say that as much as 95% of trafficked persons in India are forced into prostitution.



Graph 2: State-wise distribution of human trafficking cases in India from 2018-2020 according to NCRB data



Graph 3: Average rate of human trafficking cases for each state in India according to the NCRB from 2018-2020

While there are fluctuations across years, NCRB data also indicates that the states where human trafficking is most common are West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan in terms of the number of cases. During the 2018-2020 period, West Bengal and Assam had continued decreases in trafficking cases, with Assam, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana having the largest numbers of trafficking cases and Telangana, Kerala, Jharkhand and Assam having

the highest rate of trafficking cases. It is to be noted that the rate calculations of the NCRB have been called into question frequently given that it uses population estimates, not the actual population size of the State/ UT. It is also to be noted that these only track trafficking cases, so the location a case is tied to is the location where the victim was rescued from/ trafficked to, which tends to be different from their home state. This could explain why despite Delhi NCR not seeing

many victims trafficked from it, still has quite a high rate of trafficking as lots of victims are brought there, and why states like Manipur, despite literature identifying them as

source states for the rest of the country, do not have a high number of cases in them.

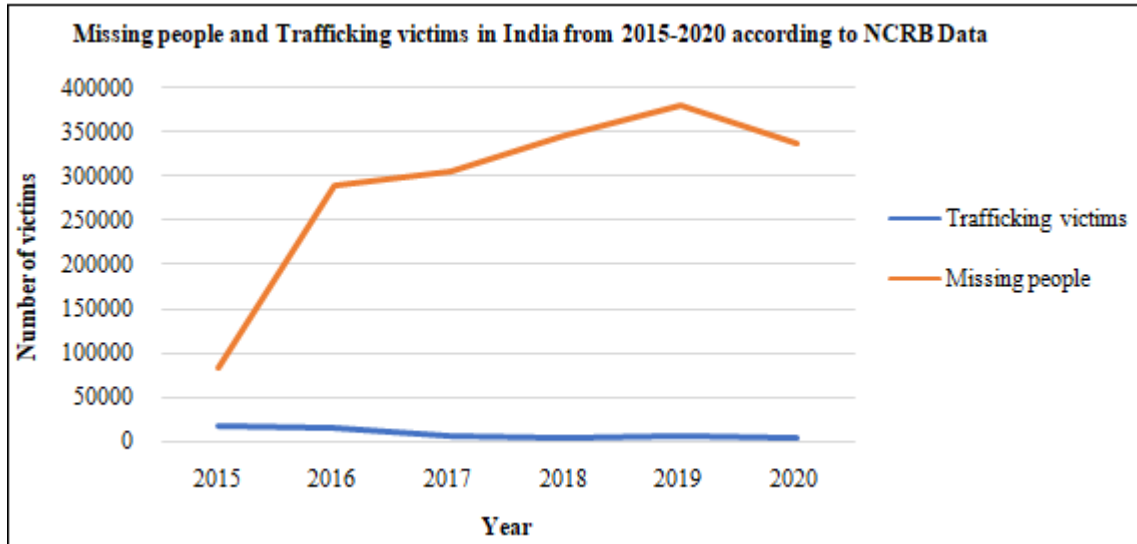
Table 2: State-wise distribution of human trafficking cases in India from 2016-2017

State/UT	2016	2017	Difference	% Difference
Andhra Pradesh	239	218	-21	-9%
Arunachal Pradesh	2	0	-2	-100%
Assam	91	262	171	188%
Bihar	43	121	78	181%
Chhattisgarh	68	48	-20	-29%
Goa	40	39	-1	-3%
Gujarat	548	9	-539	-98%
Haryana	51	22	-29	-57%
Himachal Pradesh	8	11	3	38%
Jammu and Kashmir	0	1	1	-
Jharkhand	109	373	264	242%
Karnataka	404	31	-373	-92%
Kerala	21	53	32	152%
Madhya Pradesh	51	87	36	71%
Maharashtra	517	310	-207	-40%
Manipur	3	8	5	167%
Meghalaya	7	8	1	14%
Mizoram	2	2	0	0%
Nagaland	0	0	0	-
Odisha	84	63	-21	-25%
Punjab	13	5	-8	-62%
Rajasthan	1422	316	-1106	-78%
Sikkim	1	3	2	200%
Tamil Nadu	434	13	-421	-97%
Telangana	229	329	100	44%
Tripura	0	2	2	-
Uttar Pradesh	79	46	-33	-42%
Uttarakhand	12	20	8	67%
West Bengal	3579	357	-3222	-90%
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1	0	-1	-100%
Chandigarh	1	0	-1	-100%
D&D Haveli	0	0	0	-
Daman and Diu	7	1	-6	-86%
Delhi UT	66	95	29	44%
Lakshadweep	0	0	0	-
Puducherry	0	1	1	-
Total	8132	2854	-5278	-65%

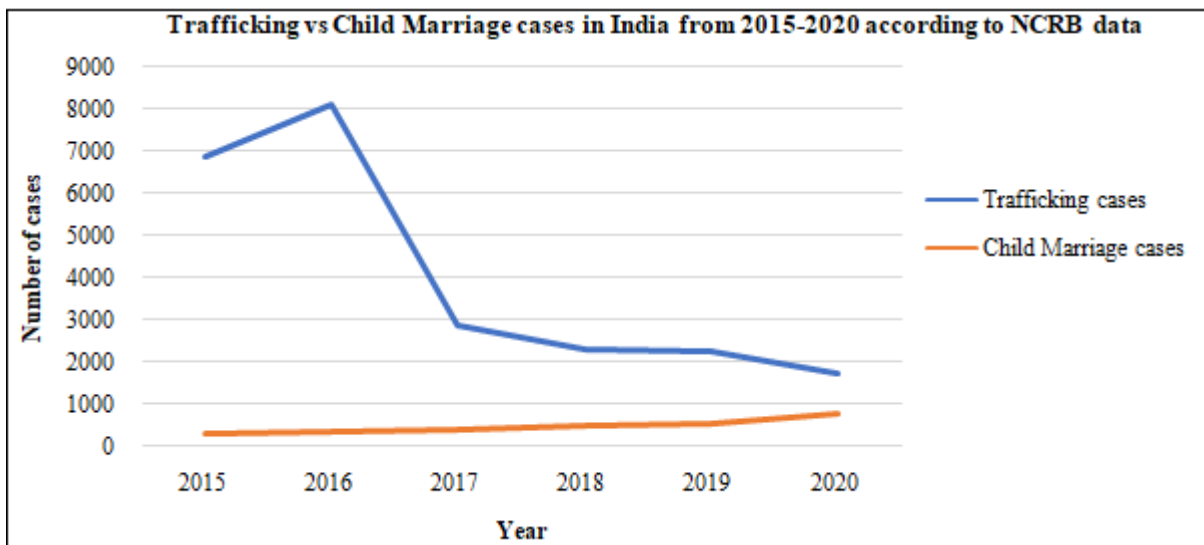
This decrease is also not heavily geographically concentrated. 17 out of the 36 states/UTs saw a decrease in trafficking cases, and the decreases on average tend to be higher than the increases - the average increase is 39, while the average decrease is 354. This seems to indicate that the reason behind this shift is some sort of nationwide trend rather than action undertaken solely by one or two states. However, it is to be noted that some of the positive increases are still significant - Kerala saw a 152% increase. Assam a 188% increase and Bihar a 180% increase. Some literature on the topic concludes that this is a result of improved reporting- but this does call into question why other areas then saw a decrease in trafficking during the same period in which they were also working on improving reporting.

Government officials have attributed the sharp drop to the success of governmental policies, with Reuters citing an official from West Bengal [25] as saying that the drop was due to awareness campaigns launched by the state government and the improvement of surveillance, especially around railway stations. However, the rate of related crimes

that are often stopped by the same as well as crimes that are often misreported as trafficking and vice versa remain on the rise. Both child marriage (which trafficking is often done for the purpose of) and missing people have risen, as shown by Graph 1 and Graph 2 below by approximately 79% and 358% respectively.



Graph 4: Missing people and Trafficking victims in India from 2015-2020 according to NCRB Data



Graph 5: Trafficking vs child marriage cases in India from 2015-2020 according to NCRB Data

The NCRB underreporting data has been a concern with other crimes as well - a well-studied example of this being the underreporting of suicides while the act was criminal, with the average underreporting being 27% for males and 50% for females. [31][32] This has been largely attributed to the fact that NCRB estimates are based on cases reported to the police, which can never be the full extent of cases that do exist - but this does not explain the decrease year to year seen in the numbers of cases and victims of human trafficking.

Some NGOs and activist organisations, on the other hand, suggest that either the government is deliberately falsifying data, not properly collecting data from individual police stations or failing to detect trafficking as it moves to alternate routes.[26] [27] As outlined in the background information, there was no major government policy implemented during this period (Ujjawala and Swadhar Gher had already been implemented) and policies that exist were too lacking to have such a significant decrease in crime. The estimates during the 2019-2020 - a decrease instead of an increase in most states despite a pandemic and decreases in funding to programs like Ujjawala and Swadhar

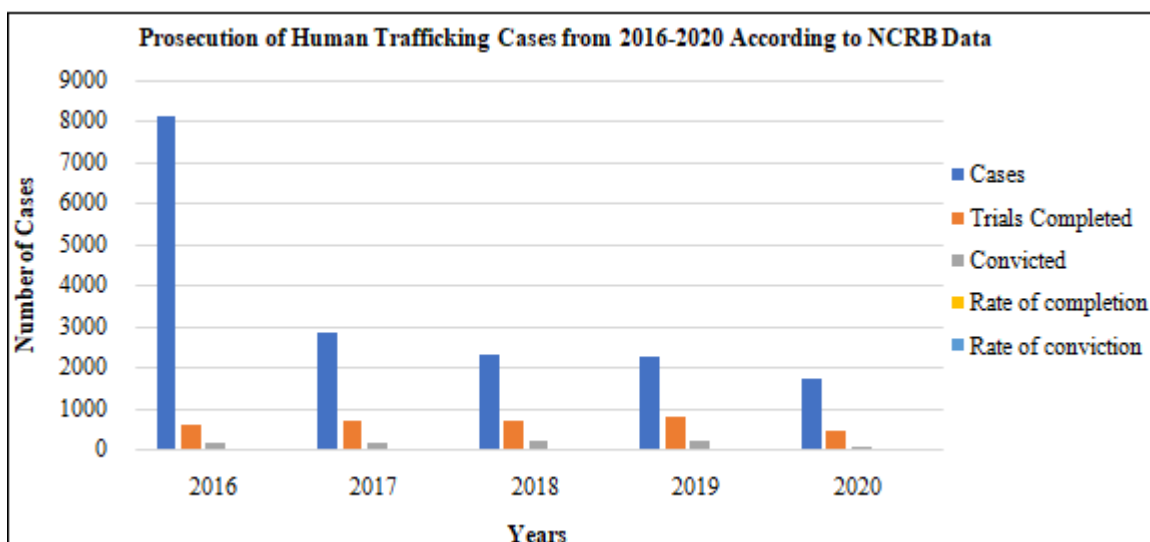
Gher [28] - also have been questioned by many NGOs, activists and scholars.

Increased prosecution of human trafficking could also have led to the decrease from 2016-2017, and the lack of a large increase during 2020. NCRB data shows that the rate of cases being completed rose from 0.077 to 0.234 between 2016 and 2017 and the number of trials completed rose from 587 to 669. Similarly, the rate of conviction rose from 0.020 to 0.057. It is to be noted, however, that government data is not available on how many of these cases resulted in proper compensation to victims and the average time it took to prosecute these cases. However, it is doubtful whether an increase in conviction in 2017 would have had a trend to the effect that occurred, considering the drastic drop in cases coming to court should have occurred the previous year. Prosecution truly being better would have probably seen a similar number of cases but increased rates of prosecution, but 2017 saw far fewer cases, and 2016 saw low levels of successful prosecution, with only approximately 7% percent of cases reported in the year being completed - leaving aside the fact that government is not clear if the cases completed is only out of the cases reported in 2016 or the case backlog that exists from previous years as well. The data also suggest

that the link between increased prosecution and human trafficking might be tenuous, because 2020 saw a decrease in both rate of completion and conviction from the previous year, but still saw a large decrease in cases and victims - it could be the case that 2020 numbers were more affected by the prosecution rates in the previous few years, but that explanation would not justify the increase seen in 2019 even though prosecution rates were on the rise.

Table 3: Trials completed and trials in which a person/people were convicted in India according to NCRB data from 2016-2020 (proper data not available for 2015)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cases	8132	2854	2278	2260	1714
Trials Completed	587	669	687	782	463
Convicted	163	164	202	172	49
Rate of completion	0.072	0.234	0.302	0.346	0.270
Rate of conviction	0.020	0.057	0.089	0.076	0.029



Graph 5: Prosecution of Human Trafficking Cases from 2016-2020 According to NCRB Data

Alternate explanations for the decrease include the incorporation of the internet into the trafficking process making it harder for the government to track human trafficking [11] [12]. It is also possible that crimes are getting misreported or misfiled - for example, as missing people cases instead of human trafficking. In the absence of any meaningful government response or change to the prosecution, this does seem the most likely explanations.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of NCRB data appears to cast significant doubt on the accuracy of government data. This is worrying as many government policy decisions are made on the back of this data, meaning it is likely that current government decisions may be maying made with the assumption that human trafficking is a smaller problem than it truly is or that policies that are currently in place are having a significant positive impact. The government will likely have to take a larger effort in curtailing human trafficking. Country wide awareness about trafficking methods, prevention programs, crackdown on corruption within law enforcement and funding towards and oversight of the rehabilitation of trafficked victims are necessary, and any current schemes/programs need to be expanded and bettered. On the other hand, it can still be argued that this decrease is natural but the analysis done and the literature that was reviewed largely do not agree with this.

6. Further Exploration

Scope for further exploration in preparing an estimation of human trafficking in India. Many estimates used in studies

are done based on small sample sizes taken across India, meaning that the trends identified there may not hold for the rest of the region, let alone the rest of the country. While this would likely require immense amounts of manpower and resources, it would allow NGOs and activists to better challenge government data and identify where gaps truly are.

Scope for further exploration also exists in more closely isolating and studying the results of particular government policies like the schemes under Ujjawala. This would require some sort of methodology that can account for the effects of other variables (introduction of other schemes, economic fluctuations, pandemics) but would allow us to better analyse the government responses and the government data.

Lastly, while claims of states not turning in data do exist, it is hard to verify them, especially when it becomes an issue of particular districts and police stations within them. Future studies can attempt to focus specifically on this particular part of the reporting chain - that is, individual police stations to local governments to the state - as it would give a better idea of the reasons behind inaccuracies in NCRB data.

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Author Profile



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