

Media Intervention in Mitigating Human Trafficking in Assam

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Abstract: *The paper aims at analysing the importance of media as tool in eradicating human trafficking. The study explores the present scenario of trafficking in Assam and legal awareness among people. As we all know that human trafficking is a global issue and is second largest organized crime which involves physical sexual and mental exploitation of the victims. Assam is considered as one of the most vulnerable region for human trafficking where most of the victims are below eighteen years. As per the National Crime Records Bureau report, there were a total of 8,132 reported cases of Trafficking in 2016 across India, with 91 (1.12%) cases from Assam. Assam is a state that has registered a total of 1,494 (21.7%) trafficking cases in 2015. There is a rapid increase in the number of missing adolescent child across the state. In Assam the case of trafficking is quite visible in the border areas where people are predominantly illiterate and have low level of awareness. This study reveals the need and importance of effective media intervention in mitigating human trafficking in the state.*

Key Words: *Media, Anti-Trafficking, Assam,*

1. INTRODUCTION:

It is said that slavery ended before 150 years ago but it is still prevailing in our society under the veil of human trafficking. Trafficking has been a scorching issue of the present civilization and it is identified as the fastest growing criminal industry of present era. Every year a huge number of men, women and children become prey of the traffickers. Trafficking has no definite boundary, this can be happen within a country within state or internationally This can even happen even in their own country, considering every country in the world is affected by human trafficking. The prime focus of trafficking is sexual exploitation and bondage labour but certain other issues are also related with this.

Loss of freedom is one common experience shared by the victims of trafficking. The United Nations defines human trafficking as follows:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force 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 person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The International Labour Organization estimates that 1.2 million people are trafficked each year. Human trafficking is globally recognized major human rights violation and this social evil is prevailing in each country present in this globe. With the growth of social research and the research in public relation has helped to bring this menace into focus and from the last pervasiveness and ramification of this practice have risen to international prominence. (Aronowitz, 2009). Human Trafficking provides a critical engagement with the key debates on human trade. It addresses the subject within the broader context of global crime and the internationalization of crime control. (Lee, 2007).

1.2 Significance of the study

With regard to human trafficking, Assam has witnessed as one of the most vulnerable regions for victims. There is a rapid increase in the number of missing persons across the state. Trafficking is considered to be one of the atrocious crimes against humankind. It is seen that women and children are always victimized in any sort of crime. They are the prime focus of the traffickers as children and women are largely induced in prostitution and forced labour. They keep in a very pathetic condition where they lost their freedom to move. Human trafficking is mounting day by day. Media is said as the fourth pillar of democracy. It also has the social responsibility to aware people about the wrong doings in the society and also to help the citizen of the country to take precautions about the social menace. It is important to find the root cause of trafficking and also to aware people to prevent it from further inflation

1.3 Trafficking in Context of Assam

Human trafficking has become a grim concern for Assam. In the year 2015, this state holds the dubious record of most number of person trafficked all the states of the country. According to the records available more than 6,000 children are still missing. From the year 2011 to the present year, more than 760 cases of human trafficking are registered, where 1035 common people became the victims of trafficking. 624 victims were rescued and 590 persons were arrested.

But the disquieting fact is that the number of trafficking cases has increased steadily over the years. In the 2011 the number of registered cases were 54, the number gradually increased to 170 in 2015 and to 212 in the year 2016. In the month of January 2017, 22 cases of trafficking were registered. The most susceptible district of this province are Sonitpur, Kokrajhar, Kamrup (Rural), Tinsukia, Nalbari and Dhubri (The Assam Tribune, Vol.79, No.115, May 1, 2017). It has been noticed that the poorest section of the society has become the easy quarry of the traffickers. But there are instances where persons displaced by ethnic clashes also became prey of the traffickers.

Number of cases of trafficking in Assam

Year	No. of Cases registered	No. of Persons arrested	No. of Victims	No. of Victims recovered
2011	54	67	75	64
2012	99	77	177	122
2013	118	130	153	130
2014	90	53	113	51
2015	170	162	228	167
2016	212	99	266	95
Jan'2017	22	7	23	5
Total	765	595	1,035	634

(Source- The Assam Tribune, Vol-79, No.115, May 1, 2017)

As per the record of CID, Assam, since January 2010, 163 Nos. of women and children were either recovered or rescued ; 251 Nos. of culprits were arrested; 147 Nos. of cases registered, of which 67 Nos. of cases submitted Charge sheet, 3 cases ended in F.R. and 77 Nos. of cases are pending investigation for various reasons. (Das & Nayak)

1.4 Laws related to trafficking

The Government of India penalizes trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation through the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA). The constitution prohibits trafficking under ITPA and a person involved in this crime is liable to seven years imprisonment to lifelong imprisonment. India also prohibits bonded and forced labour through the Bonded Labor Abolition Act, the Child Labor Act, and the Juvenile Justice Act.

Kidnapping and selling minors into prostitution is prohibited by the constitution under Section 366(A) and 372 of the Indian Penal Code, also it allows arresting traffickers. Penalties under these provisions are a maximum of ten years' imprisonment and a fine.

1.5 Objectives:

The objectives of this paper are-

- To explore the causes human trafficking in Assam.
- To analysis the role of media to mitigate human trafficking

2. METHODOLOGY:

Qualitative approach has been adopted to conduct this research, but in order to find the answers to certain research questions, Quantitative approaches have also been used. Rural people of Sonitpur District are selected for the purpose of the study. The total geographic area of Sonitpur district is 5324 sq.kms. Sonitpur is comprises of fourteen community development blocks comprising almost 1615 villages (sonitpur.gov.in). Seven blocks were randomly selected out of which one village from each block was chosen arbitrarily for administering questionnaire and all the inhabitants of the villages formed the universe of the study. 20 inhabitants were selected randomly from each of the selected seven villages. That made the selected 140 sample for the study.

Since this study is regarding those attributes of the people of the communities which cannot always be explained in terms of numbers or quantity, hence a more Qualitative approach has been adopted to conduct this research, using methods like observation, in-depth interviews, case studies and focus group discussions. A simple random technique is used in this research. On the basis Social Responsibility theory and Social learning theory of media the study is conducted.

In this research, one focus group discussion was conducted, each with a different objective. In the focus group discussion, an interaction was held among community members who are in the position of opinion leaders of the community. These members were drawn from amongst leaders like volunteers working in NGOs, Anganbadi workers and teachers who have better understanding about the people of the community and their issues. The FGD was conducted in order to discuss about

- The common livelihood of the people of the community,
- Their societal structure,
- Their dependency on media
- Different problems they face
- The reasons behind these problems (according to them)
- Their opinions on human trafficking
- Their opinion on legal literacy

In this research, such in depth interviews of certain members of the community including opinion leaders and NGO workers and victims from the study area is taken.

Case Study-1

A Non-Governmental Organization, People Action For Development (PAD), rescued a girl of age of 17-year from Delhi with a joint venture with Child Welfare Committee (CWC), Delhi. The girl who was a native of Rupajuli Tea Estate was lured by her companions and she went to Delhi with them. She was assured to get a job by her companion. But after reaching Delhi, she was kept in a basti by a male who also went with them to Delhi. That was last time she saw her companions. The male took her to Jangpura by saying her that he will provide her a job but he sold her there in exchange of a huge amount of money. The family of the girl did not register a missing complain since they were not aware of the legal procedure. PAD came to know about the case they started to find the girl immediately. The child protection committee of Gohpur helped them to contact CWS Delhi. And they were able to find the location of the girl and later with the help of CWC Delhi PAD rescued the girl. A local news paper published the news of rescuing of the girl. But the victim revealed that the media has published a lot of information about her. Now she and her family is facing the taunt of society and she is isolating herself from the society as she has to face demean behavior of the people from her village.

Case-2

The Assam police team rescued a 8 year old boy from Bahbari village. The child was a school dropout and his parents are daily rated workers. With the consent of the parents an agents took the child to Arunachal Pradesh to work and a huge amount of money was exchanged between the parents of the child and the agent. When the community mobilize of PAJHRA, a non-government organization, came to know about the case the parents were warned for bringing back the child and also FIR was lodged. But according to a community mobilize even after lodging the FIR police did not take action and so the mobilizer re-filed an FIR on September, 2015. Few days later the child was rescued by Assam police while working under a contractor in Arunachal Pradesh.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:

The demographic profile of the respondents showed that Among them 17% of the respondents belong to the age group of 15 to 18 years, 36% of the respondents belong to the age group 18 to 24 years, 23% belong to the age group 25 to 34 whereas 22% belong to the age group 34 to 44 and rest comes under the age group of 45 to 54. More than half of them are employed i.e 53%. 21% of the respondents are uneducated and only 5% of has completed graduation. 21% of them earn below 1000 and 54% earn 1000 to 2000, 18% 3000-5000 and only 7% earn between 5000 to 7000.

In order to find out the awareness level of the respondents on trafficking and to determine their media dependency and consumption few questions were set in the questionnaire apart from the open ended questions.

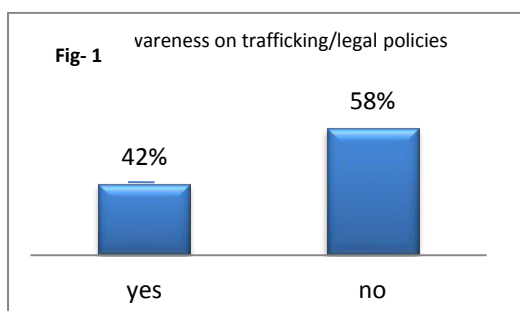


Fig 1 has shown the awareness among the respondents about trafficking. 42% said they know and understand the concept of trafficking and what measures should be taken. 58% they do not know about the trafficking.

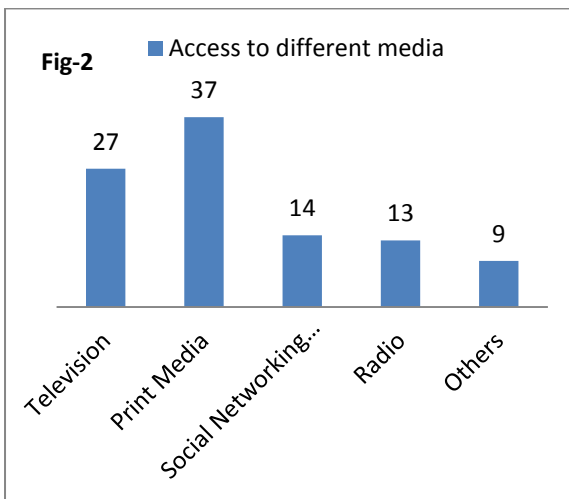


Figure 2 is showing that 27% of the respondents have access to television and 37% rely on print media 14% have access to social networking sites ,13% have radio.

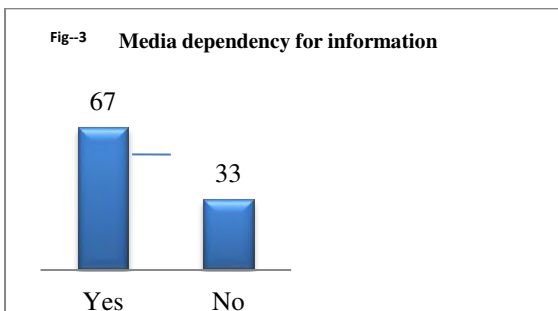


Figure 3 is showing that 67% of the respondents depend on media for gathering information and 33% have denied

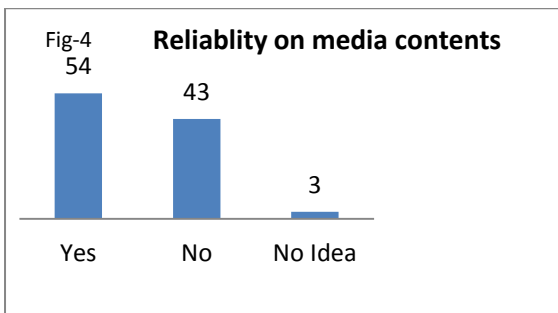


Figure 2 represents here 67% respondent
Figure 3 represents the reliability of the respondents on the contents provided by different kind of media. 54% agreed that they rely on the media contents and 43% denied while 3% remain neutral.

- Most of the respondents replied they mainly follow newspaper and television. Interesting fact is that radio still has a wider audience in the community. They have community groups in who perform street plays on various topics. They are playing a great role in creating awareness among people including their human rights.
- According to the respondents they are close to media and media is accessible to all of them. There for it can easily create awareness on health rights among the community people.
- Due to Lack of awareness community people are still not aware about their legal rights also the legal policies related to trafficking, also a number of superstitious beliefs are prevailing in the community.
- On being asked if the community has been well represented by the existing mainstream media, it was pointed out that many issues are suppressed by the media.
- Lack of education or the willingness of the people to be educated was the biggest problem and the root of all other problems, and that the education scenario can be improved, it would be the solution to all other difficulties that are engulfing the community.
- The economic backgrounds of the respondents are not strong. Most of them are belong to below poverty line. Natural disaster like flood is the one of the main reason of their economic grief according the members participated in the FGD.
- Alcoholism among the men folk of the community& domestic violence. The members claimed that many of the men of the community waste their time and money on alcohol, thus ignoring their family responsibilities. Apart from these, some other major issues of the people included problems of unemployment and population-explosion.

4. MAIN REASONS BEHIND TRAFFICKING IN ASSAM

It is seen that poverty is the main cause of trafficking in people in Assam. According to the record one third of the total population is under below poverty line. In the survey conducted for this research it has seen that only 7% population earn above five thousand. These people are lured by the traffickers by promising them a better future. Flood is one of the destructive natural disasters in Assam. Due to flood not only people lose their home but also their livelihood. They are always in search of a way through which they can survive and traffickers use this as an opportunity to lure people. It was observed that most of the villages where the research was conducted have to face this calamity every year and during the interviews was revealed that many families of the villages have lost their only livelihood, lost their agricultural plot in flood. "Persistent poverty is a major factor. Many vulnerable women and girls are lured by promises of employment, and some parents are desperate enough to sell their daughters to traffickers. Rapid urbanization and the migration of large numbers of men into India's growing cities creates a market for commercial sex, as does a gender imbalance resulting from sex-selective abortion practices that has created a generation of young men who have little hope of finding female partners. India's affluence is also a factor, luring European women into India's sex trade. The caste system compounds the problem." (The Newyork Times, October 16,2013)

Assam is a place of diverse culture. The state is inhabited by people from different community. So often clashes took place between two communities, sometimes for political agenda or for social diversity. The societal structure, economic backbone is often shattered due to such conflicts. Traffickers search opportunity to lure people for a fake job or a better future. And people easily fall in their trap. It is found that in the study area the cultural amalgamation was shaken many times by political activities which led to ethnic conflicts. And the result of the conflict is still prevailing in the society and the agents are using this this situation as a tool to shift people from their villages.

Assam is well known for its tea industry. But beneath the scenic beauty of Assam there lies a bitter truth. The Adivasi community which is comprises of both tea and ex tea community is the available prey for the traffickers. In the tea plantation the workers have to live a rigorous and stressful life. When someone promise a better life with less effort it obvious that people fall for that. And most importantly the temporary labours of the tea plantation are the most deprived section. They work only for six month in the plucking season and they went outside the plantation in search of work for another six months. Traffickers use this as an opportunity and the workers become victims of trafficking. It was seen the study that in many of the tea gardens of the study area the the temporary workers often goes out in search of work when they do not have work in the garden. The young girls from the community are taken by agents to different metros as domestic help without the concern of their parents. Ex tea community people are the daily wages workers. They live near by the gardens. They also migrated to other places in search of work and these people also easily lured.

Illiteracy is the main cause of girls residing in the border areas of Assam and they are not aware of the happenings around the world. They lack guidance from the family and they start dreaming of a colourful and modern life. They get deviated from the main stream and get affected by materialistic culture of the society. In that case many girls become an easy prey for the traffickers and without any knowledge they are sold to outer countries. And is has been noticed that illiteracy has led to superstitions in many of the gardens. During the focus group discussion it was seen that the problem of witch-hunting is still there in the society and people are quite orthodox about this issue. Educations has stand as a major obstacle in the field of legal awareness among people. Though a section of the society is educated and they follow newspaper but they are more concerned about the political and entrainment section rather than the awareness messages.

Social evils like superstitions, necromancy, black-magic, witch-hunting and some of the evil practices that are on-going in the society in the context of Assam. There is belief that having intercourse with a virgin girl, HIV can be cured and for this reason many young girls of fourteen-fifteen years are trafficked for forced sexual labour. Witch-hunting creates a disturbance for some girls and they become easy prey for the traffickers. Most of the people in the rural areas of Assam hardly aware of the term trafficking. Neither these people are aware of the laws related to trafficking. Traffickers use this ignorance as tool for trafficking.

5. MEDIA IN ASSAM:

Assam is most important states of north-eastern region of India. This state is a convenient gateway to north east and has massive significance in the field of tourism, agriculture; industries and socio-cultural milieu. Assam is inhabited with people from diverse culture and community and this is one of the reasons for which the states have become the hot beds of political activities. All these factors have made the state media's favorite. Media is working here not only to inform people about the ambiance but from the time of the inception of the industry a continuous effort has been seen to educate and entertain people. The print media, electronic media and the emerging new media have uniformly contributed in the mission.

However, it is said that a newspaper is a mirror of a democratic nation. In India journalism has a close relation with populace from primeval time (Pandey, 2016). Print society has an incredibly elongated history and so in Assam.

During the era of independence print media plays an important role to awaken the inhabitants against the British rule. But in the post independent era there was a change in the role and responsibilities of newspaper and different aspect had been included. This change in role and responsibilities led the print society towards commercialization and at some point it had become business oriented. Assam has all along been a print society for decades. With the rising trend of new media already established print sector has seen several changes.

6. MEDIA –HOW IT CAN HELP IN PREVENT TRAFFICKING:

Media have a large role to play in prevent and combat trafficking in Assam .It has a responsibility towards the society in mobilizing the public support and their involvement to fight the battle against trafficking .Media owe the ability to craft public opinion and hence media is a powerful tool for social change. In this era of globalization media has become the prime source of gathering information, so the significance of media in educating people about trafficking is indubitable. Media have a liability to ensure that .Investigative journalism on human trafficking should be promoted. By writing an article, or broadcasting a drama or telecasting a short film, or advertisement on trafficking ,media can shine light on the issues that are often lie down in darkness. While writing an article or broadcasting or telecasting news on trafficking media should provide the anti-trafficking measures also. The local anti-trafficking numbers should be provided, or other sources that can help the victim and the community should also be provided. Assam possesses a diverse culture; media has the responsibility to maintain the integrity and peace in the communities while reporting trafficking news.

Visibility is an important issue in media. If public cannot see a problem it is hard to make them believe, also it is difficult to mobilize them to solve the problem. Trafficking is illegal and it is hidden from eyesight so it almost took decade of media relation to convince people that slavery still exists in society.(The Guardian) Till the present era the movement against trafficking has made ample progress ,but the a progressive effort is needed on the other side to sway the world that though slavery or trafficking is prevailing in our society from time immemorial still it can be abolished. Here comes the importance of effective media. If the public don't see the progress, the impetus to mitigate it may stall.

Trafficking is an issue that can be solved by a bunch of professionals working mutely behind the scenes. Because, there are issues closely related with trafficking like poverty, corruption, gender inequality, superstitions, and in many cases we can't deny the political assistance to diminish those problems. Again the importance of media appears here. News coverage don't only inform people but also aware people, and millions of would take stand against trafficking and may be in future years it can be abolished. This is only possible if people are aware the idea of trafficking, its causes and consequences. The united voice will help the anti-trafficking efforts to grow and succeed. Only media can give the people the power to raise the voice.

The entire path is challenging because social evil like society can't be ended simply into headlines or SoundBits. There will always be a clash between work and ethics. There is always a risk of traumatize the survivor because of the insensitive journalist. To collect the narratives journalist may push too far. But it is seen that working proactively with media has helped to bring the issue of trafficking into focus and that too sometimes without jeopardizing the integrity of the dignity of people the media is aiming to help.

The strategy should not be simply focused documenting a project on trafficking for the sponsors. Professional capturing interviewing of trafficking and its survivors is important. Sharing those stories can also create a strong public opinion against trafficking but to cover trafficking related stories a sophisticated professional environment is important. Any development communication through media will be effective only when it is supplemented by inter-personal and group communication .For this a joint effort of media and other development agencies of the region is needed. (Pandey, 1999)

7. CONCLUSION:

Human Trafficking is becoming a scorching woe of our civilization. In Assam, the problem trafficking mostly happens in the border areas where people are predominantly illiterate and are alienated from the mainstream society. Media can raise awareness to inform people about these crime and can mobilize people to stop it. Media also can strengthen prevention by warning vulnerable groups and assuage the factors which make people vulnerable to trafficking also it can enrich knowledge by a deep understanding of the nature of trafficking trough more data collection and analysis, Joint research initiative can also be taken and it can create an evidenced based report on global trends. Most importantly a balanced outlook is important where journalist, media persons should provide the causes as well as cures. News follow up is an important thing here. Law enforcement officers must be taught how to identify victims of trafficking—particularly in areas outside of the commercial sex industry. More awareness and sensitivity to the trafficking of their own citizens is needed. (Aronowitz,2009).Shortage of shelter home for the rescued person and lack of adequate facilities or their rehabilitation are few issues came out from the focus group discussion that was conducted for this study. Media should have to focus on such issues also and in most of the cases the rescued person is

socially avoided. Here also it is the responsibly of media to break such taboos, because media holds the ardent readers, audiences, viewers who follow media in every step of their life.

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