

# Unveiling India's Bride Trade: Socio-Cultural and Legal Context Determining the Indian Scenario

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**Abstract:** In the words of William Wilberforce, “*You may choose to look the other way, but you can NEVER say again that you did not know.*” and this paper is an attempt to explore one such lesser-known but widely prevalent practice of Bride Trafficking around the globe. Human Trafficking, which is rightly called a ‘Basket of Crimes’ is hooked with many other offences like wrongful confinement, assault, kidnapping, slavery, forced labour, prostitution, sex trade, etc. Bride Trafficking, one of the cruellest forms of human trafficking, is a deep-rooted wicked tradition. In this market, females with unique names, are tagged with the same title of ‘Paro’ or ‘Molki’. They are nothing more than a commodity to be lured, decoyed, and sold off against their wishes, not once but multiple times. Due to this ‘marriage of convenience’, the relationship of a life partner has become a lifelong trauma for them.

Realizing the need to explore these untold stories, the Researcher reviews certain Indian documentaries portraying exploitations in this illicit trade and analyzes factors responsible for the intra-country trade practices by sharing case studies from different parts of India. Forging ahead, the Researcher explains different legislative provisions referring to this issue although not expressly yet impliedly; and examines the collaboration of the Indian government with the United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime (UNODC) to eradicate bride trafficking. This paper is an attempt to unveil this dark trade, find its causes, complexities & consequences, and suggest probable solutions to erode the well-established roaring business of bride trafficking gradually.

**Keywords** - Human Trafficking; Bride on Sale: Paro, Molki & Nybreum; Skewed Sex Ratio, Poverty, an Intracountry Roaring Business.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The delightful lexicon of “human trafficking”, “trafficking in persons”, and “modern slavery”, are words that are casually tossed around to refer to an array of crimes steeped in the economic exploitation of humans. It’s almost poetic how these terms while sounding so official and bureaucratic, encapsulate such a profound violation of human rights. One could almost imagine a committee sitting around a table, pondering how best to phrase the systematic abuse of individuals, all while conveniently overlooking the weight of their implications. It’s fascinating to consider how this casual conflation of terminology might obscure the reality of the atrocities involved, almost as if too polite to call a spade a spade.

Indeed, regardless of the specific label chosen, the essence remains, i.e. a significant breach of basic human dignity and fundamental rights. The most common forms identified by international law enforcement and human rights agencies include- Forced Labour, Sex Trade, OTC (Organ, Tissue, Cell) Trafficking and the emerging business hub is Child Trafficking. Delving into reports from various global and national organizations will reveal the staggering realities

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and offer a sobering counterpoint to the polished language often used, presenting the urgent need for a robust response to these grave issues.

As per the *'Profits and Poverty: The economies of forced labour'*, report of ILO published in March 2024, illicit gains from forced labor have soared by 37 percent over the past decade, now generating an estimated \$236 billion annually, where sexual exploitation alone accounts for nearly three-quarters of these obscene profits.<sup>1</sup> To touch upon the status of India, it still battles under TIER-2 of 2024 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, indicating that although the Government does not meet the minimum standards for elimination yet is making significant efforts to do so.<sup>2</sup>

However, the UNODC's *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*, detected a drop in the global number of trafficked victims. This decline likely results from reduced institutional capacity, fewer opportunities for traffickers due to COVID-19 restrictions, and trafficking shifting to more hidden, harder-to-detect locations.<sup>3</sup> Following that, the researcher in this instant paper focuses on the third factor and highlights one such hidden but prevalent form of human trafficking i.e. Bride Trade.

### 1.1 Bride Trafficking vis-a-vis Human Trafficking in India.

Indian law, addresses human trafficking broadly but lacks specific provisions targeting its distinct subset of bride trafficking. Involuntary movement has three main criteria to qualify as trafficking- first *Act* of transporting, harboring, transferring, or receiving; second *Means*, consent obtained through fraud, misrepresentation, or coercion; and third, *Purpose* of exploitation.

At present, no universal definition of bride trafficking exists. Often termed "bride purchasing," this form of trafficking diverges from traditional sex trafficking by focusing on the commodification of women through the institution of marriage. Bride trafficking is marked by a distinct form of exploitation that hinges on the commercialized sale of women to male buyers—not to foster genuine companionship, but to satisfy the male purchaser's desire for a wife who can function as a sexual object, a reproductive instrument, and a domestic laborer. This phenomenon's close association with marriage renders it deeply influenced by culturally specific marital practices, making it resistant to a single global definition. Consequently, a thorough analysis of bride trafficking requires an understanding of its cultural and economic dimensions within regional contexts, as these factors critically shape its prevalence and manifestations.

In many Asian countries, particularly India, bride trafficking is deeply intertwined with the tradition of arranged marriage, which is closely linked to the cultural practice of matchmaking. In some instances, female victims may voluntarily enter into marriage, hoping for financial stability, only to later discover they have been deceived and are now part of an impoverished, often rural, family. This element of perceived voluntariness complicates the distinction between cases of bride trafficking and those of simply unsuccessful arranged marriages, underscoring the unique nature of bride trafficking as a form of human trafficking. Furthermore, the formalization of marriages in these cases blurs the line between inter-regional marriage arrangements and instances of bride trafficking, making detection and categorization more challenging.

### 1.2 Documentary Insights and Bollywood Reels.

The documentaries serve as critical resources for understanding the complexities of any social evil, illustrating the intersection of the responsible factors that perpetuate these issues. The international perspective is well examined in multiple films, for instance, BBC's "Stolen Brides". But this topic, though prevalent in real life, is still an emerging idea in the reel life of India. The fear of bringing out news that may be perceived as stirring a hornet's has prevented from broaching the topic. Filmmakers have either strummed to the tunes of the narrative or have an absence of will to explore those social issues without any politicized beats.

*'Nybreum - The Unsettled Shade'* directed by Neha 'Bhavini' Sharma, explores the untold story of bride trafficking from Bengal to Kashmir over the past 2 decades. This documentary urges the audience for a collective introspection of the uncalled-for creation of this community comprising of "Discarded Women" who feel alienated in

<sup>1</sup> Profits and Poverty: The Economies of Forced Labour, ILO Publication, Second Edition, ISBN: 9789220404225

<sup>2</sup> 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: India, U.S. Department of State. (Available at - [https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/india/#report-toc\\_section-5](https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/india/#report-toc_section-5))

<sup>3</sup> Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. ISBN: 9789210023351 (Available at - [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP\\_2022\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_web.pdf))

the valley yet have no other home to call their own anymore. Nybreum means the one who is not a native Kashmiri speaker, or an outsider.

*'Meet Bhavani - A true story of Trafficking'* directed by Vijay Kumar, portrays the plight of trafficked brides in the state of Haryana, all named as *Paro* (outsider) or *Molkii* (one with a price). What shocks one is the fact that they have accepted their lives as predestined reality and don't even believe that another kind of life exists beyond this market, where she is just a commodity to be sold and resold again and again.

Mardani, Pakhi, and Gangubai Kathiawadi are a few of those Bollywood Movies that if not based on true incidents are inspired by one. Out of all, *'Lakshmi- A Story of hope, courage and victory'* and *'Love Sonia'* are two movies that reveal the story of a daughter being sold into a flesh trade, by her father for an insignificant sum of money.

### 1.3 Forms of Exploitations of Victims.

Victims of bride trafficking often endure interconnected forms of exploitation, where one type of abuse leads to or reinforces another, trapping them in a cycle of control and suffering. Initially, many are deceived or coerced into marriage, only to find themselves forced into prostitution, where traffickers exploit their isolation and dependency to subject them to sexual servitude. This forced prostitution may, in some cases, segue into polyandrous arrangements, where trafficked women are pressured to act as wives to multiple men within a family or community. Such polyandrous arrangements intensify the degradation and reinforce the woman's lack of agency, further solidifying her entrapment.

Rape, occurring both before and after marriage, often serves as a tool for subjugation, breaking the victim's resistance and normalizing sexual abuse as an inevitable part of her existence. This sexual violence compounds her trauma and makes her less likely to resist other forms of exploitation. In cases of re-trafficking, victims are sold or passed on to other men or families, further severing any hope of stability or escape and increasing the risk of repeated abuse, as they are exchanged like commodities without regard for their well-being.

Simultaneously, many trafficked brides are subjected to slavery or servitude, where they are forced into labor-intensive tasks without compensation, and treated as property rather than partners. This forced labor often takes the form of bonded labor, where the victim is made to "repay" fictitious debts, binding her to unending cycles of labor and reinforcing her dependency on her traffickers. Domestic violence then becomes a recurring method of control, where physical, emotional, or psychological abuse is used to suppress any attempt at resistance, isolating the victim further from any means of support or escape.

Together, these forms of exploitation create a web of abuse that deepens the victim's entrapment, with each form of mistreatment reinforcing another. Forced prostitution, polyandry, rape, re-trafficking, slavery, bonded labor, and domestic violence collectively strip trafficked brides of their autonomy and bind them in a life of relentless control and subjugation.

### 1.4 Factors Responsible for this Evil.

This practice of 'Bride on Sale' involves abuse of power or position of vulnerability. The persistence of this evil is neither an accident nor a mere byproduct of isolated issues; rather, it is woven into the fabric of various deeply entrenched socio-economic systems, upheld by cultural traditions, economic desperation, and a striking lack of accountability. These push and pull factors create a complex web that normalizes and perpetuates exploitation, often under the guise of tradition or necessity.

First, one must acknowledge the influence of patriarchal traditions<sup>4</sup>, a well-oiled machine that assigns women roles strictly as commodities, expected to serve in marriage, yet stripped of any agency in their choice of husband or freedom from exploitation. In communities where bride trafficking thrives, a woman's value is often measured by her obedience, her ability to bear children, and her capacity to toil away in household servitude. This is not merely tolerated but codified in customs, turning a blind eye to the transactional nature of marriage that traffickers exploit so readily.

Economic pressures add fuel to this patriarchal fire, with poverty acting as both a driving force and a convenient scapegoat. In regions steeped in economic despair, families of trafficked women often view marriage as a financial

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<sup>4</sup> Shikha Kumari Pahadin, *Trafficked and Sold from One Man to Another, Minor Finally Returns Home*, Video Volunteers, 16 February 2018. At - <https://www.videovolunteers.org/trafficked-and-sold-from-one-man-to-another-minor-finally-returns-home>

transaction, a way to reduce economic burdens rather than form genuine partnerships. Meanwhile, men facing bleak prospects for marriage due to their economic status are enticed by traffickers' offers to arrange a wife at cheap rates. Here, the trafficked bride is not only a partner but also a conveniently unpaid domestic worker, expected to carry out endless household chores in what is essentially a form of sanctioned slavery. After all, why pay for labor when you can acquire it along with a wife?

A skewed sex ratio, exacerbated by female foeticide, further compounds this issue. Communities that have systematically erased the female population through selective abortion now face a scarcity of marriageable women. The shortage has created a desperate demand for brides, where the "supply" is supplemented through trafficking networks. The irony of creating a demand for trafficked women by first erasing female children seems lost in these societies; instead, the traffickers' network steps in to solve a problem of their own making. This creates a scenario where brides are sold at lower rates than cattle.<sup>5</sup>

Layered on top of this scarcity is the question of land and property. In many rural communities, property division through inheritance is a primary concern, with families anxious to avoid fragmenting their land into increasingly small and unproductive plots. To combat this, polyandry (where multiple men share one wife) is sometimes practiced as a solution to reduce offspring and protect the size of inherited land holdings. Thus, a trafficked bride may not only find herself in a forced marriage but also discover that her husband comes with a set of brothers equally intent on claiming her as 'their' wife. Furthermore, the additional burden of her children often prevents her from returning to her community, as they become a responsibility she cannot easily leave behind. This entrapment intensifies her isolation, reducing any realistic options to escape the exploitative environment. Property, inheritance, and progeny are managed like an agricultural spreadsheet, with the trafficked bride reduced to a utilitarian role in the scheme.

Dowry practices are another absurdly ironic twist in this system, acting both as a push factor for the victims and a pull factor for their buyers. In source regions, dowries burden families to the point that marrying a daughter off to a distant and possibly unknown family seems like a financially sound decision. On the other side, in regions with fewer women, receiving families see dowries as a lucrative addition, often eager to bring in a bride from afar to secure the economic benefits of a dowry. These practices support the idea that 'raising a daughter is like watering your neighbor's garden,' When marriage is reduced to a simple economic transaction, it's unsurprising that traffickers find ample opportunity to profit from this marketplace.

Often ignored factor is the psychological one, the mental scars of the victims. Trafficking is the process by which you exploit people's dreams to rob them of their future. It is not just a crime, but a deep betrayal of human trust and potential. An important question that is challenging the anti-trafficking field today is: why is it so often hard for the trafficked person to break away from their trafficker? Riddling the answer are various complexities including the psychological coercion that human traffickers use on their victims. For adults involved in the sex industry, even if coercion is clear, gaining victim status is more complex. Societal bias typically assumes that an adult involved in the commercial sex industry is culpable, and guilty of prostitution (though partly decriminalized in India now) until proven a victim. Therefore, feeling lost in a social reality that stigmatizes their experience, run back to their traffickers- often several times before they can exit or escape.<sup>6</sup> Together, these factors create an intricate, self-sustaining system that traffickers deftly exploit. Each factor reinforces the others, creating a cycle that normalizes the trade of women and obscures accountability. In a context where tradition is used to mask exploitation, the line between marriage and trafficking becomes perilously thin, posing an ongoing challenge for those who seek to dismantle this network of abuse.

## 2. Case Studies.

### ***RAJASTHAN (Mewat)<sup>7</sup> - Bound by vows, broken by poverty.***

The trafficking process in this region is a meticulously orchestrated operation, identifying vulnerable families and high-risk villages and targeting impoverished areas in Hyderabad, Kolkata, Assam, and Bihar. Young girls, often from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are trafficked to Mewat for forced marriages & later for sexual exploitation.

- RS, now 35 and a resident of Bharatpur, was sold from her impoverished family in Hyderabad at just 14. Married to PH, a 68-year-old ex-truck driver, she recounts poverty as a driving force behind her coerced marriage. Like

<sup>5</sup> Adrija Bose, *It Is So Common For Haryana's Men To Buy And Sell Wives That No One Cares Anymore*, News18, 26 July 2018. (Available at - <https://www.news18.com/news/india/its-so-commonfor-haryanas-men-to-buy-and-sell-wives-that-no-one-cares-anymore-1824341.html>.)

<sup>6</sup> Psychological Treatment by Paola M. Contreras, *Human Trafficking Survivor*, ISBN 978-1-138-92428-4 (Pg.71)

<sup>7</sup> Trafficking in Women and Children in India, Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd. 2005, ISBN 10: 8125024855 (Pg No.602)

other trafficked brides, she too endured cultural clashes, linguistic barriers, and harsh expectations, including agricultural labor, leaving them isolated and at risk of domestic abuse.

- TS, another victim from Munger in Bihar. Unaware of her husband's physical disability before the wedding, she felt pressured to accept the arrangement, as her family, with three younger daughters, couldn't refuse money. She faced domestic violence & disclosed that some women, unable to cope with the difficult family environment, contemplate suicide.

#### ***ANDHRA PRADESH (Hyderabad) - Promises of Gold, Chains of Deceit***

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- PR, aged 13, was married to a man on call. Her father, a rickshaw puller, was so glad of her marriage with the Arab Sheikh & expenses being taken care of by the groom's side, they didn't find it unusual that they hadn't seen the groom at all. Parents were given Rs.10,000 as Mehr/ Bride Price and were asked not to accompany the girl to Mumbai. For the next two years, there was no news other than PR's taped voice cassette saying she was fine. Parents were under impression that their daughter was in the Middle East, whereas she was sold for Rs.50,000 in Mumbai's red light area. She was spotted by police during a raid and rescued.<sup>8</sup>
- 17 year old Brahmin girl MV, fell in love with SR their family barber. Convinced by SR that their parents would not approve of their marriage, she ran away from home carrying gold jewelry and some cash. On reaching Mumbai, SR said he was going on job hunt and left MV with KM 'aunty', who was actually a brothel owner. Later realized that she was duped by her paramour and had to work as a prostitute to repay the sale amount of Rs.20,000 with interest. After a year she succeeded in escaping and reached home but her parents refused to accept her back. Heartbroken MV questions, "Why am I a stigma and bolt? I did not become a prostitute out of choice, but was trafficked lured, and forced into sex trade."<sup>9</sup>

#### ***TAMIL NADU (Coimbatore) - Lured by Hope, Bound by Toil***

Mill owners would lure girls with the promise of being able to earn enough money to pay for their dowry, without which marriage is not possible. Make them sign a three-year contract and promise to pay the lump sum amount of Rs.30,000 once the contract ends. This kind of attractive deal is to seek parents' permission, whereas girl's consent is taken for granted, they are made to believe that happy marriage is possible only if they work hard. However, the working conditions are very difficult, having long working hours with accommodation not only congested but also very unhygienic. If quits before the stipulated period, not entitled to receive any money.<sup>10</sup>

#### ***GUJARAT (Ahmedabad) - Big, Booming Business***

The Tribal belt, Dalits & OBCs are easy targets for traffickers, because of the former's deprived socioeconomic conditions, and lack of awareness & education. The highest demand is from the Darbar and Patel communities of Rajasthan and Gujarat respectively.<sup>11</sup>

- Hema, an ST girl of 13 years, was taken out of her parents' custody on the pretext of buying some clothes and payal. Isolated 100 km away from home, was beaten and raped repeatedly over 30 odd hours by Ashok (trafficker), whom she still called bhai. Hema was about to be sold into a combination of slavery and rape by a man many decades her senior but was reduced by the police on investigating the missing complaint registered by her parents.
- Parul, a single mother and lone breadwinner, recruited on the promise of commissions from helping transport girls and also from multiple marriages to Patel community men. After each wedding, she would loot the jewelry and money being looteri dulhan. She confessed to police that it was her only way of escaping from the torture of her first ex-husband.

#### ***HARYANA (Jind) - Rebellious Brides***

At a political rally, Urmila, a 30-year-old "bought-in bride," confronted former CM Khattar, questioning why Haryanvi men import brides but fail to offer them dignity. Her protest spotlighted Haryana's skewed sex ratio and the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Pg No. 339

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Pg No. 341

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Pg No. 625

<sup>11</sup> The big, booming business of child-bride trafficking in Gujarat, Spotlight-The Hindu (published on June 2, 2023)

mistreatment of brides brought from states like West Bengal and Bihar. Urmila, who lost her husband five years ago, called for a ban on bride trafficking to ensure women's respect and equality in their new families.

### **3. Legal Provisions under Various Statutes.**

India's legal framework against human trafficking is built upon various provisions aimed at addressing different dimensions of exploitation. These laws serve as a protective mechanism, seeking to prevent trafficking, safeguard victims, and punish offenders. As we explore the relevant legal aspects reflecting India's commitment to uphold human rights, it is crucial to understand how these statutes interconnect to form a comprehensive response within the country.

*Constitution of India*- Article 23 serves as foundational safeguard against human trafficking and forced labor. It ensures that no one is forced into servitude, including any form of trafficking, which is considered a violation of human dignity and freedom. However, despite constitutional guarantees, challenges exist in implementation. Many trafficking cases are underreported and victims may lack awareness of their rights. Additionally, the lack of proper law enforcement mechanisms in rural and remote areas diminishes the effectiveness.

*Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976*- This Act is crucial in combating trafficking that is linked to forced labor. It mandates the release of bonded laborers and ensures that they are rehabilitated with financial support and other rehabilitation measures. However, the main issue lies in its enforcement. Many bonded laborers are still trapped in exploitative conditions, and rehabilitation programs remain underfunded. Rural areas have limited access to proper relief and legal support, making it hard for victims to escape from exploitation.

*Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015*- It offers protection to children from exploitation. It ensures that child victims of trafficking receive immediate care and are provided with rehabilitation through care institutions. Still issues such as slow processing of cases, inadequate shelters, and lack of proper follow-up leave room for improvement. The absence of a seamless system to track and rehabilitate rescued children often leads to re-trafficking, especially in cases of cross-border trafficking.

*The Goa Children's Act, 2003*- This state-specific legislation mandates the establishment of child welfare committees and shelters for abused children. While the Act is progressive within Goa, its applicability is limited to the state, which hinders its effectiveness at the national level. Given that human trafficking is a transnational crime, state laws like this may need to align more closely with national frameworks and include measures for interstate cooperation and victim rehabilitation.

*Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993*- The Act empowers the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to investigate cases of human rights violations, including trafficking, and establishes a mechanism to protect the victims. The NHRC plays a vital role in raising awareness and monitoring trafficking cases, but its function is largely advisory, with no enforcement power. While it can investigate violations and recommend actions, its impact is limited without direct intervention or legal powers to impose binding solutions for victims.

*The Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, 1986* - ITPA is a loosely constructed piece of legislation that lacks a clear definition of trafficking. It focuses narrowly on cases of trafficking related to prostitution and the sexual exploitation of women, failing to address other forms, such as organ trafficking, bride trafficking, forced labor, and more. One of the major shortcomings of the Act is its lack of a dedicated framework or effective provisions for the rehabilitation of trafficking victims. Although it defines immoral trafficking under Section 5A, it overlooks the issue of forced marriage altogether.

*Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care & Rehabilitation) Draft Bill, 2021*- This aims to establish a comprehensive national framework to combat trafficking by creating a National Anti-Trafficking Bureau, a national database for traffickers, and special care for victims. It emphasizes prevention, victim protection, and rehabilitation. The Bill's provisions offer a holistic approach to combating trafficking, however, as a draft, it has not yet been implemented, and questions remain about the resources required to set up and sustain such an extensive system. Furthermore, without proper inter-agency collaboration, the Bill's implementation could face significant delays.

### **4. International Conventions.**

*Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)*- India ratified it in 1993. Although CEDAW addresses discrimination broadly, it includes provisions on trafficking and exploitation of women. The convention mandates state responsibility to ensure women are protected from trafficking, an obligation India has

incorporated into policies that focus on vulnerable women and girls. CEDAW has influenced India's targeted interventions in education, economic empowerment, and awareness programs for women, all crucial in addressing the root causes of trafficking.

*UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*- Ratified by India in 1992, the CRC includes measures to protect children from all forms of exploitation. It has been instrumental in prompting India to implement child protection laws, such as Juvenile Justice Act and Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act. These laws create a protective framework that addresses trafficking at its core, safeguarding children who are among the most vulnerable to exploitation.

*UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000)*- Also called *Palermo Protocol*, aims to combat trafficking through prevention, prosecution, and victim protection. India ratified it in 2011, and it has significantly shaped Indian anti-trafficking laws by emphasizing a victim-centered approach. Its framework supports India's efforts to increase accountability for traffickers, address victim rehabilitation, and provide cross-border cooperation, essential in region where trafficking often crosses national boundaries.

*SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002)*- As a member of the SAARC, India adopted this regional convention, which fosters cross-border cooperation in combating trafficking within South Asia, particularly in vulnerable border regions. It enhances information-sharing, mutual legal assistance and joint efforts in monitoring trafficking routes.

These conventions have influenced India's legislative framework, however, implementing these measures remains challenging due to socioeconomic disparities, limited resources, and issues in law enforcement.

## **5. GOI and UNODC Collaboration.**

The collaboration of the Government of India with UNODC has made significant contributions:<sup>12</sup>

- Law Enforcement Training- extensively for Indian law enforcement officials to improve the identification, investigation, and prosecution of trafficking cases. This includes cross-border collaboration to disrupt trafficking networks that transport brides across regions.
- Awareness Programs- The UNODC Regional Office for South Asia, based in New Delhi, launched campaigns to educate communities vulnerable to trafficking. By informing potential victims about the risks and realities of bride trafficking, the aim is to reduce recruitment by traffickers who often deceive families with promises of better living conditions.
- Cross-Border Coordination- UNODC promotes collaboration between India, Nepal, and Bangladesh to tackle transnational trafficking networks. This regional approach with enable faster intervention in trafficking cases, though it notes that such efforts would be more effective with stronger data-sharing agreements among these countries.

The joint efforts of GOI and UNODC have yielded some measurable results, a noticeable decrease in trafficking cases between 2016 and 2020. In 2016, there were 10,150 cases of trafficked women, but by 2020, this figure had dropped significantly to 2,797. This decline indicates progress but also reflects challenges in capturing the full scale of bride trafficking, given possible underreporting and data limitations.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS.**

The study of Bride Trafficking has focused on the socio-cultural factors determining the Indian Scenario. Various case studies from different states help in understanding the true nature of crime as well as its magnitude. Victims of bride trafficking are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation including not only physical, sexual, and social but also psychological. This issue cuts across states, classes, govt. departments and all such boundaries, but the response of governmental agencies has been segmented and unidimensional. It is further worsened by legislative gaps and weak enforcement that allow traffickers to exploit the vulnerable. International organizations (US State Department & UNODC) have declared that an effective response to human trafficking must include four key elements, i.e. *Prevention* (to decrease the number of people trafficked), *Protection* (Increase protection and support to survivors), *Prosecution*

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<sup>12</sup> Deda, V., Buiney, M.E., & Suryanti, M.S.D. (2022). Assessing efforts of the Government of India and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Tackling Bride Trafficking. *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, 2(1), 1-15. DOI: 10.31957/pjdir.v2i1.1998

(Investigate and prosecute traffickers; strengthen laws), and *Partnership* (bring together diverse perspectives and leverage resources).

The recommendations below are not exhaustive but an attempt to build sustainable solutions, ensuring that laws, resources, and societal attitudes partner to prevent, protect and prosecute.

- *Incorporating Anti-Trafficking in Professional Standards and Practices* - The Ministry of Home Affairs should make it an agenda item of discussion at the annual conference of Chiefs of Police, projects of BPRD (Bureau of Police Research and Development) and reports of NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau). The practice of incorporating survivors into self-help groups (eg. their success stories in Legal Service Authority motivating others).
- *Embedding Anti-Trafficking Awareness in Training Programs* - Considering the multilateral impact of the issue, training schedules of administrative officials, police officers, judicial offices, and welfare officers should include a module on anti-trafficking activities. Specifically for Police, large-scale programs should be conducted to educate about probable cases of Bride Trafficking. Also, the officials must carry out duties in a dignified manner, protect the rights of these trafficked women, and not treat them as prostitutes or criminals.<sup>13</sup>
- *Strengthening Bilateral Cross-Border Collaboration* - Traffickers and exploiters have no boundaries but law enforcement officials and others are bound by limitations of jurisdictions. Collaboration need not be among interstate police authorities only, but also intra-state connection with local NGOs working in the same field. This would help in rescue operations and create a victim friendly system.
- *Empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions in Anti-Trafficking Efforts* - Gram Sabhas can eradicate this evil from its roots by creating public awareness and forming Community Vigilance Groups<sup>14</sup>. It can be made mandatory to get the marriage registered and certificates signed by the Panchayat. Also, informers be incentivized to report such cases of trafficking.
- *Enhancing Monitoring and Support Systems for Trafficking Prevention* - Between 2006 and 2010, 1,807 children went missing from just 26 government and private-run shelter homes<sup>15</sup>, raising serious concerns about the effectiveness and accountability of these institutions. To address this, a robust monitoring system is essential, including a national database of traffickers managed by the NCRB. Additionally, establishing a centralized help desk for missing persons would facilitate better coordination among law enforcement and provide vital information on trafficking networks, missing persons, and preventive measures. This would improve overall efforts to combat bride trafficking and missing person cases.
- *Strengthening Rehabilitation Policies and Ensuring Effective Implementation* - In India, current rehabilitation practices often lead to re-trafficking, as victims are returned to the same impoverished conditions that made them vulnerable in the first place. Shelters provide temporary protection, but with a lack of long-term support, victims face societal rejection & financial insecurity upon return. To break this cycle, comprehensive rehabilitation policies must be implemented, offering continuous support that empowers survivors, helps them build economic independence, and integrates them into society in a meaningful way.
- *Financial Empowerment for At-Risk Communities* - At times victims cannot return home even if they wish to, as they lose acceptance from their own families. Economic Assistance from the government will prevent them from being re-trafficked and help them earn a living. Economic support initiatives should target vulnerable groups, focusing on sustainable financial aid, small business funding, and accessible credit options (eg. interest-free loan).
- *Skill Development and Vocational Training for Economic Independence* - Empowering survivors with skill development can create pathways to stable employment. Vocational training tailored to local industry needs promotes self-sufficiency, reduces vulnerability to trafficking, and fosters community resilience against exploitation.

<sup>13</sup> Economic Review of India, National Portal, available at <http://www.india.gov.in/allimpfrms/alldocs/12262.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, Ujjawala: A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of Trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-Integration of Victims of Trafficking for Commercial Sexual Exploitation (2016), available at <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Ujjawala%20New%20Scheme.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Ravikantsv, 1800 Kids Missing From Shelters in 4 Years, Shakti Vahini, 2 April 2012, available at <https://shaktivahini.org/1800-kids-missing-from-shelters-in-4-years/>.