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Human Trafficking in North East India: Patterns and Emerging Trends

Neimenuo Kengurusie

This brief article attempts to analyse the factors that have facilitated the rise of human trafficking, and the patterns and trends of human trafficking in North East India, with special emphasis on Nagaland. The study is based on primary data which include field-work, analysis of case studies and reports collected from state and non-state anti-trafficking personnel, and secondary data which include newspaper reports, articles, and books. It identifies human trafficking at an alarming level and the need for a strong level framework, as well as the role of religious institutions in tackling this menace.

Keywords: human trafficking, women, children, education, employment, fake faith-based organisations, Nagaland

Human Trafficking in the North East

Human trafficking has been recognised and is classified as a form of modern slavery. It is considered as one of the most potent organised crimes in the world today transcending culture, geography, and time. This gruesome practise across the world has deprived thousands of people their fundamental dignity and right to life.

According to the 'United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially in Women and Children', trafficking is:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other coercion of abduction, or fraud, or deception, or 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 (United Nations, 2000).

Human trafficking is a heinous form of modern slavery that dehumanises and violates the basic rights of a human being. In most cases, these operations occur in countries where there is absence of stringent law against trafficking and the government is unable to protect the basic rights of its citizens.

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Over the years, Asia has become the global hub of human trafficking. According to the United Nations Development Programme's estimate, 300,000 to 450,000 people are trafficked within Asia each year, of which more than half occurs in South Asia alone. The 2014 Global Slavery Index showed that out of the world's 36 million victims, 23.5 million victims of human trafficking comes from Asia. At over 14 million, India tops the list as the country with the highest rates of human trafficking in the world (Hope for children Organisation, 2014).

Every year hundreds and thousands of women, men and children in India fall victim to human trafficking, and some make their way into transnational networks. The report by Asian Development Bank (2002) revealed that 89 percent of human trafficking in India takes place within the domestic border, and only 10 percent accounts for international trafficking. It has become a lucrative trade because large sections of Indian society live in extreme poverty with no source of income, unwarranted job security, and other related problems. According to National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) report, people from such vulnerable state becomes an easy prey for trafficking by agents through false promises of jobs, marriage, better living standards, shelter and security (Sen & Nair, 2005). Victims of trafficking are usually subjected to various forms of exploitation such as prostitution, forced labour, involuntary domestic servitude, forced marriages, forced begging, armed conflict, and organ trade. Usually, men are trafficked and forced into heavy labour; children are trafficked to work as domestic helpers or in industrial setups in agriculture, textile and fishing industries; and women and girls often trafficked into commercial sex industries. The United Nation estimates that of the total victims of human trafficking in Asia, 64% are trafficked for forced labour, servitude and slavery, while 26 % are trafficked for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2014). Despite this gross violation of human rights, there is a rise in human trafficking at an alarming rate because it has emerged as a highly organised and lucrative business, generating an annual profit of \$51.8 billion in Asia alone (ILO, 2014).

Methodology

The study is conducted by means of qualitative research. The study also adopts a descriptive and explorative approach to examine and analyse the emerging trend of human trafficking in North East region (NER), with special emphasis on Nagaland. Qualitative data for the study were mainly collected by means of both primary and secondary sources. These include interviews, academic journals, books, research reports, newspaper reports, and international documents.

Secondary data collection method: The study has drawn on existing databases from Government of India and International organisations. Information reviewed includes statistics on the extent of human trafficking. These are derived from the following public databases: National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB), International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Furthermore, documents and research reports on human trafficking were sourced from publication by international organisations such as the United Nations and Asian Development Bank (ADB). The study also made use of academic litera-

ture. These include scholarly articles and books that discuss the issue of human trafficking in NER. As regards data analysis, newspaper reports were also consulted.

Primary data collection method: Official records and reports from State officials and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were consulted as far as possible. To supplement primary data collection, data were obtained from informal discussions and interviews with police officials and NGOs in Nagaland. Discussions and interviews were conducted in person. The author first contacted prospective discussants in Nagaland via email and telephone. The discussants were informed regarding the purpose of the study. Discussants with key participants were conducted in Dimapur, Peren and Kohima. The participants include police officials from Dimapur, Peren and Tuensang District and NGOs based in Kohima and Dimapur. During the interviews, I sought reports and data from my discussants. Case studies on human trafficking in Nagaland have been collected from Peren police department, State Child Protection Society, Kohima and School of Social work NGO based in Dimapur. Similar reports and data were collected from NGO Prodigals' Home based in Dimapur and Dimapur Police.

Why the North-Eastern states are vulnerable?

The North Eastern Region (NER) comprising of eight states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim are disadvantaged owing to its precarious geographical location in relation with the rest of the country. It is a landlocked region, geographically sharing more than 98 percent of India's borders with Bangladesh, China, Myanmar and Bhutan. It is due to the remote geopolitical location and lack of interest in the development of this region that the North East is at risk of cross border trafficking. According to Hasina Kharbih, most of the borders are 'open and unmanned ... which provides an easy passage in and out of India for organized human trafficking syndicates to operate undetected' (Kharbih, 2013: 348). Moreover, with the complex ethnic conflicts which have sprung up in various parts of the region, the problem of trafficking is further exacerbated. The NER has become a significant location that functions as the source, transit, and destination of illegal trafficking.

There are many reasons why the NER of India is vulnerable. The NER is economically weaker compared to other parts of the country. Adding to the problem are ethnic violence, armed conflicts and political movements for autonomy that intersect and create an environment that is not conducive for steady employment and social stability. These factors create an environment and a situation where the people, especially women and children, become highly vulnerable to human trafficking. Human trafficking is closely tied to poverty and unemployment, especially when coupled with lack of social awareness. Disasters, both natural and manmade, also contribute to the vulnerability of many social groups. All forms of conflict and natural disasters lead to mass displacement of people, as they are forced to take refuge in relief camps. This situation provides for a well organised and well marked route for traffickers to maintain the supply side of the market. In a paper titled 'Of Vulnerability and Coercion: A Study of Sex Trafficking in Assam', Sawmya Ray has conducted a study

wherein she examines the effect of mass displacement of people due to natural disasters and conflicts occurring in various places and correlates it to the flourishing practice of human trafficking in the affected areas of the state. She argues that inherent patriarchal practices combined with factors like poverty, conflict, natural disasters, and others contribute in making women and children soft targets for human trafficking (Ray, 2015). What is worse is that more and more communities are marginalised due to this and often, these individuals and their families get trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, forced migration and ultimately, trafficking.

What acts as the main incentive is the demand from the market for flesh trade. According to a report by The Times of India, metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and states like West Bengal, Goa and Kerala serve as the largest market for trafficked female from North East India (Baruah, 2012). The skewed sex ratio in states like Punjab and Haryana due to the cultural proclivity towards male child, have resulted in kidnapping and trafficking of young girls as brides especially from Assam (UNODC, 2013). Another factor is the rapid urbanisation and increased participation of family members towards livelihood earnings. Since the entire family has to go to work; a maid or a helper for the domestic chores is necessitated. Many urban households in India are increasingly becoming dependent on domestic helpers for menial work or taking care of their children. Consequently, the demand, especially for children is increasing, as they are considered an easy subject-naïve, and non-complaining. In many cases, these children work under conditions of forced servitude and exploitation by the employers (Prabhakaran, 2013).

According to the figures released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in the year 2015, the state of Assam has emerged as a trafficking hub of the country. The peculiar geographical setting of Assam has made it vulnerable to infiltration. A protracted insurgency problem coupled with the recurrent floods has resulted in slow economic growth. Spurred on by aspirations for better livelihood, the state of Assam has witnessed a large scale migration of the local population to the mainland. Often these migrations are facilitated by the traffickers, who introduce themselves as recruiting agents and lure vulnerable groups with the promises of a better life. The growing number of missing children from the state of Assam is indicative of the seriousness of the problem in the state.

In Mizoram, the Government has taken several steps to curb the evils of human trafficking. It is the first state in the North East to formulate the 'Victims of Crime Compensation Scheme' (UNODC, 2013, p.132). However, in spite of these novel measures, human trafficking is still active in the state. In 2016, eight tribal girls from Mizoram who were trafficked to Gujarat via Guwahati were rescued (Indian Express, 2016).

In Meghalaya, human trafficking has spread even into the interiors of the state and it has the largest incidence of child trafficking after Assam. In the beginning of the year 2017, there was a case of human trafficking in which a local politician was involved. The other accomplices were found to be the owner of the guest house wherein such activities took place (The Shillong Times, 2017). More often than not, hotels and guesthouses function as meeting places for the customers and the sex

workers. Tourism is the major industry in the state, which have contributed to the recent mushrooming of guest houses and hotels. However, the rate of increase of guest houses and hotels is not in proportion to the inflow of tourists. The recent cases that came to light of these service industries engaging in flesh trade is evidence of the seriousness of human trafficking in the state. Until recently, most of the children were trafficked to be employed as bonded labour in the mining of coal, or in tea stalls and other services.

Nagaland — Source, Transit and Destination

As per the latest 2011 census, Nagaland has a population of about 2 million scattered over 11 districts¹ inhabited by 16 tribes. Out of the total population, Nagaland recorded higher rural population of 71.14 percent as against urban population of 28.86 percent (Census of India 2011).

The issue of human trafficking in Naga society appears to be low-key on the surface but a closer look reveals that the menace of human trafficking is taking root. The rise in cases on human trafficking in recent times is an alarming trend that needs immediate attention. According to a study conducted by a local NGO, Prodigals' Home, every three and half day a person goes missing in Nagaland and that 83 percent of missing reports are of children below 18 years of age. The Dimapur district recorded the highest number of missing children at 68 percent (Prodigals' Home, 2009). The study indicates that human trafficking may be one of the main reasons behind those missing children. According to the latest report from Dimapur Police, in 2015 alone, about 115 cases of missing women and children were registered, out of which 67 were traced while 48 remains untraced.²

Nagaland has witnessed growth in education, upward mobility, and urban population over the years. However, there is tremendous uneven development between urban towns like Kohima, Mokokchung and Dimapur and other far-flung districts. With growing urbanisation, there is also a huge demand for domestic helpers, especially minor boys and girls. Over the years, there is an increasing flow of children as domestic helpers from remote villages to urban towns especially Dimapur and Kohima. These children have become vulnerable targets for child trafficking (Prodigals' Home, 2009). During fieldwork, social workers and police officials have mentioned that children from remote villages with poor economic backgrounds are most vulnerable to this form of trafficking.³

The long-drawn political instability, ethnic differences, rural-urban disparity, and lack of conscious political intervention have made it difficult to utilise the abundant natural resources and work towards sustainable development. Since there is a dearth of employment opportunities in Nagaland, many young semi-educated girls of underprivileged background are lured with offers of jobs in economic establishments, massage parlours and find themselves duped or coerced into the commercial sex trade by ill-intentioned employers in metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Pune, Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Goa (Times of India, 2011; Nagaland Post, 2012; Meneno 2013). Ignorance on the part of the local community on the issue of human trafficking is also one of the contributing factors that encourage the traffickers. Often, the

locals stigmatise those who get exploited in sex trafficking without recognising them as victims. This also makes it difficult to address the issue systematically and with sympathy.

In recent years, the traffickers have taken an alarming new route to expand their illegal trade in the state. Nagaland is primarily a Christian state where the people bestow their complete faith and trust in organisations that call themselves religious. Although there are many faith-based organisations in the state with noble intentions that serve the society in the areas of education, health, youth and community development, there have been cases of fake faith-based organisations and individuals that exploit the trust of the gullible. In my interactions with social workers, police officers and church leaders, I found that the traffickers, well aware of the sentiments of the people, operate in the guise of missionaries or religious leaders and recruit children by luring them with false promises of providing free and quality education in illegal 'charity homes'. Many families from poor and rural backgrounds in Nagaland have fallen victims to such designs of the traffickers. The following cases⁴ highlight the growing trend of recruitment under the cover of fake missionaries.

Case study 1: In the year 2013, 51 boys and girls from the North East belonging to the age group of 5-14 years (8 children from Nagaland) were rescued from an illegal children's home called 'Grace Home' which was based in Jaipur, Rajasthan. This 'home' was run and maintained by a man named Jacob, who claimed to be a pastor. All the 8 children from Nagaland were from humble family backgrounds from Peren District, a remote place in Nagaland. Most of the rescued children came from remote villages in Peren District. Their parents were convinced with free education in a city along with free lodging and food. For people coming from humble rural backgrounds and living in an economically-deprived area in the state, a free city education for their children was more than they could ask for. With absolute faith in the "church ministry" they sent their children away for education and didn't even suspect when they did not come home for five to six years. However, the children were never sent to school. Instead, they were confined to filthy and unhygienic rooms, starved and subjected to abuse, emotionally, physically and psychologically by the "pastor". The minor girls were raped and molested.

Case study 2: Dr. Henry proclaimed himself to be the Director of the 'Truth Light Healing Ministry' of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, a ministry that claims to be affiliated to the American Baptist Convention. It was learnt that in 2009, Dr. Henry and Mrs. Sarah of the same ministry had visited the Samziuram and New Jalukie village under the Peren District thrice and during their visit, they advocated for free education and accommodation for children in the 'Gypsy orphan children home' that is located at Andhra Pradesh. They convince the parents to avail themselves of this opportunity to send their children for free theological studies under the care and guidance of the Evangelical Association for Revival Education (EARE), which is an NGO based in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Together, the parents of twenty nine children decided to avail of the opportunity for their children and registered them for the programme. The children were then escorted by Dr. Henry and Sarah to Dimapur and from there, they left for Andhra Pradesh. Later on, it was discovered

that the children were not sent to schools as promised but were ill treated and made to perform numerous tasks without proper food and lodging.

With the traffickers resorting to all possible means to perpetuate their modus operandi, it is important to leave no stone unturned in identifying the loopholes that enable these traffickers to mask human trafficking under the pretext of religious aid. When “attractive” offers of free education and lodging come from traffickers disguised as “good Samaritans”, poor and uneducated parents easily give in to the lure of quality education in towns and cities for their wards. The cases mentioned above of young boys and girls who were lured with false promise of educational opportunities in the cities and eventually rescued from different parts of the country, speaks volumes about how fast and wide the tentacles of the trafficking racket has spread.

Today, Nagaland is not only a source state but also a transit point for trafficked victims from India to other countries. Pangsa under Tuensang district and Dimapur in Nagaland are the transit centres for trafficking. Women and children from Assam, Nagaland and Bangladesh are trafficked through the Pangsa International border, and then moved out to Myanmar and other South East Asian countries through the golden triangle. Dimapur is a transit point for women and children trafficked from Assam especially from upper Assam, Luming and Guwahati. From Dimapur, they are moved to Moreh in Manipur or international border at Tuensang in Nagaland to the golden triangle (Sen & Nair, 2005). In a personal communication with Impung⁵, a police officer, it was confirmed that Pangsa serves as a transit route for traffickers. Nagaland has also become a destination point for trafficked victims particularly from Assam, where they are inducted into commercial sex trade and domestic work. It is estimated that there are around 11,000 commercial sex workers⁶ in Dimapur alone (Times of India, 2011). A typical case would be like that of Mrs Anju (name changed) from Assam. She travelled to Dimapur (Nagaland) in search of work after her husband’s death. On her way, she met a woman who promised to provide her a job in Dimapur. On arrival, the woman coerced her into the sex trade⁷. This case reveals that trafficking and exploitation in Nagaland has acquired many dimensions whereby, gullible local children and women are trafficked outside the state and vulnerable individuals and groups from outside also fall prey to exploitation within the state.

Through this study, we can see that there are three trends of trafficking evident in Nagaland: firstly, since there is lack of avenues for employment, many young women including educated ones are lured with the promise of decent jobs in the cities. Secondly, parents from poor economic backgrounds are lured by fake missionaries and counterfeit faith-based organisations to send their children for free education and lodging. And thirdly, children belonging to poor families especially from the remote villages of Nagaland and Assam are employed as domestic help sometimes ending up as child labourers in exploitative working environments.

Conclusion

The frequency of human trafficking reveals the complex networks, of exploitation of children and women in flesh trade, child labour, and physical abuse. It has crept into the most interior parts of the country where the problem becomes even more difficult

to address. Thus, there is an urgent need to tackle the evils of human trafficking and curb it before it spreads further. Legal devices must be framed to increase political will to fight human trafficking. Such political intervention also needs to be inclusive involving all section of institutions – public, private, religious institutions and the community. In framing policies, the State Government should also set up means to ensure that they are carried out systematically. Development of education opportunities as a long term measure as well as massive awareness campaigns (by NGOs, social groups, church and the government) in the immediate context is pertinent. Despite governmental effort at universalisation of free and compulsory education for all children from 6 to 14 years, a huge number of children are still uneducated and thus, they are trafficked into the sex markets and urban homes for child labour particularly as domestic help. In states such as Nagaland, a huge uneven development between rural and urban have also forced people to migrate within and outside the state in search of better opportunities and they become vulnerable targets for trafficking.

The role of religious institutions in the fight against human trafficking is also significant. Religious institutions hold a great realm of influence in the society, especially in the NER of India. There is a need to mobilise religious institutions and utilise them as a medium to generate public awareness and indulge in community participation. An exemplary step undertaken, as a result of the emerging trends of fake missionaries trafficking children across the country, is by the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC). In a personal communication with Vilasieu of NBCC, she mentioned that NBCC has started a sensitisation campaign to fight human trafficking and has undertaken several campaigns in churches across the state to raise awareness.⁸ Therefore, the urgent need for sensitising the people and raising awareness on the issue of trafficking should be multi-pronged and taken up both by the state and non state actors and they should collectively work together to combat the issue of human trafficking.

Notes

¹ Dimapur, Kohima, Kiphire, Longleng, Peren, Phek, Mokokchung, Mon, Tuensang, Wokha, Zunheboto.

² The Report has been collected from Dimapur Police.

³ Interview with Ms Ela, Director of Prodigals' Home, Ms Vilasieu of Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) and Police officials of Peren and Tuensang District, Nagaland.

⁴ Both the case study highlighted has been collected from State Child Protection Society (SCPS), Government of Nagaland and Jalukie Police Station, Peren district, Government of Nagaland.

⁵ Mr Impung is a Deputy Superintendent of Police, based in Tuensang District, Nagaland.

⁶ Not all commercial sex workers are trafficked. Some willingly enter the profession for easy money and out of poverty while some are trafficked by locals and outsiders.

⁷ The case study has been collected from School of Social Work, an NGO based in Dimapur, Nagaland.

⁸ Vilasieu, is the Director of Women's Department of NBCC.

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