

# Trafficking of Women in Eastern India: A Social Anthropological Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*Crimes against women are a universal dark reality that confronts all nations. Trafficking of women is one such crime, which involves all places either a source or destination of trafficking. Not only it is widely prevalent, it is also traumatic and akin to slavery in modern times. It debilitates its victims not just physically but mentally as well. Although trafficking is prevalent in almost all parts of India, one region where it is widespread is Eastern India, comprising the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. In his article, the focus is on a holistic and an analytical prescriptive. It examines crimes against women from the perspectives of victims, offenders as well as the cultural context, to interpret how it all influences trafficking. It takes a processual and an interpretive approach towards the phenomena of the trafficking. Based on Alison Phinney's concept of 'trafficking space', the article look at the ecosystem of trafficking in terms of demand or pull, push and the vulnerability factors in conjunction with the modus operandi of the traffickers and the cultural context, wherein women are habitually abused and have a lower status pushing them into trafficking trap. The article also suggests how to handle the issue and identify those plays where it is widespread.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is paradoxical that in our society where women are worshiped as goddess is also seen as one of the most unsafe places for women. Reverence and respect for women in our culture is sullied by exploitation and hostility faced by them in many spheres of life. The violence against women is an ignominious dark reality of our times. It occurs within confines of homes by the family members as also outside, sometimes by complete strangers. The skewed infant sex ratios of many states, indicating widespread feticide, domestic violence, dowry harassment and dowry death, and honor killings are some of the examples of the former, while molestation, eve-teasing sexual assault are the types of crimes rooted outside homes. As a patriarchal society male often uses violence (physical as well passive) against women to assert the male supremacy (Karlekar 2004). Even some of customary practices support the subjugation, discrimination and subordination of women, thus creating an ideal situation for the perpetrators to commit crime with impunity and a difficult situation for the law enforcement agencies to control such crimes. It has been increasingly felt that unlike other types of crimes against woman, trafficking is matter of greater concern as it has many negative implications for women as an individual being as well the status of women in general. An unsafe woman means a disturbed family and an unsafe society. At the same time, providing a safe environment to women is a prerequisite for their effective functioning. It is only then can we expect them to avail the equality of opportunity. Thus putting an end to this social scourge is a prerequisite for the growth and advancement of a community, society and a nation at large.

Of all forms of crimes directed against women, nothing is more traumatic as trafficking. It is akin to slavery in modern times, which debilitates victims not just physically but emotionally as well. Although trafficking is prevalent in almost all parts of India, one region where it is widespread is Eastern India, comprising the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. According to the annual report of Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016 more than 3250 cases of trafficking were report from Eastern India to various other places in the country (Crime in India, GOI. 2016:34). These constitute only tip of the iceberg, as there are many other cases, which never come to the notice of the law enforcement agencies. Interestingly unlike other places, these four states are not only sources of trafficking to other parts of India; the urban centers of these states are also points of trafficking destinations from other places. The intra and inter-state trafficking is a major issue and trafficking of rural women to towns for labor work or sex work is widely prevalent in these four states. The region is also a transit route for international trafficking of women from Bangladesh to other states in India. The major cities like Kolkata, Ranchi, Bhubaneswar and Kendrapara see many women from rural areas of the state trafficked for sex and other works. The worst sufferers are the women from the tribal areas of Jharkhand who are trafficked in large number to different parts of the state and outside. This article looks at the problem of trafficking social anthropologically, which implies using fieldwork to collect data and provide a bottom up understanding of the problem.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The empirical study was conducted in four states of Eastern India, viz., Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand. It covered 15 districts of the four states. The districts were selected based on high crime rates and incidences of crime against women. Both crime rate and number of crimes were taken in consideration based upon five years data. Blocks and village were purposefully selected based on frequency of reported cases. Cases were collected and analyzed from both rural and urban areas of the four states. Cases of crime against women were also collected from rescue homes run by the government, cases reported to the police, cases pending in courts and the cases reported to women's organization. Unreported cases were also collected from the community, for analysis.

## 3. TRAFFICKING DEFINED

Any definition of trafficking begins with the Palermo Protocol of the United Nations to fight against transnational organized crimes related to trafficking of women, children, drugs, firearms and migrants. It defines trafficking as an unlawful or illegal transaction, wherein any living or a non-living objects like drugs, goods, firearms which an individual is not supposed to trade for either ethical or cultural or economic reasons. Trafficking as the definition spells out include human as well as trafficking of objects like firearms or intoxicating substances. Of all forms of trafficking, it is trafficking of women and children, which are most inhuman in nature. It is akin to turning human beings into commodities and trading in them for monetary reasons by the unscrupulous traffickers.

In this paper, the focus is upon these traffickers to understand, how they operate. Therefore, it takes a processual and an analytical approach towards the phenomena of the trafficking. It raises questions like; how the traffickers draw their victims into the trade, what kinds of method they use and how they exploit them through trading in them. The question of vulnerability is also examined to determine what factors contribute to trafficking. During the course of this study, it was found that in legal and administrative approaches emphasizes is upon consent of the victims as the deterministic criterion in defining trafficking, as elopement is an important issue in many places in Eastern India. Instead of victim's consent, here the focus was upon the intentions of the offenders, who carry out the heinous act. If the intention were to make monetary gains by exploiting the victims and trading in them, the action was defined as trafficking. This approach was in odd with how the law enforcement agencies like police defined trafficking. For them 'victims opposition' becomes the central point in considering it as a crime, as they have to prove the victim consent was not there and the

victim was duped by the offender. 'She didn't go willfully' is the starting point for defining it as trafficking or the more prejudiced denial comes from the fact that victim went willfully. Thus the law enforcement agency look at it simply as a legal issue in the sense that whether they can prove it as trafficking in the court of law or not. The humanistic approach is completely missing in their perspective. Police told me that rescued victims often do not cooperate and they do not want to return home, and if they are sent back, they come back again. The common police complain is 'victims allow themselves to be trafficked', especially when they return to trafficked places, after being rescued from there. Thus for law enforcement officials trafficking is any activity which could be proven so under the provisions of the anti-trafficking laws. As one of women officers with Women's desk in Kolkata, police once told me 'we are very frustrated when victims of trafficking often do not wish to be regarded as victims'.

"--- they do not cooperate with us, on the contrary they try to escape from homes and other places where people are trying to help them. The problem can be solved if victims are rehabilitated within the city instead of sending them back home".

Most of the trafficked victims do not give evidence against the traffickers because after being with the trafficker for a very long time, the victim becomes emotionally attached to them and choose to work with them even if they are exploited and have to live under difficult condition. This dependence is called as **Stockholm syndrome**, and it is reported in many cases where victims turn hostile in the court of law.

Analyses of cases revealed that there are three elements, which are common in all cases of trafficking (Sen and Nair 2005: 2).

**Enticement:** Most cases of trafficking involve deception or direct coercion by creating situations wherein the victim fail to discern the real motive of the trafficker. Often these traffickers exploit the naiveté and vulnerabilities of the victims. Luring them through misleading commitments thereby winning victim's trust and the victim of their own fell in the trap of the traffickers.

**Objective:** An action is called trafficking, if the objective is monetary gains to be made by trading in women.

**Exploitation:** This is the central feature of defining an act as trafficking. All cases invariably involve an element of exploitation. Often the exploitation takes the form of sexual exploitation or physical exploitation of the victims.

This exploitation can take many forms. It could be commercial sexual exploitation i.e. to work as sex worker in massage parlors or to work in liquor bar or directly in house of ill fames in red light areas. It can also be their exploitation as under paid domestic workers. In this

exploitative toxic environment, victims face physical exploitation, deprivation of sleep and denial of food. It is this modern day slavery in the form of forced labour, which is most heinous aspect of the crime. Victims being underpaid and forced to overwork is akin to bonded labour. There is a close connection between these two categories and often they overlap. In many cases, it was found that women who are initially recruited for domestic work had to undergo sexual exploitation before taking up the job of a domestic help in a household. Within households, also many of them face different kind of exploitation ranging from attempt to sexual assault, molestation and physical assault. Thus, there are multiple factors involved in trafficking but the common factor, which binds them together, is the exploitation of the women and the commercial motive of the traffickers.

#### 4. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR TRAFFICKING

Poverty and trafficking are closely related and many of the victims are from those families, which are at the margins of society either because of economic reasons or for social or cultural aspects. Mukherjee and Das (1996) have also reported in their study the link between trafficking and the economic condition of victims. At the same time, some victims are also from better off families. Significant factors, which are linked to vulnerability, include:

- a) Low Literacy
- b) Awareness and access to information
- c) Personality features like social recluse with very few friends or weak bonding with significant other including members of the family.
- d) Victim's family issues often enhance the vulnerability. For example, those from broken or disturbed families are often targets of the traffickers.
- e) Those who suffer from any physical abnormality and often ridiculed by others are also easy victims.
- f) Vulnerability also increases if there is a family member or a close relative or anyone in extended kinship network is involved in these activities.
- g) Times of natural disaster likes cyclones or flooding also leads to increasing incidents of trafficking.
- h) Lack of development in an area or those areas where livelihood opportunities are compromised because of displacement also are regions of greater number of incidents

- i) Those areas where local governance is weak or non-effective and less attended to by the law enforcement agencies are also more trafficking prone.

Alison Phinney (2001:68) proposed that there is an ecosystem in which trafficking take place, he referred to it as trafficking space'. It constitutes of demand, vulnerability factor that provide the supply and finally the consumers who creates the demand. At the apex are the client consumers and at the base are the vulnerability factors which pushes the victims into trafficking, and it is illegally carried by the traffickers. Therefore, the trafficking space is mediated by the victims, the traffickers and the final consumers. The central role in the entire process is played by the traffickers and it is they who;

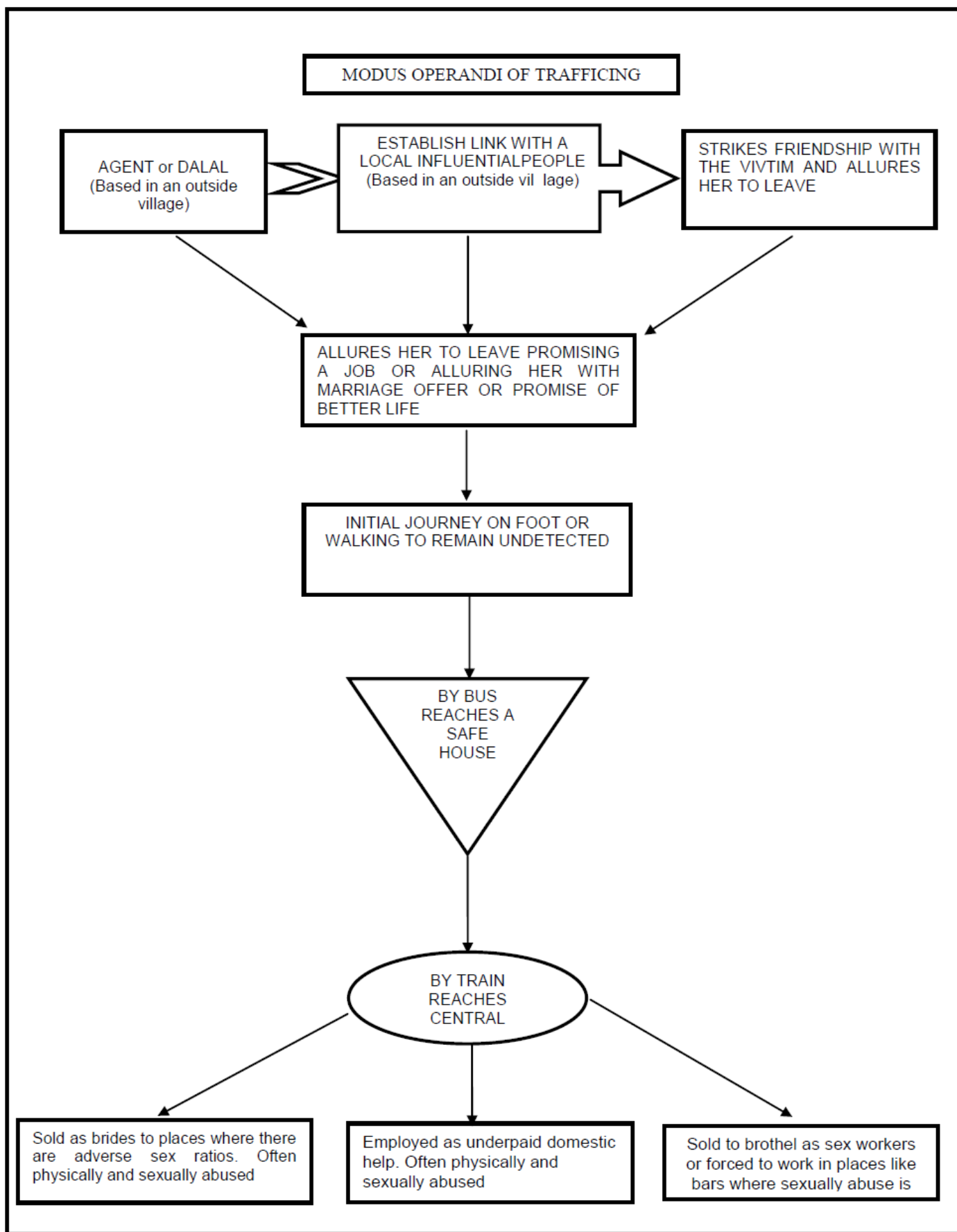
- a) Target and entrap the victims
- b) Arranges for their transportation
- c) Finally delivering them to the clients

Sen and Nair (2005) have used this Phinney's triangle in their study of trafficking of women. According to them, the areas where status of women is compromised and their exploitation is culturally tolerated along with limited livelihood opportunity, these are the ideal circumstances, which are taken advantage of by the traffickers. Along with this if the law enforcement institutions are weak and do not perform their duties such areas are prone to trafficking.

#### 5. MODUS OPERANDI

##### 5.1. Targeting the victim

In Eastern India, those rural and tribal areas, where traditional livelihood opportunities have shrunk because of resource depletion are the most fertile grounds for the recruitment of the victims. Method of trapping varies. The strategies used include developing familiarity with the victims and then deceiving by alluring them with a hope of a better life. Most of the time it is misleading victims with false promises rather than coercion is used as a strategy for trapping the victims. The traffickers who trap girls are mostly men and in few cases women are also part of these trafficking gangs. They are mostly residents of the area who have migrated to cities. As mentioned earlier they could be victim's close relative also. Although they have migrated but they keep moving back and fro with their operational base being the rural area and the business, which is mostly conducted from urban areas.



Often they are only the agents who work for somebody else. The traffickers generally do not target people from their native villages. They trap their victims

from neighboring villages. The modus operandi is first they would make acquaintance with few local people of the area, frequenting their houses, offering taken gifts to the local

people. Flaunting his connections, he would create an identity of a helpful and a very resourceful person. With this image of a Good Samaritan, he would target potential victims identified by them. She would be lured with gifts to make her feel comfortable and gradually entice her to accompany him with a promise of a job and good quality of life in the city.

## 5.2 Transportation

Not to raise the suspicion of the victims the trafficker may take her out few times and introduce her to few women in the city, who are part of their network to convince them about their noble intentions. Final elopement is done without informing anyone in the village. Initially they walk on foot so as not to raise any suspicion. After reaching the main center they board a bus to flee. Once they reach the town the victim is kept in a safe house where the girl would stay for a day or few weeks before being taken to a larger city. In the city she is kept for a longer duration at a safe place depending upon how quickly the trafficker is able to strike a deal. It is during this time the victim is sexually exploited by the traffickers. The third stage of the transportation is when she is finally taken to her buyer/employer's place. Thus victims are trafficked through different stages and they may be moved many times before being trafficked to their final destination.

## 5.3. Source area

Trafficking can originate within the state or from outside. For example in West Bengal there are two sources of trafficking. One from across the border from Bangladesh. The 158 long porous border with Bangladesh from Jalangi to Farrakha in Murshidabad district is the hub of trafficking and bodytrade. Road leading to the Farrakha barrage and along the ghats, there are shanties where there are roaring business of flesh trade. There are also liquor joints along this route. Sex trade is a thriving business here. Women who were initially into smuggling have now become part of this trade. Many of those who were interviewed said they were pushed into sex work because those guarding the border demanded sexual gratification. In this area smuggling and sex are intertwined. Smugglers often use regular supply of women to border forces to facilitate smuggling. Whenever there is a group of these female who are crossing the border it is an acknowledged practise that one of them is offered to a border police in order to cross the border. This is done in rotation so that others can continue with smuggling. According to people trafficking is possible only with complicity of the law enforcers. Our estimation is there are approximately 2400 sex-workers in Murshidabad and of these most are trafficked from various places

## Case study of a sex worker

Hasina Biwi, a 45 year old has been a veteran sex worker in this area. Age has taken a toll of her but still she remains active and is considered as one of the important gurus of sex trade in this area. Hasina Biwi, used to live across the border, she ran away when she was 14 year old, with a boy. The boy was into smuggling of cow, fertilizers and rice from India to Bangladesh. She initially started off helping her friend in smuggling business. This boy promised to marry her but when she was four months pregnant he disappeared. Hasina Biwi had to earn a livelihood all by herself as her parents refused to accept her back. She initially started with smuggling rice, but she had a difficult time in crossing the border. She had to give in to the demands of the border police in order to allow her safe passage. Soon it became a regular thing and she started exchanging sex for border transit to cross over. Having been exploited herself many times by them, she decided to join sex work as it was more profitable and lucrative. Soon she started working as a full fledged sex worker. Gradually she expanded her trade and started luring other girls into the trade and establish herself as a *Guru* in the area. The demand for sex work is so high in the area and the business is so lucrative that women who were in farming earlier decided to be a part of it. Many of these girls who worked with Hasina are from Bangladesh or from the neighbouring villages in the area. Some have been abandoned by their husbands and they practiced sex trade to raise their children. Then there are those young girls who leave home like Hasina Biwi, with their boyfriends or agents who promise them jobs but sold them into prostitution. Hasina is now well established in the area she has an income of approximately 2000 rupees everyday. The average worker under her also makes not less than 200 to 500 rupees everyday. This kind of income in this area is unimaginable, as a result sex trade is thriving in the area.

From within certain districts like the Murshidabad, 24 South Paragana and North 24 Paragana within the subdivision: Kakdwip, Dimondharbar. Baruipur, Canning, Bashirhat in the following blocks:

Mathurapur - I, Mathurapur - II Jayanagar- I, Jayanagar- II, Daimondharbar – II, Kulpi- Canning I, Canning II, Basanti, Gosaba, Kakdwip, Shagar, Namkhana, Kakdwip Coastal, Patharprotima, Kakdwip – III, Shagar – II, Namkhana Coastal, Baruipur, Sonarpur, Bhangor – I, Bhangor – II and the following police stations: Sagar, Namkhana, Kakdwip, patharprotima, Mothurapur, kulturali, Joynagar, Canning, Basanti, Goasaba, Chatomollakhali Sunderbon Costal Police Station, Hamnagar Coastal, Hingaljanj, Sandeshkhali, Hasnabad, Bashirhat, Minaka, Haroya. Malda and Murshidabad are two districts where prostitution and sex trade are quite prevalent. There are call girl rackets in Hansagiri lane under English Bazaar police Station. Girls from Murshidabad and Maldda are trafficked to North India and sold as brides in Haryana, Punjab and U.P. by middlemen. Generally they are married to physically challenged people and these marriages are performed in temples or Gurudwaras. These girls are treated just as domestic workers and are often sexually exploited by others as well. Other than West Bengal trafficking also originate from the state of Jharkhand. The state is ranked third in trafficking in India. Trafficking here mainly for two reasons viz., domestic labour, which is non sexual exploitation, and for commercial sex work, which is sexual exploitation.

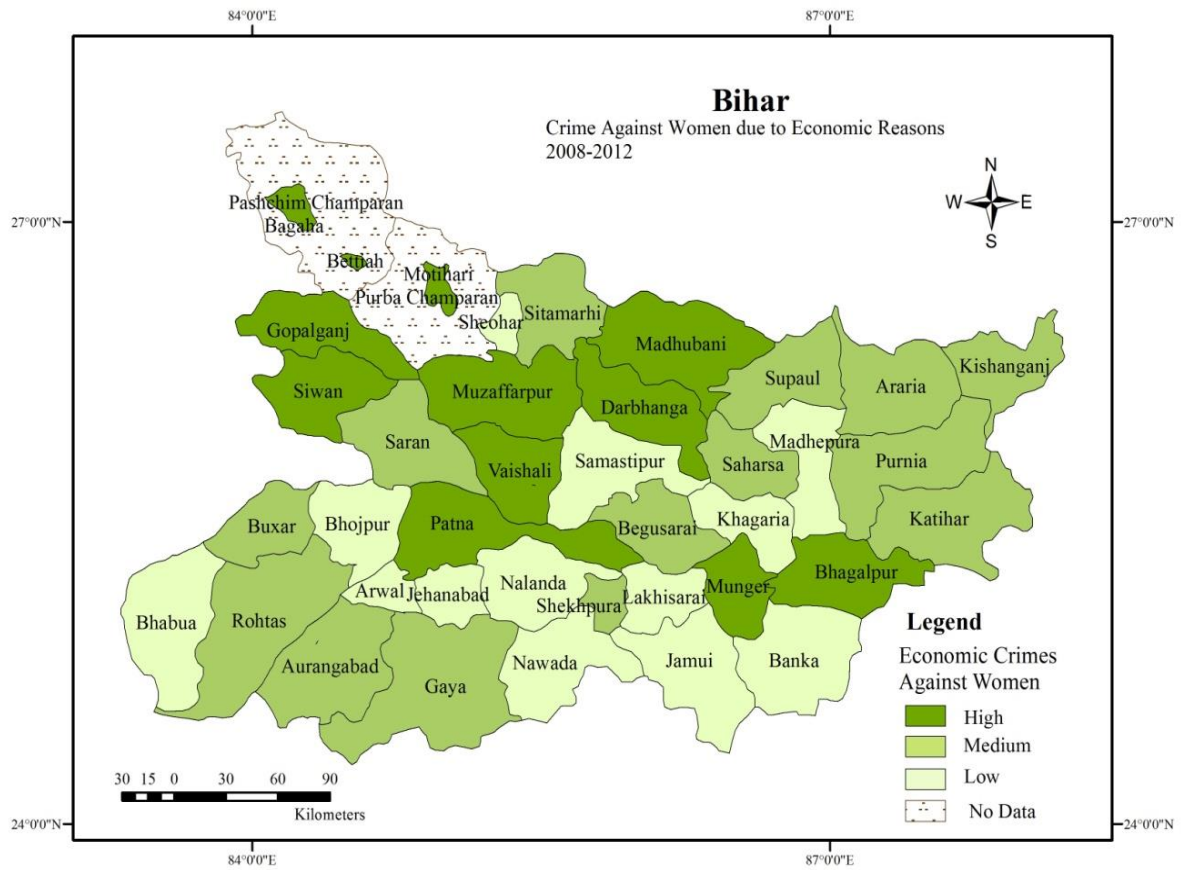
There are very few cases registered by the police by their own initiative, most cases are only reported after media attention and intervention. There is no suo-motto registration of cases by the police. There is a great delay in reporting of cases of missing girls this is because absence of a girl from home for a week is nothing unusual for the tribal girls. Often these girls leave their house without informing their parents. A girl not in home for a week or more is not something unusual. As a result, parents do not pay any attention say for a month or so when a girl is missing, they think she may be visiting a relative.

Trafficking in Eastern India has come to acquire a new dimension with demand for domestic help in urban metropolitan cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Patna, Mumbai, Chandigarh etc. Most of these cities have agencies which supply domestic workers to peoples home. Large number of these agencies are den of trafficking network and needs to be closely investigated for their role in supporting the exploitation of the victims.

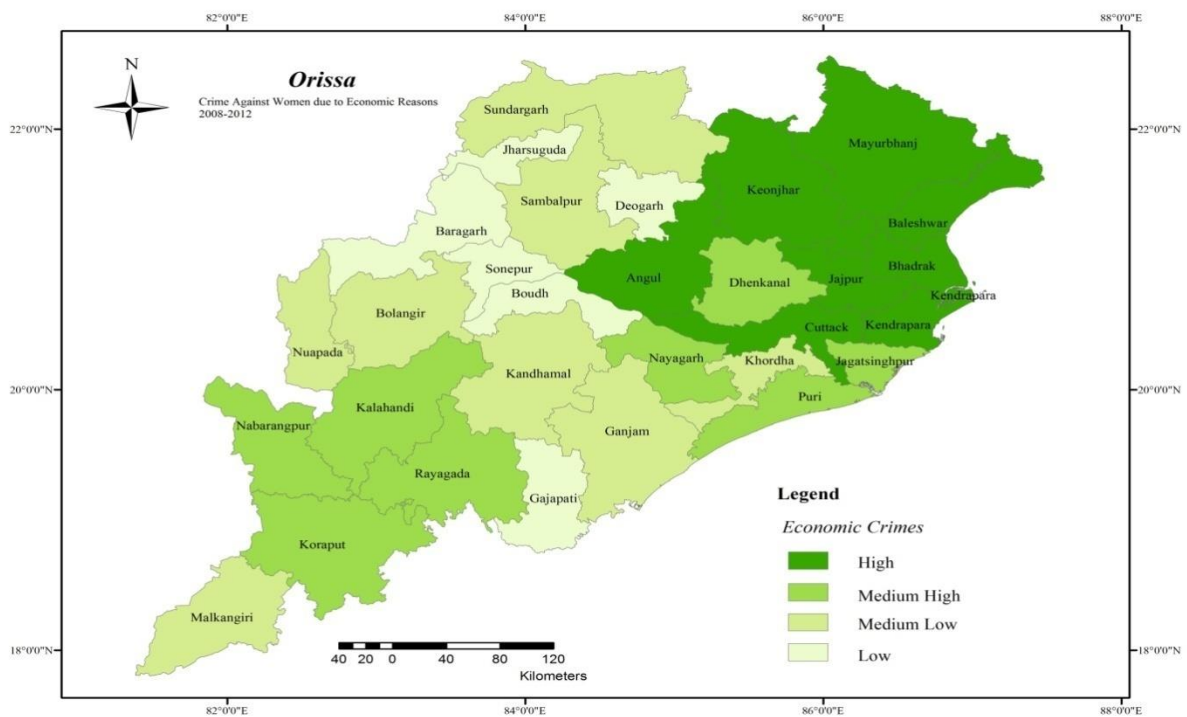
## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The processual approach towards trafficking highlights the actual processes and the causal factors

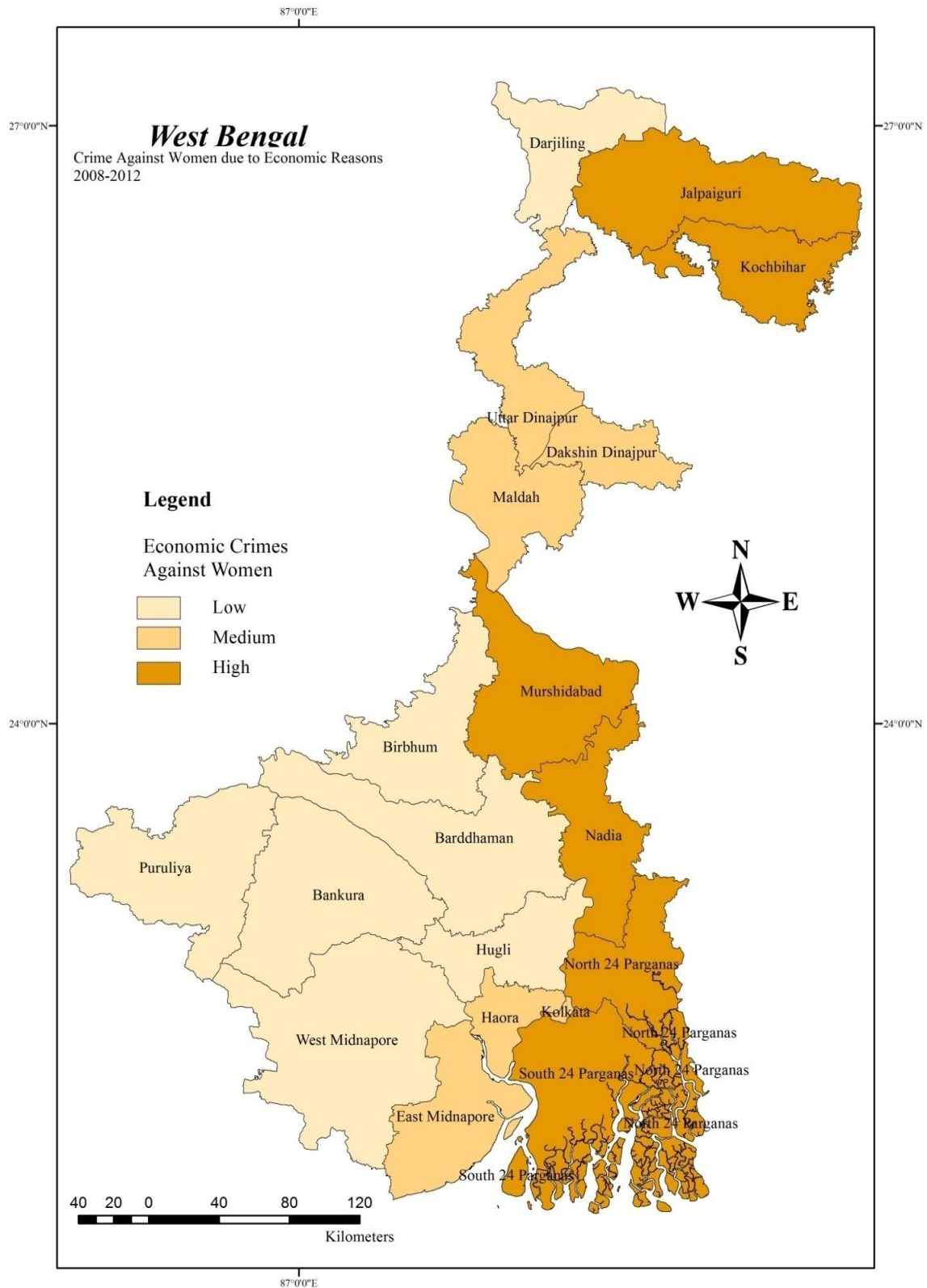
responsible for rising incidents of trafficking of women in Eastern India. Trafficking have been mainly viewed as a legal and law and order problem by the government agencies. In this article the focus have been on trafficking space and how various actors operates within the space and define its boundary. The space is created in the first place because of shrinking of traditional livelihood opportunities in the rural and tribal areas of the four states of Eastern India viz., Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. Because of destruction of natural resources like forest and water bodies, declining soil productivity has put the local population under a lot of economic hardship. This has affected marginalised families the most. Economic insecurity has multiplied the vulnerability of the women. The space thus created have been masterfully exploited by the unscrupulous traffickers. Although they belong to the same region they are much more exposed to the outside world after they had migrated to cities. These local agents are masterfully exploited by the main actors who are located in cities who form the the mainstay of the trafficking. They often work behind the scene through the local agents and even when the racket is busted they do not come to the notice of the law enforcement agencies. The second element which constitute the trafficking space is the missing information and awareness of the local people towards the social evil. Most victim fell prey to traffickers because they fail to discern the real intention behind the agents who entrap them. Cultural factors also constitute this space as often it was noticed that women in these areas have a poor social status and violence against women is quite common. The failure of the state machinery to check the menace is also a glaring indictment of its negligence. There is no viable strategy to rehabilitate the victims when they come back. The social ostracisation and the stigma pushes them again to their exploiters. However the most important factor in creating this vicious circle are the consumers who create this demand. It is recommended here that stringent laws should be instituted to change the unsafe nature of their work places. People need jobs, shrinking livelihood will push them to look for work somewhere else. Therefore work place safety and mechanisms to check the exploitation of women can only root out the problem. The same phenomenon which is a social evil can be blessing if the migration for jobs from rural and tribal areas are better regulated. They can help ease the pressure on the fragile livelihood systems in these areas and at the same time help people to come out of the vicious cycles of poverty and deprivation which tend to characterise their lives.



Map 1. District-wise distribution of Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363-373 IPC), Importation of girls (Sec. 366-B IPC) & Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956. (Bihar)



Map 2. District-wise distribution of Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363-373 IPC), Importation of girls (Sec. 366-B IPC) & Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956. (Odisha)



**Map 3. District-wise distribution of Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363-373 IPC), Importation of girls (Sec. 366-B IPC) & Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956. (West Bengal)**

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