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Dr. Nitesh Saraswat

E.MBA, LL.M, PH.D, PGDSAPM

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Subhrajit Chanda



BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); PH.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provide dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

BORDERS OF EXPLOITATION: MAPPING THE NEXUS OF HUMAN, WILDLIFE, AND NARCOTIC TRAFFICKING IN NORTH EAST INDIA

AUTHORED BY - RUCHI RAO & ADITYA SHANKAR ACHARYA

Abstract:

This paper investigates the escalating developments and systemic vulnerabilities of trafficking across North East India, a geo-politically sensitive location characterised with the aid of porous global borders, ethnic unrest, and socio-monetary disparities. It highlights the area's emergence as a important transit and foundation point for human trafficking—mainly concentrated on ladies, youngsters, and indigenous groups—for sexual exploitation, pressured hard work, or even recruitment into insurgent factions.

Parallel to human trafficking, the location has witnessed an alarming rise in unlawful wildlife alternate, with rare and endangered species smuggled to feed worldwide markets, undermining both ecological stability and biodiversity conservation norms. Moreover, the North East has developed right into a key conduit for narcotic smuggling and hands trafficking, with illicit networks exploiting weak border governance and go-border rebel linkages. This illicit financial system not handiest fuels local militancy but additionally sustains transnational crook operations.

The paper similarly explores the function of cash laundering in legitimizing trafficking proceeds, facilitated via unregulated monetary channels and shell entities. A principal concern diagnosed is the entrenchment of political-crook nexuses, in which nation actors are complicit—either passively or actively—in trafficking operations for non-public, monetary, or electoral benefit.

To counteract those layered challenges, the paper advocates for an included and multi-jurisdictional method encompassing inter-nation cooperation, advanced prison enforcement, regional intelligence sharing, economic monitoring, and community-based totally vigilance. It requires obvious governance mechanisms to dismantle entrenched interests and build

institutional resilience in the vicinity.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Wildlife Trafficking, Narcotics, Arms Smuggling, Money Laundering, North East India, Political-Criminal Nexus and Border Security

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Human trafficking constitutes one of the most severe violations of human rights, encompassing the illicit trade and exploitation of human beings through coercion, fraud, or force.

1.2 The crime is not limited to any particular demographic; men, women, and children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds can fall victim. Traffickers employ various deceptive means, including fraudulent employment agencies, false promises of education, and coercion through violence or threats, to subjugate victims for commercial or personal gain.

1.3 In the context of India, the North Eastern Region (NER) emerges as a particularly vulnerable area for trafficking activities due to its geographical location, porous international borders, socio-economic challenges, and historical insurgencies. The trafficking of human beings, wildlife, and narcotics constitutes one of the gravest transnational criminal challenges facing North East India today. Situated in a geo-politically sensitive region sharing international borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China, the North East serves as a strategic hub for both domestic and cross-border trafficking networks. The intricate interplay between poverty, ethnic conflict, porous borders, and weak law enforcement mechanisms has enabled traffickers to operate with alarming impunity.

2.1 United Nations Definition

2.1.1 According to the United Nations “Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.

¹2.2 Palermo Protocol / World Bank Interpretation

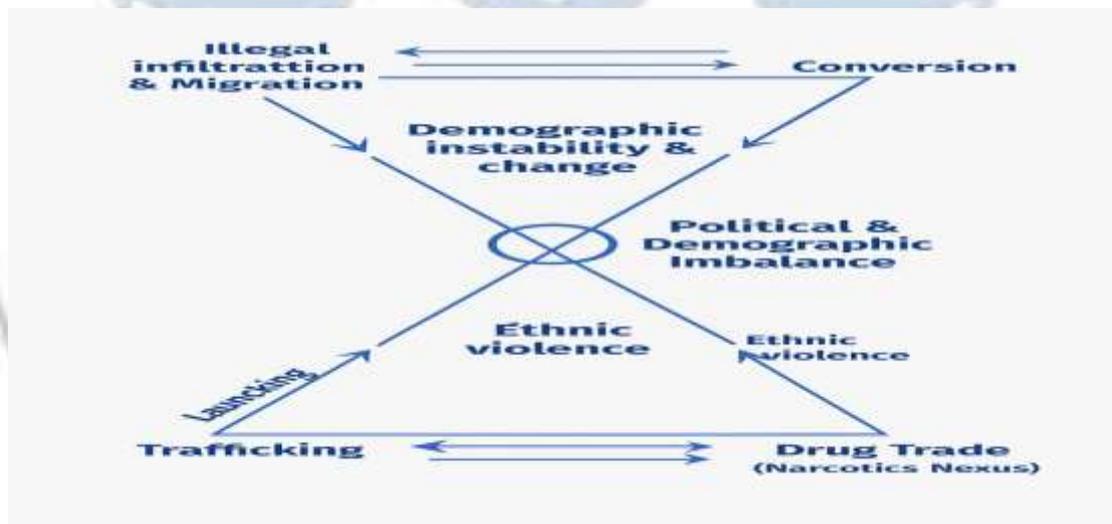
2.2.1 The Palermo Protocol, as referred to by the World Bank, defines trafficking as:

“Recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat

¹ ¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Human Trafficking, available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/>

or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or giving or receiving of payments to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.²

This research is based primarily on secondary data sources, including legislative texts, government reports, judicial pronouncements, and publications by international organisations. Case law analysis has been employed to evaluate the judicial interpretation of trafficking-related offences, while policy recommendations are informed by comparative legal perspectives and documented field realities. The paper focuses specifically on the North Eastern states of India—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. It examines the interlinked nature of human, wildlife, and narcotics trafficking within this regional context. Due to security concerns, logistical challenges, and the clandestine nature of trafficking operations, primary field research has been limited. The analysis thus relies on verified secondary sources and publicly available data, which may not capture the full scale of illicit activities.



HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Human trafficking continues to pose a serious challenge in North East India, particularly in states such as Assam and Manipur. According to the most recent publicly available *Crime in India (2021)* report by NCRB, the number of cases registered and persons arrested under human

² United Nations General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000.

trafficking across the North Eastern State was as follows: Assam reported **203 cases and 349 arrests**, Manipur **1 case and 7 arrests**, Meghalaya **1 case and 4 arrests**, with other states reporting negligible numbers.³ This underscores Assam's position as a key trafficking hot spot within the region. The overall trend aligns with UNODC and U.S. TIP reports, which emphasise that forced labour and sexual exploitation constitute approximately **43% and 33%** of trafficking cases in India, respectively.⁴

Drivers and Vulnerabilities

Structural socio-economic factors such as poverty, under-development, ethnic displacement, and unemployment serve as major push factors for vulnerable populations—especially women, children, and indigenous communities—pushing them into the hands of traffickers.⁵ Assam alone accounts for nearly **38% of India's child trafficking cases**, demonstrating the severity of the issue in the region.⁶ Conflict-affected districts and tribal communities, facing weakened community structures, are particularly at risk.⁷

Legal and Policy Responses

India has made legislative progress in addressing trafficking. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, revised **Sections 370 and 370A of the Indian Penal Code**, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) introduced **Sections 143 and 144** to define and punish trafficking.⁸ The **Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956** remains central to combating commercial sexual exploitation. The amendment of the **National Investigation Agency Act in 2019** allowed the NIA to directly investigate offences under these sections, enhancing federal investigatory reach.⁹

Empirically, the number of Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) in India has expanded to **827 across States and Union Territories**, including 15 units under BSF and 5 under SSB in

³ Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Details of Cases Reported and Persons Arrested under Human Trafficking in North Eastern States' (PIB Press Release, 21 March 2023) <https://www.pib.gov.in> accessed 4 April 2025.

⁴ United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2023: India Narrative* (2023) <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/india> accessed 4 April 2025.

⁵ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2021: Chapter on Human Trafficking* (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022); UNODC *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024* (Vienna: UNODC, 2024).

⁶ Wikipedia, 'Indian States Ranking by Incidents of Human Trafficking' (updated 2025) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_states_ranking_by_incidents_of_human_trafficking accessed 4 April 2025.

⁷ Rebant Juyal, 'Human Trafficking and North East India: Analysing Its Exploitative Impact' *GUINEIS Journal* Vol X (2023) 31–45.

⁸ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 3664 (2 April 2025)

⁹ Ibid

border areas.¹⁰ These institutional measures reflect efforts to institutionalise a victim-centric and inter-agency response.

In *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v Union of India* (2011) 5 SCC 1, the Supreme Court underscored state obligations to protect children from exploitation—including trafficking and forced labour. Similarly, *Gaurav Jain v Union of India* (1997) 8 SCC 114 emphasised the government's constitutional duty (Article 21) to rehabilitate adult sex workers, particularly trafficking survivors.¹¹ These judgments laid important jurisprudential foundations for victim protection frameworks.

India's cross-border human trafficking response has been bolstered through bilateral MoUs with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and UAE, and through multilateral involvement in instruments such as the **SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, 2002**.¹² At the global level, India remains bound by the **UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000)** and the UNCRC (1989), which mandate monitoring and protective obligations.¹³

3. Wildlife Trafficking and Environmental Impact

3.1 Overview of Wildlife Trafficking in North East India

The North Eastern region of India, comprising eight states, is globally recognised as a biodiversity hotspot. Its geographical proximity to the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity zone and the Eastern Himalayas makes it home to numerous rare and endangered species, including the one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), and pangolin (*Manis* spp.). However, this rich ecological diversity also attracts illegal wildlife traffickers. The region faces rampant poaching and smuggling activities that threaten the survival of these species.¹⁴

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹ *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v Union of India* (2011) 5 SCC 1; *Gaurav Jain v Union of India* (1997) 8 SCC 114.

¹² SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002).

¹³ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing UNTOC (2000); UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

¹⁴ Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, *Annual Report 2022-23* (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India, 2023) 15.

Wildlife trafficking in this region largely targets species for:

- Traditional medicine markets in China and Southeast Asia.
- Luxury goods and ornaments, such as rhino horn and ivory.
- Exotic pets for the illegal global pet trade.¹⁵

The illicit supply chains extend from Kaziranga National Park in Assam to cross-border corridors in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland, linking with Myanmar, China, and Southeast Asian markets.¹⁶

3.2 Case Study: 2023 Kaziranga Rhino Horn Bust

In May 2023, the Assam Forest Department and Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) seized rhino horns weighing over 8 kg during a joint operation near Bokakhat, adjacent to Kaziranga National Park. The investigation revealed the consignment was intended for cross-border smuggling via Nagaland into Myanmar. Intelligence linked the trafficking network to insurgent groups operating along the Indo-Myanmar border. The illegal trade's estimated proceeds exceeded ₹3 crore, highlighting the lucrative nature of wildlife trafficking in the region.¹⁷

3.3 Wildlife–Narcotics Trafficking Nexus

Investigations reveal that wildlife products and narcotics often share trafficking routes. In Manipur and Nagaland, seizures of pangolin scales have coincided with heroin consignments. Similarly, in Mizoram, methamphetamine tablets (locally called yaba) and exotic birds and reptiles are smuggled through the same corridors. This convergence allows traffickers to optimize logistics and exploit corrupt border officials, amplifying the complexity of enforcement.¹⁸

3.4 Link with Insurgency Funding and Money Laundering

Profits from wildlife trafficking increasingly fund insurgent operations in North East India. High-value commodities such as rhino horn make it an attractive revenue source for militant groups. Money laundering facilitates the integration of these illicit proceeds into the legitimate

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Assam Forest Department, 'Illegal Wildlife Trade in North East India' (2023) <https://assamforest.gov.in/reports/2023-wildlife-trafficking> accessed 5 August 2025.

¹⁷ Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, *Press Release: Rhino Horn Seizure Operation* (May 2023).

¹⁸ Narcotics Control Bureau, *Report on Narcotics and Wildlife Trafficking Linkages* (2023) 28.

economy through:

- Hawala/hundi informal transfer systems bypassing formal banking.
- Shell companies posing as exporters of forest products or handicrafts.
- Cash couriers transporting bulk currency across porous borders.¹⁹

This nexus between wildlife crime and insurgency financing presents a dual threat, undermining environmental conservation and national security.

3.5 Environmental and Biodiversity Impact

Wildlife trafficking seriously threatens ecological balance and biodiversity conservation:

- Removal of apex predators disrupts predator-prey dynamics.
- Poaching herbivores affects forest regeneration cycles.
- Reduced genetic diversity weakens ecosystem resilience to climate change.²⁰

Illegal wildlife trade jeopardizes decades of conservation efforts, including Project Tiger and Indian Rhino Vision 2020.²¹

3.6 Legal Framework

- *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972* prohibits hunting, trade, and possession of scheduled species, with penalties including imprisonment and fines.²²
- *Biological Diversity Act, 2002* regulates access to biological resources and associated knowledge.²³
- *Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA)* applies where wildlife trafficking proceeds are laundered.²⁴

International Conventions:

- *CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species)* regulates cross-border trade in endangered species.²⁵

¹⁹ C. Das, 'Insurgency Financing through Wildlife Trafficking in North East India,' (2024) 14 *Journal of Security Studies* 45, 52.

²⁰ K. Sharma, *Ecological Impacts of Wildlife Poaching in India* (Routledge, 2021) 103.

²¹ Indian Rhino Vision 2020, 'Conservation Achievements' (2024) <https://irv2020.org/conservation> accessed 5 August 2025.

²² Indian Rhino Vision 2020, 'Conservation Achievements' (2024) <https://irv2020.org/conservation> accessed 5 August 2025.

²³ Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, §§ 39, 50.

²⁴ Biological Diversity Act, 2002, §§ 3-7.

²⁵ Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, §§ 3, 4.

- *UNTOC (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime)* is applicable to organised wildlife trafficking.²⁶
- *CMS (Convention on Migratory Species)* protects migratory species from exploitation.²⁷

3.7 Recent Seizure Data (2023–2024)

- 2023: Over 5,000 kg of pangolin scales seized in Assam and Manipur combined.²⁸
- 2024 (till May): At least 11 rhino horns recovered from poaching incidents in Assam.²⁹
- Exotic pets including macaws, cockatoos, and pythons intercepted at Mizoram–Myanmar border points.³⁰

3.8 Enforcement Challenges

- Porous borders with Myanmar and Bhutan allow easy cross-border trafficking.³¹
- Corruption among local enforcement agencies hampers effective action.³²
- Limited forensic capacity for species identification and investigation.³³
- Low conviction rates due to weak prosecution and lack of witness protection.³⁴

4. Narcotics and Arms Trafficking

4.1 Overview of Narcotics Trafficking in North East India

The North Eastern region of India has become a critical transit and consumption zone for narcotics, primarily heroin, methamphetamine (locally known as yaba), and synthetic drugs. The region's proximity to the "Golden Triangle" — encompassing parts of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand — makes it vulnerable to drug trafficking networks.³⁵ The porous borders facilitate the smuggling of narcotics into India and onward to other domestic and international markets.

Narcotics trafficking has escalated significantly in states such as Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram,

²⁶ CITES, 1973, Art. I, II.

²⁷ United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000, Art. 3.

²⁸ Convention on Migratory Species, 1979, Art. II.

²⁹ Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, *Seizure Statistics 2023* (2024) 22.

³⁰ Assam Police, *Wildlife Crime Cases Report* (2024).

³¹ Mizoram Forest Department, *Wildlife Protection Bulletin* (May 2024).

³² S. Banerjee, 'Border Challenges in North East India' (2023) 8 *Asian Security Review* 67, 71.

³³ Transparency International India, *Corruption Report 2023* (2023) 35

³⁴ Wildlife Institute of India, *Forensic Science in Wildlife Crime* (2022) 14.

³⁵ Narcotics Control Bureau, *Annual Report 2023* (Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, 2023) 22.

and Arunachal Pradesh due to weak border controls, corruption, and insurgent groups' involvement.³⁶The availability of drugs has also led to a spike in addiction and related social issues within the local population.

4.2 Route and Methods

Drugs primarily enter through the Indo-Myanmar border, especially via Moreh (Manipur) and Zokhawthar (Mizoram). Smugglers exploit dense forests, unguarded checkpoints, and informal cross-border trade routes to move narcotics. The drugs are often concealed in vehicles, packaged with legitimate goods, or carried by human couriers known as “mules.”³⁷

Insurgent groups and criminal networks facilitate the storage, transportation, and distribution of narcotics. Some groups finance their operations through this illicit trade, blurring the lines between political insurgency and organized crime.³⁸

4.3 Arms Trafficking Nexus

Alongside narcotics, arms trafficking remains a major challenge. Illegal weapons, including small arms, ammunition, and explosives, flow into North East India from Myanmar and other neighbouring countries.³⁹ These arms fuel ongoing insurgencies and inter-ethnic conflicts, destabilising the region further.

The arms trade is often interlinked with narcotics trafficking, with weapons exchanged for drugs or profits used to procure more arms. The easy availability of arms exacerbates violence and lawlessness in the area.⁴⁰

4.4 Impact on Security and Society

The influx of narcotics and arms has profound implications for regional security and social fabric:

- Rising drug addiction contributes to public health crises and criminality.⁴¹

³⁶ R. Singh, 'Drug Trafficking and Insurgency Nexus in North East India' (2024) 10 *Indian Journal of Security Studies* 44, 49.

³⁷ Border Security Force, *Operational Report on Indo-Myanmar Border* (2023).

³⁸ K. Dasgupta, 'Funding Insurgency Through Narcotics in North East India' (2023) 7 *Journal of Conflict Studies* 33, 36.

³⁹ Ministry of Defence, *Report on Arms Smuggling in North East* (2023) 18.

⁴⁰ S. Banerjee, 'Arms and Narcotics Trafficking Linkages in North East India' (2024) 5 *Asian Security Review* 58, 62.

⁴¹ National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre, *Addiction Trends Report* (2023) 14.

- Armed insurgencies use trafficked arms to prolong conflicts, resulting in civilian casualties and displacement.⁴²
- Law enforcement agencies face increased challenges combating well-funded and armed criminal networks.⁴²

4.5 Legal Framework and Enforcement Efforts

India has enacted multiple laws to address narcotics and arms trafficking:

- *Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985* (NDPS Act) regulates control and prohibition of narcotics, with stringent penalties for trafficking.⁴³
- *Arms Act, 1959* and *Arms Rules, 2016* control possession, manufacture, and transfer of firearms.⁴⁴
- *Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967* (UAPA) targets insurgent groups involved in trafficking.⁴⁵

Enforcement agencies including the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), Border Security Force (BSF), and local police conduct regular operations. Joint efforts with Myanmar and Bangladesh through border coordination mechanisms have also intensified.⁴⁶

5. Money Laundering and the Political-Criminal Nexus

Money laundering serves as a crucial enabler for trafficking networks in North East India, facilitating the concealment and legitimization of proceeds derived from human trafficking, wildlife smuggling, narcotics, and arms trade. These illicit profits, often generated in cash-intensive, opaque transactions, require laundering to enter the formal economy. The laundering process thus ensures that traffickers can safely reinvest their earnings into expanding their criminal enterprises while avoiding detection by law enforcement agencies. In the context of North East India, the persistence of informal financial mechanisms, such as the hawala system, coupled with limited financial inclusion in rural and border areas, offers a conducive environment for these laundering activities.⁴⁷

The modus operandi of laundering in the region is multifaceted. Traffickers and their networks

⁴² Human Rights Watch, *Report on Conflict and Human Rights in North East India* (2022) 27.

⁴³ Assam Police, *Annual Crime Report 2023* (2024).

⁴⁴ Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, §§ 20-22.

⁴⁵ Arms Act, 1959, §§ 3, 25; Arms Rules, 2016.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Home Affairs, *Joint India-Myanmar Border Coordination Meeting Report* (2024).

⁴⁷ Financial Action Task Force, *Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Risks in South Asia* (2023) 15.

employ methods like smurfing, where large sums of money are broken into smaller deposits to evade regulatory scrutiny, and the use of front companies that simulate legitimate business transactions. The flow of funds often involves cross-border transfers through informal channels, complicating the tracing efforts of Indian authorities. Real estate investments, gold purchases, and trade-based laundering via inflated or falsified invoices further obscure the origins of these illicit proceeds, creating layers of complexity.⁴⁸ These mechanisms not only hinder enforcement efforts but also strain the regulatory frameworks tasked with ensuring financial transparency and accountability.

A deeply troubling aspect of trafficking in North East India is the intertwining of criminal syndicates with political actors, forming what is commonly referred to as the political-criminal nexus. Evidence from investigative reports and judicial inquiries suggests that certain politicians and bureaucrats, motivated by personal financial gain or electoral advantage, tacitly or overtly support trafficking operations. This alliance allows traffickers to operate with relative impunity, shielded from legal consequences and benefiting from patronage networks that facilitate their activities.⁴⁹ The political-criminal nexus undermines democratic governance, erodes public trust in state institutions, and perpetuates cycles of corruption and criminality. This collusion manifests in several ways: traffickers may fund political campaigns, provide illicit benefits to influential leaders, or leverage connections within law enforcement and judiciary to stall investigations. Such patronage systems not only sustain trafficking but also complicate efforts to dismantle these networks. Political protection can translate into interference in ongoing investigations, selective enforcement of laws, or the manipulation of administrative mechanisms to favor traffickers. The erosion of the rule of law in this manner impedes the delivery of justice and fuels public cynicism about state responsiveness to trafficking issues.⁵⁰

The implications of this nexus extend beyond governance into the realms of security and social stability.⁵¹ The entrenchment of criminal-political alliances exacerbates corruption, weakening institutional capacity to combat trafficking and related crimes effectively. It fosters an environment where traffickers can continue their operations unabated, financing insurgencies

⁴⁸ Reserve Bank of India, *Report on Hawala and Informal Value Transfer Systems* (2022) 10.

⁴⁹ Securities and Exchange Board of India, *Annual Report 2023* 24.

⁵⁰ Enforcement Directorate, *Case Studies on Money Laundering* (2023) 18-20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

and violent conflicts that further destabilize the region. The competition among rival groups over trafficking routes and proceeds often results in violent confrontations, creating an atmosphere of insecurity that undermines development and human rights.⁵²

From a legal perspective, India has established a robust framework aimed at combating money laundering through enactments such as the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA), which empowers⁵³ investigative agencies to track, seize, and prosecute laundering offenses. The Enforcement Directorate (ED), in coordination with other agencies, is tasked with enforcing these laws. Additionally, anti-corruption bodies like the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), Lokayuktas,⁵⁴ and auditing institutions such as the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) monitor governance and financial integrity. However, despite these institutional frameworks, enforcement is often hindered by limited inter-agency coordination, resource constraints, and political interference.⁵⁵

While the Election Commission of India⁵⁶ has introduced reforms to increase transparency in political funding, including mandates for disclosure and caps on contributions, challenges persist in curbing illicit financing linked to trafficking syndicates. The lack of comprehensive oversight allows for the perpetuation of opaque funding mechanisms that sustain the political-criminal nexus. Civil society organizations and media have played a vital role in exposing corruption and trafficking links, but sustained institutional reforms and capacity building remain necessary to address the root causes.⁵⁷

In sum, money laundering and the political-criminal nexus represent systemic challenges that are deeply embedded in the trafficking economy of North East India. These elements enable traffickers to flourish by shielding illicit operations⁵⁸ from scrutiny and embedding criminality within formal political and economic structures. Addressing trafficking in the region thus requires not only robust law enforcement but also significant governance reforms to dismantle these nexus points and restore institutional integrity. Only through such comprehensive

⁵²Transparency International India, *Political Corruption and Organized Crime* (2023) 36.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, *Governance Challenges in North East India* (2022) 27.

⁵⁴ S. Chatterjee, 'Political-Criminal Nexus and its Impact on Security in North East India' (2024) 9 *Journal of Governance and Policy* 55, 60.

⁵⁵ Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, §§ 3-7.

⁵⁶ Election Commission of India, *Report on Political Funding Reforms* (2023).

⁵⁷ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Report on Enforcement Agencies* (2023) 12.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Personnel, *Whistleblower Protection Scheme* (2022).

measures can the cycle of trafficking and corruption be effectively broken, leading to sustainable peace and development. The North East region of India is uniquely complex, characterized by its ethnic diversity, porous borders with multiple countries, and longstanding insurgencies.⁵⁹ Over the past decade, it has become increasingly apparent that the trafficking crisis here is not merely a law enforcement issue but deeply intertwined with socio-political structures and governance deficits.

The nexus between politicians, bureaucrats, and criminal syndicates involved in trafficking often reflects local power dynamics⁶⁰ shaped by ethnic allegiances, insurgent patronage, and socio-economic marginalization. Many tribal and indigenous communities, historically sidelined in mainstream governance, find themselves caught between state actors and non-state armed groups. This creates a fertile environment where trafficking networks exploit both institutional weaknesses and community vulnerabilities.⁶¹

6. Integrated and Multi-Jurisdictional Approach to Combat Trafficking in North East India

The complex and multi-layered nature of trafficking in North East India necessitates an integrated and multi-jurisdictional response that transcends traditional law enforcement paradigms. Effective counter-trafficking measures must combine international cooperation, enhanced border security, intelligence sharing, community participation, and governance reforms to dismantle trafficking networks and address their root causes⁶².

Inter-State and International Cooperation

Given the porous borders shared by North East India with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China, trafficking operations often⁶³ exploit cross-border vulnerabilities. These boundaries are frequently inadequately monitored due to geographical remoteness, limited infrastructure, and socio-political sensitivities related to ethnic populations straddling borders. To address this, states in the region must collaborate closely with neighboring countries through formal treaties, joint patrols, and intelligence exchange frameworks. Regional forums such as the South Asian

⁵⁹ Enforcement Directorate, *Challenges in Detecting Money Laundering* (2023)

⁶⁰ Ministry of Home Affairs, *Inter-Agency Coordination Framework* (2024).

⁶¹ Supreme Court of India, *Judicial Reforms for Fast-Track Courts* (2023).

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⁶³ Financial Action Task Force, *Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Risks in South Asia* (2023) 15.

Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) offer platforms to bolster cooperation on trafficking issues, sharing best practices, and coordinating enforcement efforts.⁶⁴

Strengthening Border Management

Modernizing border infrastructure with the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies, including biometric scanners, drones, and integrated data systems, can enhance detection and prevention of trafficking across the region. Training border personnel to identify trafficking indicators and empowering them with rapid response protocols is vital. Additionally, establishing dedicated anti-trafficking units within border security forces with jurisdictional clarity can improve operational efficiency.⁶⁵ Equally important is addressing the socio-economic conditions of border communities who may otherwise be vulnerable or complicit in trafficking due to lack of alternatives.

Regional Intelligence Sharing and Law Enforcement Coordination

Trafficking networks operate across multiple jurisdictions, often adapting quickly to enforcement actions. Therefore, seamless intelligence sharing among law enforcement agencies across states and with central agencies such as the National Investigation Agency (NIA),⁶⁶ the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is imperative. Establishing integrated databases and joint task forces specializing in human trafficking, wildlife crime, and narcotics smuggling can facilitate coordinated operations.⁶⁷ Cross-training law enforcement personnel to handle the specific challenges⁶⁸ of trafficking, including victim identification, trauma-informed investigation techniques⁶⁹, and legal provisions, improves prosecution outcomes. Enhancing judicial sensitization through specialized courts or fast-track mechanisms also helps deliver timely justice to victims.

Community-Based Vigilance and Empowerment

Sustainable anti-trafficking strategies require active involvement of local communities who

⁶⁴ Enforcement Directorate, *Case Studies on Money Laundering* (2023) 18-20.

⁶⁵ Transparency International India, *Political Corruption and Organized Crime* (2023) 36.

⁶⁶ S. Chatterjee, 'Political-Criminal Nexus and its Impact on Security in North East India' (2024) 9 *Journal of Governance and Policy* 55, 60.

⁶⁷ Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, §§ 3-7; Central Vigilance Commission Annual Report (2023)

⁶⁸ Election Commission of India, *Report on Political Funding Reforms* (2023).

⁶⁹ Election Commission of India, *Report on Political Funding Reforms* (2023).

serve as both frontline observers and protectors against trafficking. Community-based vigilance committees, supported by NGOs and local governments, can facilitate early detection of trafficking activities. Awareness campaigns targeting vulnerable groups—especially women, children, and indigenous populations—must be culturally sensitive and accessible in local languages. Education and vocational training programs empower potential victims with alternatives to trafficking-induced exploitation.⁷⁰

Furthermore, involving traditional community leaders and village councils in surveillance and victim rehabilitation integrates indigenous knowledge systems with formal legal mechanisms, fostering trust and cooperation.

Governance and Institutional Reforms

Addressing trafficking demands strengthening institutional governance to counter corruption, improve transparency, and enhance responsiveness. Establishing independent monitoring bodies to oversee anti-trafficking efforts and ensure accountability reduces opportunities for political-criminal collusion. Capacity building for administrative and judicial officers, coupled with enhanced funding for victim support services, is critical.

Investment in data collection and research provides evidence-based insights to tailor interventions and track progress. Legislative reforms that harmonize anti-trafficking laws with international conventions and incorporate comprehensive victim protection measures are essential for legal efficacy.

Holistic Victim-Centered Approaches

Victim rehabilitation requires holistic approaches encompassing physical and psychological care, legal assistance, skill development, and social reintegration. Multi-stakeholder collaborations involving government agencies, healthcare providers, legal aid organizations, and civil society can develop comprehensive support systems. Special attention is needed for children, survivors of sexual exploitation, and trafficked persons with disabilities to address their unique needs.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Governance Challenges in North East India* (2022) 27.

⁷¹ P. Singh, *Ethnicity and Governance in North East India* (2018) 112-115.

7. Recommendations for Combating Trafficking in North East India

Addressing the complex and entrenched problem of trafficking in North East India requires a multifaceted, coordinated, and sustained strategy that engages multiple stakeholders at the local, national, and international levels. Firstly, strengthening border security and infrastructure is critical. Given the porous and rugged borders, investment in advanced surveillance technologies such as biometric identification systems, drones, and electronic monitoring can greatly enhance detection and deterrence of trafficking activities.

Secondly, fostering enhanced inter-state and international cooperation is vital due to the transnational nature of trafficking networks.

Addressing the socio-economic root causes of trafficking is equally imperative. Sustainable development initiatives aimed at improving education, vocational training, healthcare, and employment opportunities—particularly for women, children, and indigenous populations—can reduce vulnerability to trafficking by providing viable alternatives and economic empowerment. Community-based programs that engage local leaders, NGOs, and civil society organizations in awareness campaigns and prevention efforts can enhance public vigilance and build grassroots resistance against traffickers. Education initiatives tailored to rural and tribal populations, with culturally sensitive messaging in local languages, will increase understanding of trafficking risks and legal rights.

8. Conclusion

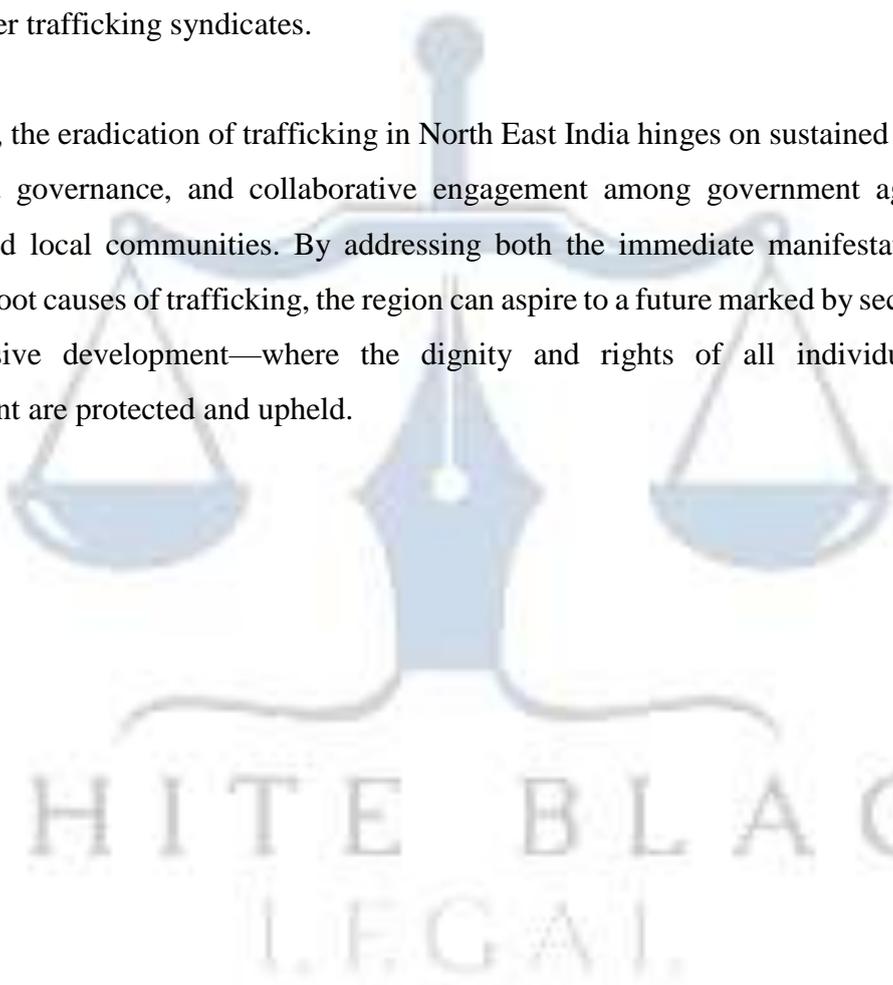
Trafficking in human beings, wildlife, and narcotics in North East India represents a deeply complex and persistent challenge that undermines the region's social fabric, ecological integrity, and security landscape. The unique geopolitical vulnerabilities—porous borders, ethnic diversity, insurgencies, and socio-economic disparities—have allowed trafficking networks to entrench themselves, exploiting the region's marginalized populations and natural resources for illicit gain. The interwoven nature of trafficking with political complicity and organized crime exacerbates the difficulty of mounting an effective response.

Addressing this multidimensional problem requires more than law enforcement alone. It demands a holistic, multi-sectoral approach that integrates robust border management, legal reforms, enhanced international cooperation, and institutional accountability. Equally

important are grassroots-level interventions focused on education, awareness, economic empowerment, and community participation to reduce vulnerabilities and foster resilience against exploitation.

Victim-centered policies and rehabilitation mechanisms must be prioritized to restore dignity and facilitate recovery, while simultaneously dismantling the economic foundations of trafficking through effective financial monitoring and anti-corruption efforts. Regional cooperation frameworks should be strengthened to ensure seamless coordination in tackling cross-border trafficking syndicates.

Ultimately, the eradication of trafficking in North East India hinges on sustained political will, transparent governance, and collaborative engagement among government agencies, civil society, and local communities. By addressing both the immediate manifestations and the structural root causes of trafficking, the region can aspire to a future marked by security, justice, and inclusive development—where the dignity and rights of all individuals and the environment are protected and upheld.



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