Understanding the Hidden Aspects of Sex Trafficking of Girl Children in Central India

Usha Rana

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By Usha Rana[1]

Abstract

This study examines the deep-rooted socio-cultural practices of institutional prostitution, which is one of the factors contributing to sex trafficking in Central India. There are some states where women and girls are vulnerable to trafficking. The Honorable Supreme Court of India became aware of the issue and directed the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to make a special report on the missing women and children. According to the NCRB report, Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) state ranks first in child trafficking and third in women's trafficking. The study discusses traditional prostitution practices among some communities in the state, such as Banchhada, Bedia, and Kanjar. They have long been involved in institutional prostitution and sex trafficking. These communities depend on prostitution proceeds from their sisters and daughters to survive. So, they prepare them to become prostitutes right from the beginning of their lives. Communities justify their practices as the traditions and customs of their culture. This study uses secondary and primary data to understand and analyze the hidden factors of culture-based prostitution and trafficking in Central India. The study's findings address the unconscious practices of communities that are responsible for the means of unconventional survival. Various parameters, including poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, have contributed to these crimes.

Keywords: Banchhada, Bedia, Families, Kanjar, Kinships, Prostitution, Sex work, Trafficking, Women

Introduction

The Honorable Supreme Court (SC) of India ordered the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to examine the data of missing persons since 2019, particularly children and women in the country. As per the SC directives, the NCRB prepared a detailed report based on crime data for three years (i.e., 2016, 2017, and 2018). The report is titled "Report on Missing Women and Children in India". The report is replete with distressing data on missing women and children in the country. This data has been used for programmes promoting the prevention of women and child trafficking, the rehabilitation of sex workers/prostitutes who wanted to leave sex work, and improving conditions for sex workers who wished to continue, to live with dignity. However, there are some states in the country where the situation is becoming worse with regards to missing women and children (NCRB, 2019). In addition, open literature discusses the primary factors including socio-economic and cultural factors behind this crime (Hameed et al., 2010; ILO & UNICEF, 2009; Warhurst et al., 2011). Sex trafficking is rife in most Indian states.

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[1] Usha Rana is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Work in Dr. Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Sagar, MP, India, and she is pursuing her Ph.D. from the same Department. She received M.A. and M.Phil. degrees in Sociology from Jiwaji University, Gwalior, MP, India, in 2006 and 2010, respectively. She is a member of the International Sociological Association, and Life Member of the Indian Sociological Society and IAWS. Her research interests are cultural studies, gender studies, and prostitution.

Human trafficking is the third-highest emerging crime; it is a multibillion business industry around the world (Ghosh, 2009; Greenbaum et al., 2018; ECPAT, 2018; UNODC, 2018; US Department of State, 2019). As a result, international organizations have strived to enact laws and regulations to control this crime. In November 2000, the Palermo Protocols were adopted by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime to impede, vanquish, and penalize human trafficking. These protocols elucidate the trafficking in persons as:

> "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for exploitation".

Furthermore, in terms of human rights, exploitation included the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs (United Nations Human Rights, 2000).

According to the NCRB report on 'missing persons on crime in India', the number of persons missing in 2016, 2017, and 2018 were 290,439, 305,267, and 347,524, respectively. The United States declared that India again retained Tier 2 status among the member countries in the list of *Human Trafficking in Persons Report 2019* (US Department of State, 2019). It argues that the state is unable to reach the minimum measures for eradication, which indicates failure on the part of government. The increment in the rate of trafficking demonstrates the lack of state wills because India has been retaining the same status since 2012, and before that, it was part of *Tier 2 Watch List 2* (Ghosh, 2009). However, the government is claiming that to retain such status, they took several efforts, and they have been aiming to achieve a better future. In order to support its claim, the government examined the crime data among all states reported by the NCRB. Maharashtra state retained the first position in missing women, followed by West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) while M.P. was placed first in missing children from 2016 to 2018, followed by West Bengal and Bihar. The contributing factors for this scenario in these states may be ascribed to their socio-economic and cultural conditions. This issue acquired significant attention in the arena of social sciences, particularly in sociology, to understand the situation at the micro-level in a different location, time, and culture across the country. Accordingly, this paper explores cultural conditions as hidden aspects of trafficking in M.P. state of Central India.

Review of the Literature

Human trafficking is growing within countries and as a borderless organized crime. Developing and under-developing countries have become the primary locations of transit points as well as destinations for traffickers. Asian countries have been facing more trouble due to poor socio-economic, political, and cultural backgrounds (Lee, 2005). Although the world is trying to control the problem, several international and national organizations, governments, and non-government organizations are cooperating for action (Camp et al. 2018; MacKinnon, 2012). However, the core of this problem is that trafficking is a highly secretive and esoteric business. Therefore, human trafficking remains often under-reported and untraced. Despite the United Nations Global Sustainable Goals calling for collective development goals to demand a better world for all, the rate of trafficking cases are increasing every day across the world. The United

Nations office on drugs and crime UNODC (UNODC, 2018) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that traffickers exploit 77% of all victims in the victims' countries of residence. Additionally, UNODC showed, based on ILO data on sex-trafficking, that victims have probably faced more cross-country trafficking, while victims of forced labor mostly faced more exploitation in their country of residence (UNODC, 2018).

Trafficking victims can be men, women, girls, and boys, but notably, the 2016 UNODC global report segregated data on the gender base and found that 71% of trafficked victims were women and girls while only 29% were men and boys. Women and girls are usually trafficked for sexual slavery, marriage, and domestic work, while men and boys are trafficked into exploitative labor (Sutinah & Kinuthia, 2019). However, India has been recognized as an origin, transit, and destination location for the trafficking of adolescent girls for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). There is common acknowledgment that the major part of trafficked girls for CSE belong from the origin country of trafficked itself rather than from abroad. Cross-nation trafficking is almost 10% from India, while interstate trafficking within India comprises 89% (Asian Development Bank, 2003; US Department of State, 2019).

India is a big market for sex-trade due to it being a developing country. Despite this trend, women and girls are treated as consumer goods in India. There are several factors, including patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy, and some social malpractices that encourage the whole environment for trafficking in the country (Ghosh, 2009; Chelliah, 2010; Mehta & Bhattacharya, 2017). Patriarchal social structures have been responsible for the downfall of the sex ratio in the country, which caused an increase in female feticide, discrimination, and gender-based violence. Because of this country-wide trend, girls and women are increasingly exploited by traffickers for forceful marriage (Ghosh, 2009; 2014). In some cases, poor families themselves sold their daughters for marriages and for work through agents in foreign countries. On another front, sex tourism is a new rising component in India alongside girl-child trafficking. Moreover, many locations are providing sex services to clients outside the country, such as Thailand. States such as Goa, Kochi, and Kerala, as well as other tourist destinations are also becoming centers inside the country for sex services.

Although India has been recognized as a transit destination for women and child trafficking, the government has not taken any appropriate action to equalize the gender gap, which provides substantial grounds for trafficking (US Department of State, 2017; 2018; and 2019). Studies show that gender bias is a notable contributing factor to the sex-trade (Moussa, 2008; Jani & Felke 2015). There was a significant study based on world development indicators (WDI) in which 42 participants who were trafficked in sex-servitude from India were undertaken by Jani & Felke (2015). They showed that augmentation in the gender gap in the South Asian region created an upper level of discrimination and violence in society, which reinforced existing patriarchal norms. The study recommended immediate intervention to control gender biases in society to reduce trafficking and prostitution. The Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India reported that the NCRB identified a total of 11,212 victims exploited into the forced labor, 7,570 victims trafficked for sexual exploitation, 3,824 victims trafficked in an unspecified manner, and 349 sold into forced marriages (US Department of State, 2018). Overall, there are 2.8 million sex workers in India, out of which more than 50% were trafficked and 35% of them entered into the trade before the age of 18. Another significant study advocated that gender inequality can be considered as a push factor for trafficking (Agustín, 2003), thus supporting the trend that often women are victims of trafficking in patriarchal societies (O'Connor & Healy, 2006). In the context of rural India, gender is considered as a significant factor for discrimination.

Women come under the control of social ethics, which is issued by society against them (Anderson & Davidson, 2004).

Figure 1 below shows the child trafficking status of states in India. Madhya Pradesh leads the list of missing children (71% of total missing children are girls and the rest are boys), followed by West Bengal, Delhi, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and others.

Research Methodology

This paper deals with some of the hidden socio-cultural factors of sex trafficking in central India, particularly in M.P. state. This study derives a conceptual understanding of sex trafficking in Central India, based on primary and secondary data. Two case studies are also included in this study as primary sources of data. The primary data based on case studies have been collected from the field by visiting two semi-governmental agencies located in Patharia village, Sagar district, and Morena district. The semi-government agencies are working towards rooting out institutional prostitution in M.P. The primary data has been analyzed into two parts. First, a series of interactions with relevant questions regarding the agency's establishment, about their history, progress, contribution, and the number of the beneficiaries, were done during fieldwork. Second, the variable-oriented approach was adopted, and the replications of data was avoided to ensure the study's validity and reliability. The scholarly contributions and reports from international, national, and non-governmental organizations have significantly contributed to collecting secondary data. Furthermore, the cases of trafficking in central India reported by national newspapers have also been included in this study. The secondary data has been analyzed and evaluated by extracting the relevant qualitative and quantitative data from secondary sources related to the study subject.


Madhya Pradesh (M.P.): State Profile

There are 28 states and 8 union territories in India. Some of them have good socio-economic status and well-developed infrastructure, but many states are facing challenges. M.P. is the 5th most populous state with 72.6 million people, which represents 6% of the total population of India. Historically, M.P. is known as a sick state, forming part of the BIMARU [3] (The Times of India, 2015a). However, M.P. has the 10th largest state economy in India. Still, it ranked 32nd in the human development index among the Indian states and union territory, which relegates it to low socio-economic status. As per the 2011 census, the sex ratio in MP is 931. The state sex ration is below the national average of 940. The literacy rate of males is 79% and females 59%. The state literacy rate is below that in comparison to the national average literacy rate, which is 83% for males and 65% for females (Census of India, 2011).

Madhya Pradesh (M.P.): Status of Females

According to the National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4)[4], the status of females in M. P. is pitiable. 33% of married women have experienced physical or sexual violence. Moreover, the desire for a male child may be indicated by the fact that six out of ten women who have only daughters have a desire for more children compared to those who had an only male child. NFHS-4 also reveals that 32.4 % of women were married before reaching the age of 18, compared to 38.6 % of women from rural areas who were married before reaching the age of 18. Currently, 23.2% of girls above the age of 10 are in state schools, but most of them drop out of schools at the

secondary level. The infant mortality rate (IMR) is 51 out of 1,000, while the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) is 65 out of 1,000. The state has the highest cases of feticide, which is 30% of the country (The Times of India, 2015b). The 2011 census unveiled that only 33% of women from MP are participating in the workforce (Census of India, 2011).

Figure 1: State-wise Distribution of a Number of Missing Children in India from 2016 to 2018 based on NCRB Report 2019 on Missing Women and Children in India.
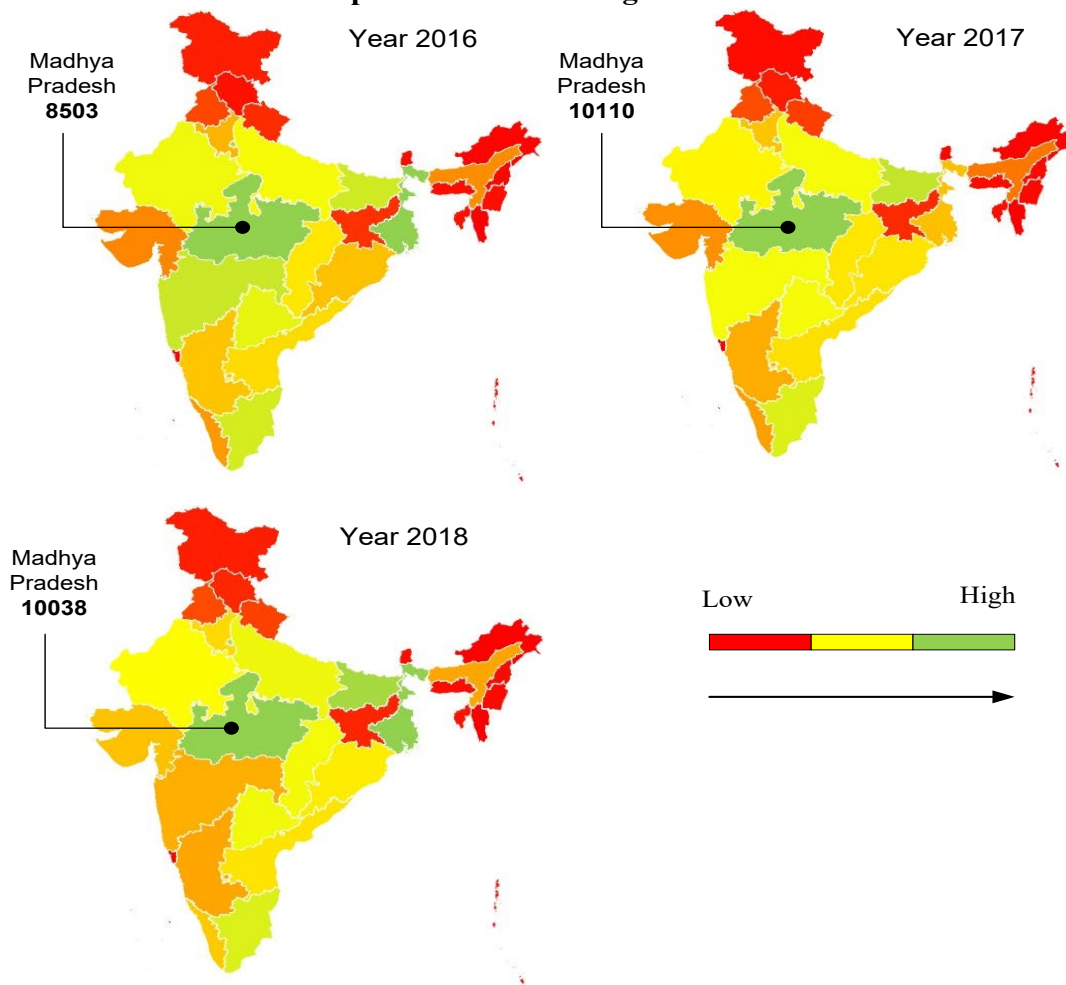
The above alarming demographical profile of women in the state is a consequence of its social structure and cultural practices, which are based on discrimination. This can be understood with the help of NCRB data: the MP state accounted for a total of 5,433 rape cases in 2018, which is 16%, and the MP state overtook those on the list of states where most cases of rapes were registered in the country. This is followed by 5,562 cases in 2017, while 4,882 rape cases were reported in 2016 (India Today, 2020). According to a report on Missing Women and Children in India, the state secured a top position in child trafficking and third place in women trafficking in the country (NCRB, 2019). As shown in Figure 1, M.P. state is involved in trafficking to England, the Gulf States, Korea, and the Philippines. The state has also reported that 25 persons on an average disappeared each day between 2010 and 2015. It is noticeable that 60% of this figure was girls, and most of them were untraced (Hindustan Times, 2016; The Hindu, 2020; The Economic

Times, 2020). Figures 2 and 3 present the district-wide distribution of a number of missing children in M.P since 2017 and 2018.

Understanding of Harmful Socio-cultural Local Practices and Trafficking in M.P.

Cultural practices play a significant role in formatting a society or country, but traffickers have been using these practices as a weapon to cover-up their malpractices and present themselves as a savior of their culture and traditions. The Palermo Protocol clearly explained that exceptions cannot be made to the criminalization requirement based on cultural variations. Governments must examine how traffickers may exploit cultural practices to conduct criminal activities. In some cases, traffickers may take advantage of religious beliefs to coerce victims into servitude, and it is important that governments seek help from and offer support to cultural and religious leaders taking strides to protect their communities from human traffickers. There are some illustrations like "juju oath" (Watt & Kruger, 2017), a religious practice of community-based prostitution and trafficking in Nigeria. They practice community-based prostitution and trafficking in Nigeria. It is a psychological way of controlling the women in prostitution and is much stronger than any violence that can be done to them. Many countries in South Asia face the practice of debt bondage, a form of human trafficking in which traffickers use debt to force an individual into forced labor (US Department of State, 2019).

Figure 2: District-wide Distribution of a Number of Missing Children in M.P in 2017 based on NCRB Report 2019 on Missing Women and Children in India.

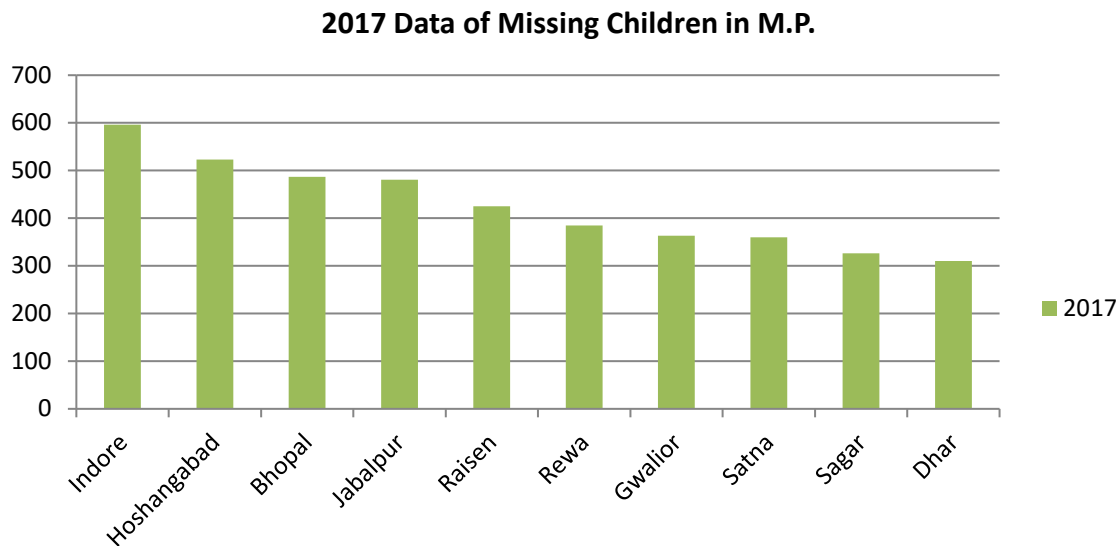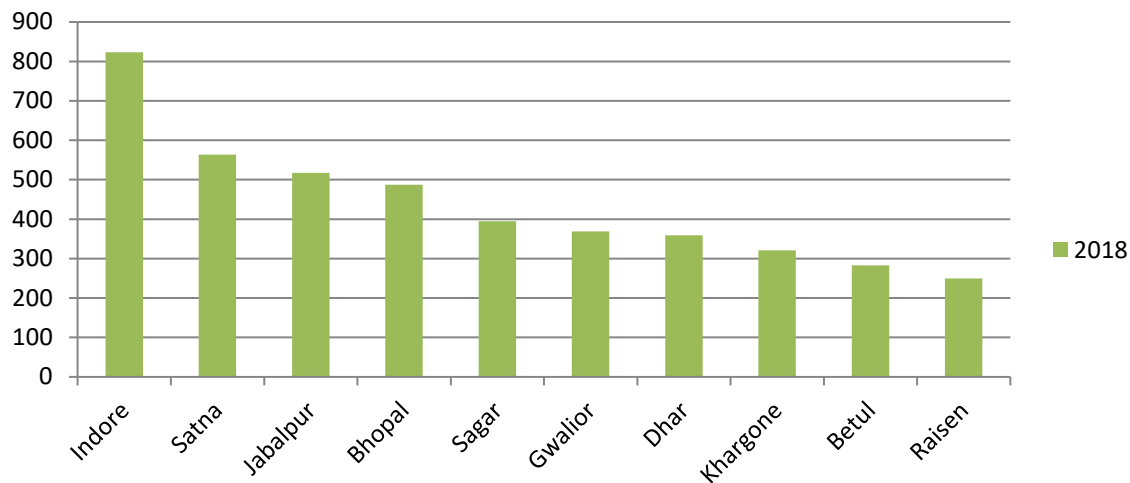**2017 Data of Missing Children in M.P.**

Figure 3: District-wide Distribution of a Number of Missing Children in M.P in 2018 based on NCRB Report 2019 on Missing Women and Children in India.

2018 Data of Missing Children in M.P.

In India, the ancient practice of Devadasi or Joginis continues even today. The term Devadasi or Joginis is derived from the Sanskrit language, which literally translates to the "female slave of God". In the devadasi traditional system, adolescent girls from lower caste are "married" to Hindu deities, and upper caste individuals and temple patrons sexually exploit them in the name of God and tradition. Bachhada, Bedia, and khanjar communities are 'denotified' communities of central India, inhabited in the three major states, including Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. The term 'denotified' was used as emblematic to refer the communities or groups by the British government during British rule in India who were involved in criminal activities. The traditional prostitution is the means of survival for these communities, and their daughters and sisters are their sources of livelihood (ActionAid[1], 2008; India Today, 2016; Rana et al. 2020[a]). After the seven decades of independent India, these communities could not reach the mainstream of development. They depended on prostitution for survival. In these communities, women neither marry nor live normal lives; they are introduced to prostitution between 13-15 by their fathers and brothers. They are exploited for sex trafficking and victimized by institutional practices. A notable work illustrated that these communities use women/girls' bodies for family survival (Agarwal, 2008). The male of such communities preserved their wives' chastity and justified the involvement of their sisters and daughters into prostitution as normal. Studies reveal that men of the community are lethargic, not contributing as they should to family income (Agarwal, 2008). However, such a contradiction can be seen in their social structure, which creates several questions. In the following sections, a brief discussion on the understanding of their social structure is provided.

Banchhada Community

Banchhada community is spread over seventy-five villages in the three districts Ratlam, Mandsaur, and Neemuch of M.P., and their total population is about 23,000, of which at least 65% are women. They survive on family-based prostitution and consider the birth of a girl auspicious as it means another breadwinner for the family. The girl who enters into prostitution is known as *khilawadis* (one who plays). A survey conducted by the Women Empowerment Department, Government of M.P. in 2015 in 38 villages in Mandsaur, showed that their population in the district

was 3,435, with 2,243 women and 1,192 men. It can be noted that the population of women is almost double the population of men. One other study conducted in 24 Banchhada dominated villages in Neemuch in 2012 showed that the women population was 3,595, while the men population was 2,770. Prostitution has led to the menace of human trafficking in the community. In order to improve the financial condition of the family, Banchhada members buy newborn girls from different parts of the state or country (Nair & Sen, 2004; India Today, 2018a; Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2018). When the girls grow up, they introduce them to prostitution. The community manages such trafficking processes in an organized manner with the help of agents in different locations. People in the community believe that this is their investment, but, unfortunately, women of this community are commonly found to be HIV positive (Verma et al., 2004; India Today, 2018b).

Bedia Community

The major proportion of Bedia are found in central Indian states, including M.P., Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. According to the Joshua project[2,] the total population of the Bedia is 556,000 in South Asia, and 26,000 out of total population resided in M.P., India. The higher number of Bedia can be recorded in different districts of M.P., including Gwalior, Sagar, Morena, Guna, Rajgrah, Shivpuri, Shajapur, Bhopal, and Vidisha. This community is involved in traditional rai folk dance, and their sisters and daughters are destined for the traditional occupation of prostitution (India Today, 2013; Nair & Sen, 2004; Santhya et al. 2014). The community celebrates the occasion of the birth of a girl child. Community constituted norms takes for granted that their elder daughter would join prostitution for family survival. However, younger daughters and sisters may also join the same. Besides, the male of the community fortifies the chastity of their wives (Rana, 2019; The Hindu Business Line, 2017; India Today, 2013). They groom their daughters to be prostitutes and they are persuaded to watch pornography or blue films with their families. Sometimes families use growth hormone oxytocin to quicken adult growth of adolescents. When any girl enters into prostitution, the community organizes rituals like '*nathutarna*' or '*sardhakwana*'. This occasion is commemorated as an event of conversion of girlhood into womanhood. Afterward, the woman is symbolized as a prostitute (Baharwali) in the community, and she is unavailable to be married. However, the Bedia community asserted that their girls are engaged only in folk dance (Rana, 2020b) and concealed the involvement into prostitution as prostitution is recognized as a stigma in the other communities. Consequently, several Bedia women are trafficked in different locations of the country and also outside of the country for sex work. Studies conducted in red light areas of Delhi and Mumbai show that Bedia women from different states are working there as sex workers (Agarwal, 2008; Sahni et al., 2008; The Hindu, 2016; Baruah, 2019).

The Kanjar Community

Members of the Kanjar community are widely known as singers, dancers, musicians, operators of carnival-type rides, and sex workers. They are also known for the maker of small terracotta toys and sell these toys sedentarily door-to-door in rural and urban communities. According to the Joshua project (ibid.), the Kanjar community is found in more than 15 states of India. Their population in M.P. is 18,000. They are inhabited in Dewas, Shajapur, Bhopal, Indore, Khandwa, and Ratlam districts of M.P. The Kanjar community traditionally survives on the earnings of daughters and sisters from prostitution. Women have to sell their bodies for the survival of their families. If any woman wishes or tries to leave it, then the local panchayat (Local agency

with authority) has a right to punish her (India Today, 2016; Hindustan Times, 2014). There are many studies and reports which show that Kanjars are engaged in girl-child trafficking from one state to another state or outside the country. However, since the Kanjars have opted for such a profession as a primary source of livelihood from long ago, they take it to be normal (Saeed, 2002; Dayal, 2020).

Discussions and Interventions to Change in Institutional Prostitution

The communities who are surviving through institutional prostitution are a small but significant proportion of the population in the M.P. state. Unfortunately, the state has been holding the highest position in the list of the missing children (girls make up 71% of all trafficked) in the country. There are several other communities with these traditional practices like Nats, Koltas, Sansi, and others who are habitats in nearby states. These communities have secret networks of trafficking. The state government needs to intervene in the tradition of sexual abuse. Consequently, the M.P. government has started schemes to take control over the institutional prostitution like Jabali Yojana. This scheme provides funds to children belonging to such communities. The government also initiated the 'Nirmal Abhiyan' since 1992-93, through which women from these communities were forced to get married, and hence this scheme was failed. Besides, the government of India has started several programs like The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA), Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013, Protection of Children from Sexual offenses (POCSO) Act, 2012, and others. Despite all efforts, institutional support for sex trafficking among these communities is understood as an esoteric tradition. However, there are some case studies of individuals or groups that have been providing a new hope to change and eventually eradicate institutional prostitution.

Case Study 1

This case study is about Ms. Champa Ben, who was a disciple of Acharya Vinoba Bhave. She came to Patharia village in 1982 and spent almost the last three decades of her life bettering the Bedia community. Ms. Champa Ben was felicitated by several national and regional awards, including the Indira Gandhi award and National award for child welfare. She established a hermitage in Patharia village in 1984, which was named as Satya Shodhan Ashram. There are approximately 200 students (i.e., 100 residing students and 100 non-residing students) from Bedia and other communities (vulnerable communities) in the ashram. The ashram provides shelter, food, and education to all the students with the help of the state government. The ashram has been working to improve the future of the new generations of the village. As a positive outcome, several boys of this village joined the policing and other services as government employees. Moreover, girls in this village are qualified up to 8th standard, and only a few of them are employed, including in the government and private sectors. However, limited resources have created trouble for girl students of the ashram to continue their education after the 8th standard. Lack of vocational courses and other sources for higher education have paralyzed them. One female teacher from Satya Shodhan Ashram revealed that the government has launched three small projects in association with non-government agencies for Bedia women to help them exit the traditional source of livelihood. Unfortunately, the Bedia women were not satisfied with the insufficient salary so, within a short span, these projects have failed.

Case Study 2

Another ashram named Abhyudaya Ashram was established in 1992 by Mr. Ram Snehi in Morena district of M.P. He dedicated his whole life to the furtherance of the community. He was awarded with the CNN-IBN Real Heroes Award 2010 for his efforts in improving the life of Bedia children. Today, the Abhyudaya Ashram is promoting the new generation of the Bedia community for a better future. There are 250 students in the ashram; many of them belong to other states. The ashram provides shelter, food, ethical values of life, and education to the students up to the 10th standard. Only girl students are allowed to pursue their higher education in nearby cities under the ashram's direction and financial support. As a result, many students have participated in games on a regional and national level. The director of the Ashram, Ms. Aruna Chhari, disclosed that more than 250 students from the Ashram are working as government and private employees in different parts of the country. She also declared that many hurdles were due to lack of resources.

However, one other study of Basai village in the Agra district of Uttar Pradesh showed that the roles of non-government organizations were reshaping the situation on the ground of the Bedia community. Currently, 90% of families are not forcing their daughters into prostitution. They have accepted the fact that with the help of the non-government organization, they can root out their deviant traditions of institutional prostitution (The Times of India, 2015c).

Hence, only a long-term intervention can change the collective mindset of such communities. Accordingly, awareness, education, and a good source of livelihoods can help communities and the country to control the human trafficking. Their unconscious prescriptive traditions must be converted into positive consciousness so that people of all communities can appreciate the comprehensive meaning of life with dignity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine hidden parts of child trafficking in M.P. The study addressed the unconscious practices of communities with unconventional survival means. Different milieu parameters, including poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, have contributed to the continued practice of these occupations. It was shown that new learned behavior can change old cultural practices and traditions and contribute to new social life. This paper also showed that the role of the state in interceding with non-government agencies has remolded the collective mindset of such communities. Structurally based occupations of prostitution created 'false consciousness' among the community. Such communities now understand that while girl children are working for family survival, they are being victimized by tradition and are being trafficked extensively. A large proportion of missing women and girl children are still undeclared due to such practices. Hence, long-term intervention is required to control girl child trafficking in central India.

Notes

1. ActionAid: ActionAid is a body of global federation affiliated with ActionAid International. They have a presence in more than 40 countries worldwide, including India, since 1972. The poor and the excluded have been at the center of their discourse and actions. https://www.actionaidindia.org/who-we-are/vision-mission/.

2. Joshua project: Joshua project is a group of ethnic people from all around the globe. https://legacy.joshuaproject.net/

3. BIMARU: An acronym formed from the first letters of the names of the Indian states of BI-Bihar, M-Madhya Pradesh, R-Rajasthan, and U-Uttar Pradesh. It was coined by Ashish Bose in the mid of 1980. All states have low resources and high density of population and are located in central India.

4. National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4): A national database about Indian families and health status of people (2015-16) http://rchiips.org/NFHS/pdf/NFHS4/MP_FactSheet.pdf.

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