From Vulnerability to Exploitation: COVID-19 and the Surge in Child Trafficking and Labour in the Eastern of State Odisha, India

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Abstract: In India, the sudden imposition of the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown—with less than four hours' notice—had devastating effects on the poor, who already faced challenges due to limited healthcare access and unstable incomes. Child trafficking and child labour are closely linked; trafficked children are often pushed into exploitative work for minimal pay, and in more severe cases—particularly involving girls and young boys—they are subjected to sexual abuse. Predatory money lending practices and debt bondage further enable trafficking, as they exploit financially distressed rural families. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Odisha reported the highest number of human trafficking victims in India during 2021–22. The state has seen a significant rise in child trafficking, especially in tribal areas, following the resumption of train services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis heightened the vulnerability of impoverished communities, allowing traffickers to move children across state lines using pre-existing networks. Labour exploitation reveals the overlap between migration for work and trafficking, with child marriages and child labour being the most prevalent outcomes. A large number of tribal individuals from rural Odisha migrate to other states for employment or marriage. Gender-based discrimination is evident in these migration patterns, often leading to bride trafficking, forced sex work, and related abuses. This paper explores the issue of child trafficking in Odisha, with a particular focus on the heightened vulnerability of children in tribal regions and the legal measures implemented to prevent trafficking and protect victims during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These

findings are drawn from an ICSSR minor research project focused on the trends and challenges of child trafficking in Odisha, particularly in the Rayagada district.

Introduction: Pandemic, Poverty, and Precarity

The COVID-19 pandemic not only created a global public health emergency but also exposed and intensified pre-existing inequalities in India's social fabric. The sudden nationwide lockdown in March 2020—with lesser few hours' notice—paralyzed the country's informal economy and left millions of workers stranded without income, transport, or food security. For the poor and marginalized, particularly tribal and rural populations in Odisha, this abrupt halt deepened economic vulnerability and dismantled fragile livelihood networks. Within this landscape of crisis, child trafficking and labour exploitation surged, revealing how structural inequalities intersect with disaster governance. The pandemic became not only a health crisis but also a *social amplifier* of long-standing vulnerabilities. In this context, trafficking is not an isolated criminal act but a *systemic outcome* of economic dispossession, gendered poverty, and the failure of state protection mechanisms.

Theoretical Framing: Vulnerability, Structural Violence, and Political Economy of Trafficking

This phenomenon can be theorized through the frameworks of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) and the political economy of exploitation (Bourdieu, 1998; Wacquant, 2009). Structural violence refers to the invisible but institutionalized harm inflicted on marginalized groups by unequal social and economic systems. The pandemic's economic fallout exacerbated these inequalities, particularly among tribal households dependent on precarious wage labour and seasonal migration.

From a political economy perspective, child trafficking operates as a by-product of capitalist accumulation under crisis conditions. When formal economies collapse, informal and illicit economies expand to fill the vacuum. Traffickers exploit this moment of systemic breakdown, capitalizing on the desperation of impoverished families. Debt bondage, predatory money lending, and exploitative recruitment become mechanisms of what Harvey (2003) calls "accumulation by dispossession"—the conversion of social vulnerability into economic profit where crises enable new forms of capitalist extraction

from the most vulnerable groups. In this context, child marriage and trafficking function as mechanisms through which impoverished families exchange or lose control over children's labour and bodies to survive economic collapse. Thus, the pandemic acted as a trigger within a pre-existing system of economic exploitation, demonstrating that trafficking and early marriage are not aberrations but integral to the informal, gendered economy of survival in tribal Odisha. The linkage between *distress migration* and *labour exploitation* can be situated within a political economy framework. Under neoliberal restructuring and the informalization of work, rural populations are rendered surplus labour' (Harvey, 2005). The lockdown intensified this precarity, collapsing informal livelihoods and forcing children into the labour market. Trafficking thus represents a reconfiguration of labour exploitation, where children become the cheapest and most controllable labour force within capitalist accumulation processes.

The surge in child trafficking in Odisha can also be interpreted through the political economy of labour framework, which examines how economic structures and capitalist imperatives create and sustain labour exploitation (Marx, 1867; Harvey, 2005).The informalization of India's labour market and the commodification of human labour have long driven migration from impoverished rural areas to urban and industrial zones. During the pandemic, this informal economy collapsed, stripping households of income and forcing them to resort to distress strategies—such as debt borrowing, child labour, or migration through unregulated intermediaries. In this sense, child trafficking functions as an *extension* of capitalist labour relations, where children become the cheapest and most compliant labourers within exploitative production systems. The recruiters and traffickers act as intermediaries within these informal circuits of accumulation, connecting impoverished households to exploitative employers across state lines. Thus, the political economy perspective situates trafficking within broader processes of neoliberal restructuring, which prioritize economic recovery and profit over human welfare.

At the same time, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) helps explain why girls and young tribal children face the highest risk. It reveals how structural inequalities and gendered expectations converge to make tribal girls disproportionately vulnerable during crises like COVID-19. The intersection of caste, gender, ethnicity, and poverty multiplies their exposure to exploitation and produces differential vulnerabilities, leading not only to child labour but also to sexual violence, early marriage, and domestic servitude. This gendered vulnerability underscores how patriarchal norms and structural poverty converge to sustain the trafficking economy. For tribal girls

in Odisha, the intersection of patriarchal norms and economic desperation leads to unique forms of trafficking — such as bride trafficking or sexual exploitation under the guise of migration and marriage.

Discussion

In India, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed tremendous humanitarian challenges to its millions of people across the country. The nationwide lockdown to deal with COVID-19 has been disastrous for the poor, who struggle to make a living in India due to its inadequate health infrastructure and meagre wages, as well as the sudden announcement with less than four hours' warning. One of the pandemic's emerging adverse effects is on the dynamics of human trafficking. For victims and survivors of trafficking, the COVID-19 crisis posed further risks and difficulties. In addition, it has heightened the likelihood that people with vulnerabilities to human trafficking, mainly women and children. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of susceptible people who were recruited for labour or sexual exploitation as a result of their worsening economic conditions. Women, children, and migrants are most susceptible to being recruited and used during the pandemic. Sexual exploitation has led to the hiring of more girls and women. In addition to dropping out of school and having to support families who have lost their employment, children have been severely subjected to human trafficking. They have been coerced into prostitution, forced marriages, begging, organ trafficking, and criminality.

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Organised Crime (UNDOC), trafficking is categorized as an organised criminal offence due to its intersectionality with many illegal activities, including purchasing, selling, abduction, sexual abuse and exploitation (UNDOC, 2009, Vermeulen et al, 2010). Furthermore, the crime scenario comprises the entire region, from its source through transit to the destination. As several criminal entities are organised and networked, the traffickers gain profits by exchanging people in different ways. While the UNDOC classifying human trafficking or child trafficking as an organised criminal activity, experts argue the moment has come for the state to introduce a law outlining the lines of control for such types of crimes (Patro, 2021).

Since the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, human trafficking has become even more subterranean, making it harder to make solid estimates of its scale at the international level (UNDOC, 2021). However, human trafficking remains a widespread and adaptable criminal activity as traffickers and exploiters cope with changing circumstances (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2023). The COVID-19

outbreak highlighted the range of possibilities for human trafficking. Despite a global pandemic, trafficking continued to occur and, with few exceptions, did not modify its nature or target population. Across the globe, domestic trafficking has evidently surged within countries, particularly through local recruitment and exploitation, according to the UNDOC 2021 report. Loss of livelihoods and mobility constraints has resulted in traffickers hiring victims in their own localities. The recruitment measures implemented by traffickers remained considerably identical. In cases of labour trafficking, hiring opportunities or advertisements were the most significant recruitment methods. Among the most prevalent recruitment strategies for sex trafficking were family and intimate connection. The pervasiveness of child trafficking as an extreme form of child abuse highlights a disrupting feature of contemporary society. Trafficking in children and child labour are two sides of the same coin. Children are often seen as 'cheap labour' and are widely employed by the labour market and employers. Child labour is the most severe form of servitude, where children are considered commodities and exploited for financial advantage. Unscrupulous money lending and debt bondage also serve as facilitators to get child labour from impoverished marginalised communities and rural households for trafficking and bondage. After being trafficked, children are either forced into employment or given subpar wages; in the worst cases, especially for women and young boys and girls, they are coerced into sexual exploitation. Trafficking girl children for prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation is a highly lucrative trade operation that relies largely on demand as well as supply. Every day, many innocent adolescents depart from their homes and remain unreachable. The secretive nature of trafficking networks makes it challenging for both family members and police to trace down and retrieve victims.

Hunger, Unemployment and Poverty during COVID Lockdown

India has recently tightened its laws against child labour, but since COVID-19 has been adversely affecting the country's economy, the progress made regarding this issue has stagnated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, children became more vulnerable to child marriage, trafficking, and forced labour (Marwaha, 2021). Kailash Satyarthi, the Nobel Peace Prize recipient, who strives for the sake of vulnerable children through his organisation, *Bachpan Bachao Andolan*, or Save the Childhood Movement, stated that children have never gone through something like COVID period (Yeung and Sur, 2020). According to him, this is far worse than just an economic or health crisis. Justice, humanity, childhood, and the destiny of a whole generation are all at risk in the current crisis.

When India underwent an intense lockdown in March 2020, schools as well as workplaces were shuttered. India's economy collapsed as a result of the pandemic, and poor people faced extreme a financial crisis. The COVID-19 crisis exposed children to the risk of deteriorated learning and disrupted midday meal programmes. As a result, millions of children were denied the mid-day meal that they used to be given at school. When children, particularly from different socio-economic echelon experiencing multidimensional poverty, misses school for an extended period of time, their prospects of returning to school are significantly decreased. It pushed children to drop out of school. Since the coronavirus pandemic has severely damaged India's economy and caused many people to lose jobs, some families have chosen to allow their children to look for work in order to supplement their income. Accordingly, children kept the burden of economic recovery. Traffickers have taken advantage of this situation by targeting vulnerable families. It demonstrates how cases of child labour and child marriage increased during this period. Many are forced to work long hours in hazardous, often abusive conditions, for little or no wage, and often far from home. In a shortage of availability of adult labourers in major cities, demand for children, particularly adolescent boys and girls, could rise in the coming days of post-COVID (Marwaha, 2021). The phenomenon is spreading rapidly and has turned into a global concern.

During the COVID lockdown, poor families faced challenges like hunger, joblessness, and poverty. By that point, the federal government had started lifting lockdown protocols in the last week of May 2020. When India reopened, the demand for cheap labour in its cities increased due to the large number of migrant workers who had left during the lockdown and returned home. The desperation, the need for labour, and the reopening of the frontiers of states, according to Indian police, provided a favourable environment for child traffickers to take advantage of. Throughout the pandemic, the government commission encountered an increase in trafficking charges. According to a survey of *Bachpan Bachao Andolan*, 86 accused traffickers were detained, and 1,127 children suspected of being trafficked were rescued throughout India from month of April to September 2020 (Yeung and Sur, 2020). As per the study, 245 households in rural regions of five of the poorest states, along with Odisha, were asked if they would be willing to send their under-18 children to work in cities because of their heightened financial vulnerability. Of these homes, 21 percent responded that they might be willing to do so. However, it's not only parents who feel helpless; children may also feel pressured to go to work and provide meals for their hungry families in dire need of money. The

majority of rescued children hailed from rural areas in poorer states, especially eastern states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha etc. Children who have been rescued have expressed being forced to work long hours with no wage. Some contend that they have also been physically abused. Many are unable to flee or contact their family as they lack resources and have fallen into the clutches of traffickers. Children's rights activists and police claim that the trafficker is generally well-known, if not a local resident.

Child trafficking is the practice of deceiving, forcing, or persuading minors to flee their homes in order to exploit, coerce, or sell them. According to experts, children have been deceived with false promises without their parents even realising it. Sometimes, desperate parents send children to get hired in order to send money home. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals seek job opportunities. In particular, children who were dropouts or did not attend school were forced to work. Since brothels closed, there have been reports of girls being trafficked and brought to private farmhouses and hotels. Children from families experiencing extreme poverty are particularly vulnerable; this is evidence of the nation's extreme wealth disparity, which has been made worse by the pandemic.

Odisha's Vulnerability Landscape: Migration, Trafficking and the Tribal Condition

Child trafficking is often seen as a multifaceted problem since it is associated with concerns such as missing children, child labour, kidnapping and abduction, commercial sexual exploitation, and other crimes against children. The pandemic has posed undoing years of work towards dealing with the issue of illegal child labour. This paper examines child trafficking in Odisha focusing on the vulnerability of children in tribal regions and legal measures taken to prevent and protect them during and after COVID pandemic. Odisha's eastern and southern districts—such as Rayagada, Malkangiri, and Koraput—constitute what sociologists describe as spaces of vulnerability where marginalization is both geographic and historical. The predominance of tribal communities, limited state infrastructure, and dependence on seasonal migration create fertile conditions for trafficking networks. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Odisha recorded the highest number of human trafficking victims in India during 2021–22. As transportation systems reopened after the lockdown, traffickers resumed operations through well-established migration routes. The overlap between migration and trafficking became increasingly blurred. Many children were transported under the guise of employment or marriage, only to end up in exploitative labour or sexual servitude in cities like Hyderabad, Surat, and Chennai. This continuum between labour

migration and trafficking underscores the inadequacy of current policy frameworks, which often treat the two as distinct. The economic push factors that drive migration—landlessness, unemployment, and debt—are the very same conditions that traffickers exploit. For tribal families, migration represents both hope and hazard: a means of survival that simultaneously exposes them to exploitation.

The study examines secondary data from multiple websites and official government documents. It highlights the main reasons that drive traffickers to ensnare more people in the trafficking racket. It also offers a statistical analysis of the state's level of criminal activity, along with a primary stakeholder analysis and a comparative study of the anti-trafficking methodology applied to the scheduled tribal regions and states of India and the Railway Protection Forces. The article also delves into the socio-economic factors that heighten the vulnerability of victims coerced into trafficking. The article describes a number of national and state anti-trafficking laws, ranging from combating trafficking to ensuring victims receive effective rehabilitation. The study attempts to provide a deeper understanding of the trafficking situation in Odisha, particularly child trafficking in tribal districts, by analysing the various sociological and economical factors that spark the trafficking process in the community and identifying susceptible people after reviewing the state government's rescue operations.

Human trafficking is a multidimensional illegal transgression that has ravaged India. It takes place in nearly all states of India, but it is predominant in its eastern region, particularly in Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal. Despite other places, these states are the source, transit and destination locations for trafficking. And, people in Odisha are at a high risk of being trafficked over past decades. Trafficking encompasses a wide range of exploitation, from labour servitude to commercial sexual exploitation within the state. Odisha is experiencing an unprecedented rise in human trafficking, with a stunning 5.44% of all cases registered in India in 2018, up from merely 0.95% in 2012 (India Statistical Data Online, 2012-18, Kumar et.al, 2020), which still has an effect on several people. In recent years, Odisha has emerged as a supply hub for the human trafficking business. Given that Odisha's sex ratio is 5.56% greater than the national average, demographic data indicate that a larger proportion of females in the state are the root cause of such an upsurge (GOI, 2021). Despite the state government's efforts to stop human trafficking, the number of cases increases annually.

Odisha, with its large rural population, has become a hub for trafficking in the past decade. Despite its abundance of rural demographics, Odisha became a victim of this horrible crime because of its isolated locations and higher rural-to-urban sex ratio in

some of the state's tribal districts such as Rayagada (1051), Gajapati (1043), Kandhamal (1037), Koraput (1032), Nuapada (1021), Malkangiri (1020), and Nabarangpur (1019) respectively (Census of India, 2011). These factors increased the vulnerability of the women residing in these specific districts. The initial variable contributing to the increase in trafficking within the state is the dramatic decrease in the proportion of girls to boys in states and union territories like Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh etc. The traffickers use multiple hiring strategies, such as forcing family members into selling their women and girls, focusing on impoverished families, drawing false assurances of jobs, paying off debts in the form of dowries, and kidnapping victims to force them into marriages that eventually take them into commercial sexual exploitation and consequently meet the demands of the labour market.

The Trafficking affected Districts of Odisha

Sl No.	Districts	Sl No.	Districts	Sl No.	Districts
1.	Kalahandi	10.	Rayagada	19.	Angul
2.	Balangir	11.	Ganjam	20.	Jharsuguda
3.	Mayurbhanj	12.	Puri	21.	Nayagarh
4.	Balasore	13.	Cuttack	22.	Dhenkanal
5.	Malkangiri	14.	Jajpur	23.	Gajapati
6.	Kendrapara	15.	Khordha	24.	Keonjhar
7.	Nabarangpur	16.	Bhadrak	25.	Kandhamal
8.	Nuapada	17.	Jagatsinghpur	26.	Boudh
9.	Koraput	18.	Keonjhar		

Source: Mukharjee 2004, UNIFEM and NACO

Child trafficking became more prevalent in Odisha, particularly in tribal districts, after train services were resumed amidst the new (COVID-19) pandemic. The poor became more susceptible to child trafficking due to COVID-19. Traffickers have been able to transport children over state borders by leveraging their established network. The process of labour exploitation exemplifies the intersection between labour migration and trafficking. The most widespread instances are child marriages, followed by child labour. A disproportionately significant number of tribal people from rural Odisha migrate to other states for work and marriage. Gender-based construction prejudice is common in migration and trafficking, as demonstrated by bride trafficking, commercial sex work, and so on. The study draws on the analysis of an ICSSR minor

research project examining the trends and issues of child trafficking in the context of Odisha, with special reference to Rayagada.

Child Marriage and Trafficking during and after COVID Period

Child marriage and trafficking in Odisha's tribal regions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic represent the convergence of structural violence, patriarchal capitalism, and governance failure. These phenomena exemplify how crises transform marginalization into mechanisms of survival, where children's lives and bodies are negotiated within systems of inequality and economic desperation. In impoverished, remote, and tribal regions within India, a large number of girls are still trafficked and coerced into early marriages. It is possible to argue that some child marriages are an aspect of child trafficking because they have traits of being a slave. This is due to the fact that children in forced marriages have been pushed into these relationships and forced to engage in activities equivalent to those of victims of sex and labour trafficking. The coronavirus lockdown in India has adversely affected children, triggering the number of cases of child labour, trafficking, and marriage cases.

In isolated Odisha villages, COVID-19 has created the most effective environment for social unrest to thrive. The increasing number of child marriages brought on by COVID-19 has been confirmed by the Odisha State Commission for Protection of Underage Rights (OSCPCR). According to data from the incidents documented by different district child welfare offices, there have been over 180 child marriage cases registered from different regions of the state since April 2020. The initiatives have been defied in every one of these instances. They've rescued the girls. Further, many of them were assigned to childcare centres, according to OSCPCR. Activists, however, argue that successful endeavours are equally important. Compared to the worst-performing Indian states, such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and West Bengal, there are eight districts in Odisha that are primarily occupied by tribal and Dalit communities and have an unprecedented number of child marriage cases. According to a National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) factsheet from 2015–2016, 21.3% of women in Odisha between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before reaching 18 years of age. With a child marriage rate of 39.9%, Malkangiri district had the highest rate, followed by Nabarangpur (37.9%), Mayurbhanj (35%), Koraput (34.7%), Rayagada (34.4%), Nayagarh (31.3%), Ganjam (29.8%), and Keonjhar (28.1%). These districts have undoubtedly been the major emphasis of Odisha's campaign against child marriage. Since 2017, the goal has been broadened to include seven additional districts with higher rates of child marriage

than the national average: Kandhamal, Boudh, Subarnapur, Deogarh, Dhenkanal, Balasore, and Gajapati. Childline, UNICEF, and Action Aid have been collaborating with the administrations of these 15 districts to stop child marriages.

The coordinated efforts of the government, nonprofits, and social activists have produced favourable outcomes in recent years, raising awareness among the underprivileged and marginalised and significantly lowering the number of child marriages. Some villages in districts like Rayagada and Subarnapur have been designated as "child marriage free" by gram panchayats. Many young activists who have been rescued from early marriage as minor girls are because of successful awareness campaigns against child marriage. Since 2018, an anti-child marriage activist has contributed to a key role in preventing more than 30 child marriages in the primarily tribal district of Kandhamal. However, a number of frontline workers, officials, and social activists admitted that COVID-19 had the potential to destroy most of the positive progress made thus far in stopping child marriage. The pandemic-induced joblessness and extreme poverty have driven many parents to marry off their underage daughters. The families are using lockdown constraints to have low-cost celebrations in a secret manner. The increasing numbers of minors eloping are still a significant consideration. In the Kolnara block of the Rayagada district, the child marriage prohibition officer, who also witnessed three or four instances in the locality, has said that school closures have exacerbated the vulnerability of children, especially young girls. The officer said that they could interfere in one case, but there are three or four more cases in which the minor girl eloped with the boy and married. Child marriage prohibition officials had stopped the marriage of a 16-year-old girl from G. Rengalpadu village, five kilometres from Kolonara, because of the intervention of police and volunteers. The girl escaped with a 19-year-old young boy. The boy's relatives tried to get the couple married. Following the failed effort, the girl's family refused to get back her home. As a result, she had been taken to a childcare centre for temporary shelter. Activists stated that the data represent only the tip of the iceberg. The economic downturn might trigger an increase in child marriages throughout districts, particularly in far-flung and economically deprived regions.

The government has put in place a number of laws and awareness programs to stop child marriages. Girl Child Day" is celebrated on October 11 to raise awareness of gender equality and to defend the rights of girls. However, child marriages are still prevalent throughout most areas of the tribally dominated Rayagada district, where underage females get married, even after the government's efforts to curb them. Under

the "Prachestha Abhiyan," the district administration makes all possible efforts to prevent girl child marriages and provide them with adequate nutrition and education. Plans are therefore being put together, although the district has not yet been able to eradicate the problem of child marriages. According to a survey, the district ranks fourth in the state for the number of girl child marriages. The district has a 33.2% child marriage rate, according to the 4th National Family Health Survey. By the time they are 15 to 19 years old, 9.2% of married girls become mothers. Despite the statistics, 1,345 villages have been deemed child marriage-free by the district administration. The district social welfare officer reports that the administration had prevented 69 child marriages in 2022, 89 in 2021, and 97 in 2020. Reports of child marriages have come from all around the district, with the exception of this town, Gunupur, Kolnara, Padmapur, and Ramnaguda blocks. The district administration paradoxically lacks official statistics regarding the number of child marriages that have occurred in the district thus far and those that have been avoided prior to 2020. Numerous child marriage cases, according to social activists and experts, have gone unreported by the district authorities. According to sources, teenage girls (who are 18 years old) elope with their partners and marry in some places. To prevent similar incidents, collaboration at all levels is necessary, according to the district social welfare officer. Although the administration takes action to stop child marriages, experts claim that in isolated rural communities, its efforts have failed. They pointed out that in order to stop child marriages; there is a need to raise enormous awareness among parents and young girls and boys at the grassroots level. Despite governmental measures to curb child marriage, the continued prevalence of this practice in isolated rural communities reflects the limitations of formal policy interventions in addressing deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms. The social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides additional insight, illustrating how child marriage is reinforced at multiple levels. At the micro level, parental decision-making is guided by financial insecurity and patriarchal norms. At the meso level, community expectations and peer norms legitimize early unions. At the macro level, insufficient institutional outreach and inconsistent law enforcement fail to deter these practices. Without interventions that operate simultaneously across these levels, legal measures alone remain insufficient.

Trafficking of New Born Child during COVID 19

The case of the newborn in Seskhal, Rayagada, highlights the intersection of structural inequities, institutional negligence, and potential exploitation within the healthcare and child protection system. From a structural violence perspective (Galtung, 1969; Farmer,

2004), the incident reflects how marginalized tribal communities are systematically rendered vulnerable due to poverty, limited literacy, and weak access to public services. Despite the presence of a District Headquarters Hospital with specialized units, the newborn was admitted to a private facility, suggesting a systemic failure in accountability and oversight.

A tribal native from a village under Seskhal tahasil in Rayagada district claims that on March 18th, 2022, his newborn baby was admitted to a private nursing centre in Rayagada town instead of the local government hospital at the district headquarter. The baby was carried by his aunt, a ward member, some villagers, ANM, and a local ASHA worker. The medical staff took the newborn's aunt's signature and guided her back to the village. Notably, the baby's mother died after giving birth to her child. When District Headquarters Hospital (DHH) has a nutritional centre, a Special Newborn Care Unit (SNCU), and a special child ward, the ANM is more likely to find out why the poor infant is being admitted to a private nursing care facility. The association between private clinics and government health personnel is clear, stated a RTI activist from Rayagada district. After a week, the father of the new-born child and his relatives arrived at the private nursing home and asked for the infant; however, they were told to deposit Rs. 37500. But the poor tribal father, living hand in hand, objected, saying that he was unable to pay. The father and the villagers then asked to visit the newborn, but the nursing home staff refused. Finally, they realised the baby had died and buried him the next day. They were not allowed to speak to the father because his phone number and location were unavailable. The nursing home administration was rather whimsical during the process of being admitted for the baby. Why did they bury the infant without ensuring authority? Why didn't someone from the clinic go to the respective village, which is only 9–10 kilometres away? It is definitely fraudulent to be unaware of the whereabouts of the baby's father and the phone numbers of ASHA, ANM, AWW, or the police and not contact them. "Those who suppressed the facts and intensified the problem need to be held responsible," stated a district scribe of note. The father of a new-born baby, suspecting foul play, reported the incident to CDPO Rayagada on May 27th, 2022, informed local news reporters, and accused the nursing facility staff of trafficking the child outside for a large sum of money. The CDPO also praised the District Child Protection Officer for rescuing the child. When news reporters looked into it, they found anomalies in the testimony of nursing home management, an ANM, an ASHA worker, and an Anganwadi worker. They reported it to the District Collector, who requested an investigation led by CDM and PHO.

A committee formed of Child Welfare Committee members, a legal officer, and a district child protection officer looked into the issue and corroborated the news reporters' conclusions. They produced a joint inquiry report, which was handed over to the district collector for further steps. In the meantime, the investigative team has lodged a FIR with Rayagada police. The civil society members apprehended that such incidence could be merely one instance of child trafficking with a government-private sector collaboration—the tip of the iceberg." Poor tribal people's voices, like this case, are becoming increasingly reduced in front of the judicial system. There is relatively minimal oversight of these clinics under the Clinical Establishment Act. It is an alarming sign of a succession of criminal operations under the district administration, said an activist in Rayagada who advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities.

The role of government personnel—ANM, ASHA, and Anganwadi workers—raises questions about institutional complicity and governance gaps. Their involvement in guiding the infant to a private facility, without verifying parental consent or facilitating communication with the father, illustrates how bureaucratic procedures can be manipulated, creating openings for exploitation. The arbitrary burial of the infant without proper notification, combined with obstruction of parental access, points to potential commercial or criminal motives, highlighting the risk of clandestine trafficking under the guise of healthcare services. From a human rights and legal lens, the incident exposes weaknesses in monitoring under the Clinical Establishment Act, insufficient protection of tribal citizens, and minimal oversight of private clinics. It underscores the necessity for transparent mechanisms, community-level vigilance, and multi-agency accountability, linking healthcare provision, child protection, and law enforcement. The Rayagada case exemplifies how structural vulnerabilities, coupled with institutional gaps, can facilitate exploitative practices, reinforcing the need for systemic reforms to safeguard marginalized populations and prevent the commodification of children.

State Level Workshop on Trafficking since COVID-19 Pandemic

As Odisha had the highest number of human trafficking cases in 2021 as per NCRB report, with the alarming facts that 1475 people fell down into victims to trafficking across the state, including an overwhelming 735 of them being women. Yet more concerning is the findings that 497 were children below 18 years of age (Mohapatra, 2023). To bring attention to this crucial issue, a workshop on **"Emerging Trends in Human Trafficking"** was held on August 18, 2023, bringing together experts and stakeholders to discuss the issue. The chairperson of the Odisha State Commission for Women stated that the number of young adolescent elopement cases has increased,

particularly since COVID pandemic. She stated that the Commission has already started to raise community awareness through workshops held in each district and that college-level workshops would be held soon to raise awareness among young adolescents about the risks associated with human trafficking. The Women's Commission stated that children as young as 14 years old are now at risk of such crimes due to their exposure to mobile phones. Young teenagers form relationships and, at a young age, elope without considering the repercussions. They lived together for a few months before separating up. She pointed out that the large number of these instances that come before the Commission illustrates how easily these girls become targets for traffickers who allure them to engage in the grim business of sex trafficking. She underlined the importance of community-wide initiatives in tackling this urgent problem.

Human trafficking is a "complex" issue, according to ADGP CID, who also outlined the measures the state government has taken to combat it, including women's and child desks at police stations and integrated anti-human trafficking units in every district. Director of Aide et Action, Migration & Education emphasised the task of the police in preventing traffickers from being arrested in 2022. He stated that the movement slips and priority given to registrations before migrating were crucial in curbing migration and indentured labour at Balangir last year. The director of Childline in Odisha, reported that in the two months prior (June & July) in 2023, roughly 16 cases of child trafficking had been reported. According to Senapati, victims only feel somewhat relieved when they witness culprits prosecuted to punishment. For this reason, law enforcement is required to ensure a stop the crime. The voices of witnesses were also taken into account in the workshop. Two trafficking survivors, participated in the workshop and expressed their concerns regading trafficking. They reflected about their experiences as victims and how the government assisted in rescuing them from forced servitude. Over 50 media professionals from all over the state were participated the event, which was scheduled by Odisha Women in Media. In addition to encouraging them to report the crime more frequently, the objective was to increase their awareness and understanding of bonded labour and human trafficking in the state of Odisha. As the state struggles with this disturbing issue, it is obvious that collaborative efforts from all sides have to be taken to stop this threat and guarantee the security and welfare of its citizens.

The engagement of survivors and media professionals at the workshop symbolizes the potential of community-centered and participatory approaches in disrupting trafficking networks. Survivor testimonies provide counter-narratives to the silence surrounding trafficking, while the involvement of journalists in awareness campaigns

reflects a growing recognition that combating trafficking requires multisectoral collaboration. Yet, the continuing recurrence of cases indicates that these efforts must be supported by sustained socio-economic empowerment of vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

The post-COVID surge in child trafficking in Odisha illustrates the interplay between socio-economic vulnerability, systemic inequalities, and predatory exploitation. This flow in human trafficking in Odisha embodies a condition of structural precarity, where economic collapse, patriarchal control, and digital exposure converge to reproduce gendered exploitation. The pandemic acted not as a temporary shock but as a catalyst that revealed the fragile boundaries between safety and exploitation in marginalized lives. Human trafficking in Odisha, therefore, should be theorized as both a product and a process of unequal development—sustained by systemic neglect, economic desperation, and the digital reconfiguration of vulnerability. A holistic approach, integrating legal, social, and economic strategies, is essential to protect children, empower marginalized communities, and disrupt the cycle of trafficking and exploitation in the region.

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