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Child trafficking in India: 'It was only after a few years I realised I had been sold'

Thousands of children are being trafficked from India's remote rural areas and sold into work in cities, often as domestic staff for wealthy families



Children in New Delhi take part in a candlelit vigil to end child slavery in November 2014. An estimated 135,000 children are trafficked in India annually. Photograph: Subrata Biswas/Getty Images

[Sutirtha Sahariah](#) in Dehli

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Anti-slavery activists say thousands of children are going missing from some of India's remote tribal areas as human traffickers respond to a surge in demand for domestic child labour in booming urban districts.

Between 2011 and 2013, more than 10,500 children were registered as missing from the central state of Chhattisgarh, one of India's poorest states. The majority are believed to have been trafficked out of the state and into domestic work or other forms of child labour in cities.

"Trafficking for sex and other purposes has always existed in India, but trafficking children for domestic slavery is a relatively new development," says HS Phoolka, a senior advocate at India's supreme court and a human rights lawyer and activist. "This is due to rising demand for domestic

maids due to rising income in urban areas and widescale poverty ... in rural areas. This trafficking shows the rise of massive inequality in [India](#).”

The missing children in Chhattisgarh represent a small percentage of the estimated 135,000 children believed to be trafficked in India every year. Yet the rate at which they are going missing from remote villages in the south of the state is causing alarm.

“I worked from 6am until midnight. I had to cook, clean, take care of the children and massage the legs of my employers”

Last year, the supreme court expressed serious concern over the number of missing children in Chhattisgarh. The state responded with legislation, India’s first attempt [to regulate the growing number of employment placement agencies](#), which are often conduits for children being trafficked into domestic servitude and

other forms of exploitation.

Activists say more needs to be done to tackle the problem. “The state has become a big source area for children because of a lack of law enforcement, civil unrest, large-scale poverty, illiteracy and the remoteness of the villages,” says Bhuwan Ribhu, an activist working with the [Bachpan Bachao Andolan](#) (Save the childhood movement). “These are places where the protection of the state does not reach. Trafficking in this region has become deeply engrained.”

In the village of Kunuri, Deepti Minch, 19, describes her experience of being trafficked into domestic servitude in northern India’s Punjab state. A village agent had visited her family and promised her mother 5,000 rupees (\$79) a month if she sent Deepti to work in Delhi. Once she reached the capital she was sold off to a family.

“It was only after a few years I realised I had been sold,” she recalls. “I was extremely hurt and was in tears. My life was tough. I worked from six in the morning until midnight. I had to cook meals, clean the house, take care of the children and massage the legs of my employers before going to bed. If I didn’t do my job well, they used to scold me.”

Deepti eventually managed to run away and make her way back to her family – yet thousands of other children remain unaccounted for.

One of them is Salmaet, who went missing from Sihardhar village in Chhattisgarh’s Jashpur district six years ago, when she was 11. “I thought she had gone to a neighbouring village, but when she didn’t return I got worried and started asking around,” says her father, Thibu Ram. “I still have no idea where she is. I hope she’s safe.”

Salmaet’s disappearance is part of a disturbing trend of children going missing in the area. Fear and distrust of the police and officials mean children are rarely reported missing for months, or even years, after they disappear. Although Salmaet went missing in 2008, her family didn’t go to the police until this year. They say the police have done nothing to look for her.

Rishi Kant, one of India’s leading anti-trafficking activists, says trafficking is still considered a peripheral issue among law enforcement agencies, especially in rural areas such as Chhattisgarh.

“The response of states across India to this problem is very poor,” he says. “In states such as Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, law enforcement is too busy fighting the armed Maoist insurgency or civil unrest. [Human trafficking](#) is not a priority.”

“Most [police] don't see trafficking as a crime. They just see it as poor children migrating for a better livelihood”

Aradhana Singh, head of anti-human trafficking unit, Jharkhand state

In neighbouring Jharkhand state, Aradhana Singh, head of the anti-human trafficking unit in Khundi district, says the police lack both the funds and the will to tackle the problem.

“We simply don't have resources,” she says. “Our phones don't work; power cuts are so frequent that we cannot use a computer or a fax machine. There is not even office space to offer counselling services. Most [police] don't see trafficking as a crime. They just see it

as poor children migrating for a better livelihood and don't take these issues seriously. They think I'm dealing with a petty issue.”

The impunity enjoyed by those running trafficking rings in these tribal areas is increasing the power and influence of local criminal gangs.

“The situation has become so grave that in these areas it is the traffickers who wield the power,” says Prasanta Dash, head of Unicef in Chhattisgarh. “Even if cases are filed against them, they are able to pressure the families to change their statements or threaten them. Because they earn a lot of money, they are well off and act as muscle men. Trafficking in this region is very deep.”