
DIGITAL CHAINS: HOW ORGANIZED CRIME USES TECHNOLOGY TO EVADE INDIAN LAW

Shubham Srivastava, Research Scholar, Faculty of Law, Shia P.G College Lucknow,
University of Lucknow

ABSTRACT

As we know due to technological advancement and digital nuance India is going to become a digital first economy, the offence of human trafficking has evolved into a digital technology based enterprise characterized by the emergence of "Digital Intermediaries." This article helps to understand how modern organized crime networks (OCNs) misuse technology for recruitment, exploitation, and evade traditional law enforcement to commit human trafficking. In early 2026, the Delhi High Court described the national capital as a "mandi" (market) for trafficking, a domestic crisis that represent broader global trends identified in the *UNODC 2024 Global Report*, which notes a 25% surge in victim detection and a shift toward "business-type" structures where 56% of traffickers operate in modular roles. The research find out a rapid shift in commission of human trafficking with help of emerging digital mechanism like providing AI-driven tools, encrypted VPN tunnels, and cryptocurrency laundering which helps kingpins to protect their identity and form a global network to tackle with this scary situation the government established 827 Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and real-time coordination platforms like Cri-MAC, according to the *2024 US State Department TIP Report* highlights a staggering 81% acquittal rate and persistent official complicity as major barriers to justice. The central government, with an objective to focus on eliminating the offence of human trafficking with the help of the following framework introduces Section 111 related to Organized Crime and mandates minimum punishments for severe crimes, such as buying children for prostitution under Section 99 and kidnapping for begging under section 139. By synthesizing NCRB data with 2025 legislative insights, the article concludes that India has to adopt proactive mode to neutralise human trafficking, not only by convicted traffickers but also through destroying the digital, financial and physical infrastructure and through strict enforcement of the *Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita* (BNSS) victim compensation schemes (Section 396) to curtail the use of technology in human trafficking, a modern slavery.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, BNS 2023, Digital Intermediaries, Organized Crime, UNODC 2024, TIP Report, AHTUs, Forced Criminality

Introduction

In recent years, the internal security in India reached a critical inflection point as the judiciary and human rights bodies show their concern over expanding 'Market' for human trafficking. The National Human Rights Commission in March 2026, taken suo moto cognizance of a sharp increase of missing person across Maharashtra and Odisha. On the other hand, a NHRC report revealed that over 800 people were missing from Delhi in just the first fifteen days of the year. The Delhi HC during hearing of a case related to human trafficking observed Delhi as a "Mandi" market for trafficking, and found that around 84000 children had been reported missing over the previous six years, on April 2, 2026. These national and local crises of Human trafficking are serving as signs of a more extensive global pattern; the *UNODC 2024 Global Report* reveals that the victims of human trafficking globally has risen by 25% after a sharp drop during pandemic-era, because of technology advancement and strict legal mechanisms. These traffickers adopted a streamline organised structure network to professionalize their illicit trade through upgrading their operations from solely relying on physical coercion to advanced and highly developed digital toolkits.¹ The emergence of "Digital Intermediaries"—specialized technical actors providing AI-driven recruitment tools, encrypted VPN tunnels, and cryptocurrency laundering services—has created a "jurisdictional fog" that obstructs traditional law enforcement. This shift toward tech-enabled exploitation is further complicated by a firm "immunity gap." Despite India's "Tier 2" status and the operationalization of over 827 Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs), the *2024 US State Department TIP Report* highlights a staggering 81% acquittal rate and a lack of accountability for complicit officials.² In response, the Indian legislative framework has undergone a foundational overhaul. The implementation of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023 marks a transition from the colonial-era Penal Code to a modern criminal jurisprudence that expressly criminalizes "Organized Crime" under Section 111 and prescribes mandatory minimum punishments for severe offenses like child exploitation. By integrating real-time data-sharing platforms like Cri-MAC and specialized offender databases such as the National Database of Human Trafficking Offenders (NDHTO), the state seeks to destroy the digital chains of modern slavery. This article examines these legal and technological developments, discussing that a proactive structured plan of action is

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024* (United Nations Publication, 2024).

² U.S. Department of State, *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: India* (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2024).

required to nullify the use of digital intermediaries by traffickers.

The Digital Toolkit of Modern Syndicates

The professionalization of human trafficking in the 2024–2026 period is defined by the integration of a "Digital Toolkit" that provides Organized Crime Networks (OCNs) with corporate-level scalability and secrecy. This toolkit transforms technology into a factor that dramatically increases the effectiveness of human trafficking organizations and allows them to manage the entire exploitation cycle—from recruitment to financial laundering—remotely.

- **Encrypted Command and Control:** Due to advancement in communication technology, traffickers have stopped using traceable telecommunications for end-to-end encrypted (E2EE) platforms like Telegram and Session. This shift facilitates traffickers to manipulate, gain the trust and build an emotional connection with victims, simultaneously through encrypted communication platforms with ultimate goals of exploiting them. By eliminating physical contact during the recruitment phase, syndicates ensure that the arrest of a local "runner" never leads investigators back to the digital mastermind.
- **Financial Anonymization via Cryptocurrency:** Financial confidentiality is maintained through the use of privacy coins (e.g., Monero) and stablecoins (USDT). By routing illegal income through unhosted wallets and cold storage, OCNs bypass the traditional banking system. This renders real-time asset freezing by agencies like the Enforcement Directorate (ED) nearly impossible, as the capital remains outside the reach of centralized Indian financial regulations.
- **Camouflage via Adult Service Websites (ASWs):** ASWs serve as "virtual red-light districts" where exploitation is hidden as independent, consenting sex work. By "hiding in plain sight," syndicates utilize these platforms to advertise forced services to a global clientele while maintaining a low risk of intervention.
- **AI-Driven Exploitation:** Artificial intelligence is the latest technology development which helps humans in various fields but we know when a scientific development has benefited it also has losses. And AI is no exception. Now offenders use AI as a primary operational tool. Recently during investigation of trafficking related crimes in Gujarat,

offenders use Generative AI to create "Synthetic Identities"—deepfake personas used to entice victims into fraudulent romantic or corporate roles. And also AI algorithms use to find out "high-vulnerability" targets from social media, while automated surveillance tools use a victim's own smartphone camera as an invisible connection alerting handlers to any unauthorized movement or contact with authorities.

- **VPN Shadow Networks and "Crime-as-a-Service":** To evade the Indian Information Technology Act, traffickers utilize multi-layered VPN shadow networks. By routing traffic through non-cooperative jurisdictions, they create a jurisdictional confusion that leaves no evidence for the NIA to collect. High-level OCNs have now transitioned into a rented digital infrastructure model, providing access to these pre-configured encrypted tunnels to smaller gangs, which helps them to commit any high-tech organized crime.

Digital Intermediaries: How Organized Crime Scales Human Trade through Specialized Networks

The transformation of India's human trafficking landscape into a high-tech "Virtual Mandi" is driven by a fundamental structural shift: the rise of the Digital Intermediary. As highlighted by the Delhi High Court in early 2026, the national capital has become a centralized market for human trade, facilitated not by traditional physical gangs alone, but by a technological advancement of digital intermediaries.³ These intermediaries provide the "infrastructure of exploitation"—Video conferencing, fund transfer, AI-driven recruitment bots, encrypted VPN tunnels, and cryptocurrency laundering services—that allows high-level syndicates to scale their operations while remaining protected from ground-level risks. The scale of this issue is revealed in the NCRB Crime in India 2022 Report (published in late 2023) and subsequent 2024-2025 updates, which show a large number of trafficking cases even as the methods of recruitment shift online.⁴ The UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024 confirms this trend, identifying that 56% of traffickers now operate in "Business-Type" structures.⁵ In these networks, specialized intermediaries function like corporate departments: where intermediaries like social media use as a tools to attract vulnerable targets in states like Odisha

³ Delhi High Court, Observations on child trafficking and the "Mandi" of human trade in the National Capital Territory, (Unreported, April 2, 2026)

⁴ National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 2022 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023).

⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024 (United Nations Publication, 2024).

and Maharashtra, And advance digital ecosystem and infrastructure manage shadow networks to bypass the surveillance of law enforcement agencies. This professionalization explains how, as noted in recent news, over 800 people could vanish from Delhi in just the first 15 days of 2026. Despite the operationalization of 827 Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and real-time coordination via the Cri-MAC platform, the technical backbone of these networks remains difficult to dismantle. The 2024 U.S. State Department TIP Report points to a shocking 81% acquittal rate in India, largely because law enforcement typically arrests the physical "handlers" while the digital intermediaries—who hold the data and the financial keys—remain active.⁶ To break these "Digital Chains," the legal framework under the BNS 2023 must move beyond traditional policing to target the specialized technical networks that allow organized crime to treat human lives as virtual tradeable asset.

Legal Issues and Challenges in India

The legal mechanism governing human trafficking in India is currently in a state of drastic change, moving from the colonial-era Indian Penal Code (IPC) to the modern Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023. While this legislative overhaul introduces critical updates—such as the explicit criminalization of "Organized Crime" under Section 111 and the inclusion of "beggary" as a form of exploitation—significant legal and structural bottlenecks remain. According to the 2024 U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, India's anti-trafficking efforts are hindered by a shocking 81% acquittal rate for the criminal liability of traffickers. This low conviction rate suggests that while law enforcement is identifying more victims, the judicial system is failing to hold traffickers accountable, thereby warkeen the deterrent effect of the law. One of the most important legal challenges is the jurisdictional confusion created by the digital nature of modern syndicates. As identified in recent 2026 reports regarding the "Dunki" routes and interstate scam rackets, traffickers frequently move victims across state lines to exploit gaps in police coordination. While the government has operationalized 827 Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and the Cri-MAC platform for real-time data sharing, state-level AHTUs often lack the legal authority to register First Information Reports (FIRs) independently of local police stations. This division leads to the misclassification of trafficking cases as "missing person" reports or "kidnapping," effectively diluting the severity of the crime and skewing national statistics. Furthermore, there is a persistent lack of accountability

⁶ U.S. Department of State, 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: India (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2024).

regarding official complicity. According to the latest TIP report of 2024, it reveals that at local level law enforcement authorities and immigration officers help traffickers to operate with immunity from legal consequences or liability.⁷ This situation has become more serious by the “Gender Shift” In the criminal world, now woman offenders are used as digital recruiters so that the victims do not suspect them, but the current investigation procedure generally avoids these differences. Along with this several challenges are arising regarding the safety of the victims during implementation of BNSS. Section 396 of BNSS makes mandatory provision for preparing victims compensation scheme by state, but due to lack of non-lapsable fund at district level many victims have to wait years for to get compensation. Along with this, another legal loophole is that, the legal requirement for adult victims to remain in government run shelters without a magistrate’s order for release effectively amounts to “re-victimization.” Until the legal system harmonizes digital forensic capabilities with a truly victim-centered approach, the sophisticated “Digital Intermediaries” fueling India’s virtual markets will continue to evade justice.

Recommendations for Policy Reform

To effectively transition from a reactive “rescue” model to a proactive “forensic” strategy, India must address the systemic bottlenecks identified in the 2024–2026 period. The following policy reforms are recommended to dismantle the digital and physical infrastructure of modern slavery:

- **Strengthening and Clarifying the Mandate of AHTUs:** While the number of functional Anti-Human Trafficking Units has increased to 827 but their function and capabilities are not improved. Through policy reform must ensure that AHTUs have sufficient resources and fund they have such staffed who get special training in trauma-informed approaches and cyber-forensics. Along with this it is also necessary to clarify their jurisdiction so they not only focus in offence connected with child but also focus on bonded labour and tech enabled exploitation related crimes.
- **Targeting the Technical Infrastructure of “Digital Intermediaries”:** Due to technological advancement, it is need of time to update of criminal justice system to focus on the digital intermediaries which provide such infrastructure which enable

⁷ U.S. Department of State, 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: India (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2024).

transnational trafficking like encrypted VPN tunnels, AI-driven recruitment bots, and cryptocurrency laundering services. This involves enhancing the capabilities of the Crime Multi-Agency Centre (Cri-MAC) to facilitate real-time, cross-border digital forensics and intelligence sharing.⁸

- **Implementing Regular Audits and Freedom of Movement in Shelters:** Currently due to restricted movement in government run shelter often result in the "re-victimization" of survivors. Through policy reforms it should adopt mandatory regular, independent audits of all "Shakti Sadan" and "Mission Vatsalya" homes to ensure they meet official standards for trauma-informed care. Crucially, the requirement for a magistrate's order to leave a shelter should be replaced with a system that respects the freedom of movement for adult trafficking victims.⁹
- **Streamlining Victim Compensation and Restitution:** As we know that section 396 of BNSS provides mandatory provision for victim compensation scheme but many victims of human trafficking have to face unorecedented delay in receiving compensation amounts. Through policy reforms government should create of permanent not lapsable state lavel fund to provide agreed compensation amount by government which can be given immediately to victim. Apart from this government must have to focus on making judicial training more effective so that numbers of order for compensation can be given in trafficking realted criminal proceedings.
- **Ending Impunity for Official Complicity:** A zero-tolerance policy must be enforced regarding government employees and law enforcement officials being involved in trafficking crimes. This requires establishing independent oversight bodies to investigate allegations of corruption, bribery, or negligence within police stations and shelter homes, ensuring that politically connected traffickers are held criminally accountable without exception.
- **Formalizing Inter-State and International SOPs:** To eliminate jurisdictional confusion the government should finalize and implement comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the proactive identification and return of victims,

⁸ Ministry of Home Affairs, Crime Multi Agency Centre (Cri-MAC) Portal (Government of India, 2020).

⁹ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Shakti Sadan Scheme Guidelines: Integrated Relief and Rehabilitation Home (Government of India).

particularly across state lines and with neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal.

Conclusion

In India due to shift of human trafficking into digital enterprises, it necessary to make change in our national strategy to prevent trafficking. An this article highlighted that how red light district with use of digital technology tranform into virtual mandies provide loopholes to organised crime network to operate with unprecedented scale and anonymity. The digital chains of 2026 not only made from physical restrain but also from AI based driven recruitment, encrypted communication and the exploitation of jurisdictional loopholes by specialized digital intermediaries. The newly enforced the Bhartiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) 2023 provides a digital mechanism through crminalization of organised crime under section 111 with introduction of mandatory minimum punishment. But these legislative reforms are not alone sufficient to disband organised crime syndicate. India must focus in its institutional ambitions with ground reality of shocking 81% aquittal rate to move from the us state Department 'tier 2' status toward a 'Tier 1' ranking. The persent loopholes often widened by official involved in crime and a lack of accountability for government employees, remains the greatest obstacle to effective deterrence. Breaking this cycle requires a move toward a "forensic-first" investigation model. Law enforcement must look beyond the immediate rescue of victims to target the technical and financial infrastructure that sustains the trade. The operationalization of 827 Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and the use of the Crime Multi-Agency Centre (Cri-MAC) is important step towards coordination between States, but these tools must be consistently applied to identify and prosecute the high-level digital facilitators who protect actual crminal of trafficking. Furthermore, a truly effective response must remain victim-centered. The high rate of acquittals and the "re-traumatization" of survivors in government-run shelters—where freedom of movement is often restricted—deter victims from participating in the judicial process. The provision under Section 396 of the *Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita* (BNSS) for state-led victim compensation schemes must be implemented with transparency and speed to ensure that survivors are not merely rescued but successfully rehabilitated through scheme like "Shakti Sadan". Ultimately, the battle against modern slavery in the digital age will be won not just through the quantity of rescues, but through the finality of prosecutions and the strong support systems provided to those reclaimed from the shadows of the virtual market.

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