

The Cyber Nexus of Human Trafficking: Unveiling Digital Modus Operandi and Emerging Trends in Child Exploitation

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital ecosystem has transformed the operational structure of human trafficking operations, thus making it possible for perpetrators to use technological systems for recruiting victims and exploiting their situation to make profits anonymously and on an unprecedented level. The study explores the “cyber nexus” of human trafficking in general and focuses on evolving digital methods behind child exploitation. Departing from existing definitions of human trafficking, this paper provides an analysis of cyber exploitation using a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses criminological theories and social legal analysis along with technological processes. Using second-hand data including case laws and enforcement trends, the research outlines the cycle of cyber-based human trafficking that covers online grooming, deception and recruitment through social media sites and encrypted communication channels, digital coercion, live streaming of abuse and circulation of exploitative content through transnational networks. Special emphasis is made on algorithmic amplification, dark web marketplaces and financial innovations, including cryptocurrencies. From a legal standpoint, the paper will assess the sufficiency of current legal regulations, such as Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and Cyber laws in tackling the problems associated with cyber-facilitated human trafficking. Ultimately, this research will advocate for a paradigm shift from criminal justice approaches to technology-based regulation approaches, using AI-assisted detection mechanisms. By treating the crime of human exploitation as an adaptive cyber-facilitated business, this study provides a contribution to the growing field of digital criminology and calls for immediate legal and technological interventions against the emerging trend of child exploitation in cyberspace.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking has always been viewed as an organized crime taking place behind closed doors, in the context of specific territories. The movement of people across borders, venues, factories, or networks of informal work relations. Nevertheless, this conception of trafficking is increasingly inappropriate and does not reflect the new reality. Digitalization of interpersonal communications, business activities, and interactions has dramatically changed the field of trafficking operations. It has allowed the perpetrators to

move their criminal actions online making them invisible and much more difficult to regulate. The emergence of digital technologies has not only contributed to the perpetration of the crime, but has also become an active environment where it takes place. Social networking websites, messaging services. Gaming communities, and other digital communication channels have become the places where exploitation starts, is discussed, and maintained, especially with regards to children. In other words, there is no need for any physical abduction or coercion anymore. The children are particularly susceptible to such an emerging ecosystem. With their growing exposure in

the digital space, mostly unattended and filtered through algorithms, there are now new avenues that allow offenders to identify, approach, and exploit the child. Strategies like online grooming, identity misrepresentation, and psychological manipulation are practiced effectively, sometimes using the platform designs, which boost interaction without adequate consideration of the risk involved. Additionally, the adoption of streaming technologies and anonymous payment channels has facilitated real-time exploitation for financial gain that cuts across borders. Also, the adoption of anonymity tools, Dark Web, and cryptocurrency has led to transnational trafficking operations. Such trends have demonstrated the inadequacy of the current laws and call for pro-active, technology-led solutions.

2. HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human Trafficking is a multifaceted phenomenon which entails the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons by means of threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability or giving or receiving payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation is manifested in various ways and can include sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery like practices, servitude, and the removal of organs. Human exploitation is essentially an outrageous insult to human dignity and autonomy which turns a human into a commodity in the underworld economy. It is important to know that the genesis of human trafficking lies in the ancient civilization. A time when slavery and bonded labour was a social and legal norm. In civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece and Rome, people were regularly bought and sold for work and sexual pleasure. Although these were not called human trafficking but these practices encompassed all the key features of control, exploitation and commoditization of human beings. A major milestone in the history of trafficking is the international slave trade that took place in the 15th and 19th centuries. This. Involving the forced migration of millions of people for exploitation purposes across continents, marked the formation of organized and profit-oriented trafficking networks. Slavery abolition in the 19th century was not an end to exploitation but rather a shift to more clandestine and decentralized exploitation. The historical history of trafficking in India consists of indigenous forms of trafficking as well as the colonial forms of trafficking. Examples of bonded labour and Devadasi system show some of the earliest forms of exploitation based on social-economic stratification. In the colonial period, trafficking was more organized especially the trafficking of females and minors for prostitution in cities. The 20th century saw the slow realization of trafficking as an independent issue of law and human rights. These efforts started with international conventions on the trafficking of women and children, and then developed into more inclusive frameworks such as the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons. In India, the legislation on trafficking included. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956, and other criminal law measures that address exploitation in various ways.

3. CYBER NEXUS: TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED TRAFFICKING

Forced Exploitation was for long known as an offence involving physical restraint, geographical movement, and

forceful coercion of the victim. But the fast development of interconnectivity has dramatically changed this picture. The cyber-Nexus can be seen as the structural point where human trafficking and modern technologies meet. This is not only about the fact that traffickers use internet to facilitate the process, but mainly about the fact that technology has turned out to become the basis of the whole criminal enterprise. Technology enabled trafficking has led to a change in geographical locations into cyber hunting zones.

4. THE CONTINUUM OF EXPLOITATION

Cyber Nexus does not discard the classical features of trafficking - Act means and purpose. According to international conventions such as the UN Palermo protocol. However, it provides a radical transformation of how each feature plays out in the digital space:

- **The Act (What is done):** While the act of trafficking does not involve physical abduction or room to room recruitment, in cyber nexus, the act takes the form of algorithmic profiling, predatory behaviour in gaming lobbies and social media platforms, and scraping of personal data to identify susceptible victims.
- **The means (How it is done):** The means of trafficking involve physical violence and confinement; however, in cyber nexus, the means of trafficking are digital coercion, non-consensual use of images, and electronic surveillance. Confinement not in physical spaces but in virtual spaces where digital exposure of one's social life is a possibility.
- **The purpose (Why it is done):** Traditional trafficking exploits victims for physical labour or local sexual exploitation. In the case of cyber nexus, the exploitation involves digital means of monetization, and thus enables high-volume Pay per View live streams, subscription-only dark net forums and decentralized digital media trade.

5. DIGITAL MODUS OPERANDI OF TRAFFICKERS

The move from traditional physical to digital manipulation of the trafficking process has not changed the core goal of controlling and exploiting human trafficking. However, it has dramatically changed the way the process takes place. Modern-day traffickers utilize a sophisticated digital approach which incorporates such popular online resources as social media networks, encryption technologies, geolocation services, and digital payment systems. The use of these technologies allows for a much more efficient and anonymous operation which greatly complicates deducing and intervening in the process.

5.1 *Predatory Scouting and Target Identification*

In the digital environment, choosing victims is never random. The traffickers utilize sophisticated techniques of collecting information through social engineering in order to spot people who exhibit signs of vulnerability. By means of open-source intelligence, the offenders watch their digital footprint on the web, which includes their presence on social media sites and forums. Signs such as depression, loneliness, poverty, or poor self-esteem are analysed to choose potential targets. Algorithm driven platform makes this easier still. The recommendation systems that are made in order to categorize people according to their interest and activity tend to place the vulnerable individuals in the same digital spaces. These digital clusters are then exploited by the traffickers as the predefined digital

environments for recruitment. There are two major methods of recruitment. Active targeting where there is direct and personalized contact with individuals of choice. Passive targeting where false offers like jobs or modelling contracts are sent to lure the individuals.

5.2 Digital Grooming Mechanisms

Digital grooming refers to a calculated and progressive process of building trust, dependency and control over the victims. It differs from traditional grooming in the sense that the process of grooming in a digital environment enables a continuous interaction between the perpetrator and the victim. Typically, the offender develops an invented identity based on the emotions of the victim. The offender represents himself/herself as a supportive figure like a friend, romantic partner, or mentor in order to develop trust and emotional dependency. When a deeper connection is achieved, traffickers start testing personal boundaries by making simple requests to gradually get to information and intimate content. One of the key strategies is moving the conversation away from controlled platforms to encrypted apps where there is no possibility to be discovered or intervened.

5.3 Coercion Through Technology-Enabled Control

Once the psychological dependency is created, the trafficker uses coercion strategies to keep control over the victim. Instead of the physical captivity, the victims become subject to the digital form of surveillance and manipulation, which provides constant psychological pressure. Sextortion is one of the most common methods used by traffickers, who threaten to disclose intimate photos or videos to family, friends or institutions. Another method used by the offenders is surveillance; offenders use different applications for tracking or constantly ask victims to share their location. Digital identity manipulation adds yet another form of control. Individuals can be denied access to their own online accounts and have their identities hijacked, limiting their access to help and leaving them unable to seek aid. The combination of emotional bonding, surveillance and identity control makes an effective means of non-physical confinement.

5.4 Monetization and Decentralized Exploitation

Monetization of the abuse is the last step in the trafficking process, and digital technology allows this process to become decentralized and take on an international scope. Live streamed exploitation, where individuals are forced to perform sexual acts for an online audience, is one form of it. The acts performed are interactive, with viewers paying money to change the form of the abuse. Another way that traffickers earn money is by forcing their victims to create digital media, which is then traded internationally in online networks, often encrypted forums or peer-to-peer systems. Financial transactions in such networks are deliberately concealed. For their purposes, traffickers use privacy-oriented currencies, prepaid virtual tools, and alternative money transfer mechanisms to escape regulatory controls and anti-money laundering measures. Financial anonymity ensures not only support of the illegal market but also obstructs law enforcement's work aimed at the detection and destruction of trafficking networks.

6. EMERGING TRENDS IN CHILD EXPLOITATION

With the digital development of trafficking networks, there appear more and more sophisticated forms of Child

Exploitation, which do not require physical proximity and control as opposed to traditional methods of exploiting children. These developing trends represent the emergence of the new technological systems of abusing minors. One of the most disturbing trends is associated with the live streaming of the child abuse. Children are forced to commit some abuses in real time with the help of an online connection, where viewers are located far away in different locations. Such activities can be interactive because the abuser can order a child what he wants through some money transfer mechanisms. One more trend that is gaining popularity is the growing number of self-generated exploitive content. Offenders blackmail and force children to produce explicit material that can be distributed via various online platforms. Moreover, the content can be redistributed multiple times, causing harm to the victim throughout an extended period of time. The line between voluntarily produced content and coerced one can be drawn with blood, complicating the process of defining the crime and the protection of its victims. Online gaming platforms and social networking sites have become the critical spaces for the exploitation of children due to the anonymity, availability of constant interactions and large number of underage users. Moreover, recommendation algorithm of certain platforms can worsen the situation by exposing vulnerable users to dangerous communities or people. Additionally, the use of encryption and anonymization technologies has contributed to the creation of transnational closed networks, where the exchange of exploitive material and coordination of exploitation take place. Transactions within these networks take place using the methods of payment different from traditional currency. One prominent aspect of such emerging trends is the growing normalization of exploitation. Abusive activities become integral parts of all digital activities, thus making them hard to recognize for guardians, platform operators, and law enforcement agencies. Unaware of dangers that lurk on the internet, children can fail to see manipulations, becoming vulnerable to abuse.

7. BONA FIDE OCCURRENCES

7.1. Operation of The International CSEAM of The Delhi Police, July 2026

In mid-July 2026, the police force of the Central District of Delhi launched an attack at various police stations, namely I.P. Estate, Paharganj, and Chandni Mahal, filing ten FIRs and detaining ten individuals, aged from 25 to 30. The perpetrators exploited cloud-based storage systems, Android or iOS apps, and encrypted social media platforms to download, distribute, and store the materials related to the sexual exploitation and abuse of children. This enforcement operation was based on the automated digital indicators and actionable intelligence provided by the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children via International Cyber Tiplines.

7.2. 2024 To 2026 CBI and NIA-Cyber Slavery Networks Crackdowns

Towards late 2023, several young Indians searching for jobs on various social media such as Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp were enticed by job postings that promised high salaries of up to 1000 to 1500 dollars per month in customer service, IT support and digital marketing jobs without tax deductions in Thailand. Sub agents from cities such as Lucknow, Delhi and Mumbai provided logistical support while the masterminds behind these scams such as Nipender Chaudhary and Nilesh Narpatsingh Purohit were arrested by

the CBI. Between 2024 and 2026, Indian law enforcement authorities such as the Central Bureau of Investigation and the National Investigation Agency conducted series of crackdowns against transnational cyber slavery networks. Through these operations, a disturbing trend was identified in the use of cyber slaves to commit digital crimes while being involved in human trafficking. As early as December 2024, the NIA arrested an absconder accused of involvement in human trafficking and cyber slavery in Laos. In 2025, the CBI filed multiple cases of trafficking of Indian nationals to the cybercrime compounds in Southeast Asia, specifically in Myanmar. The victims had been promised with lucrative job offers and were subsequently kept in full confinement. After participating in online scams and frauds such as phishing and financial scams. The year 2026 saw increased efforts for the arrest of the masterminds and dismantling of organized syndicate. The cybercrime compounds, which are also called scam compounds are trafficking zones where individuals are forced to indulge in the acts of cybercrimes by coercion and threats.

7.3. *The Chhattisgarh Instagram Grooming and Interstate Trafficking Case of 2024*

An offender groomed a young girl on Instagram for a few months using emotional manipulation and romance to distance her from her family members. After convincing her to meet up with him in person, he physically assaulted her and trafficked her to another state Rajasthan in exchange for 3,00,000 INR on the pretext of forced marriage. This represents the vector from online grooming to trafficking offline, where the social media algorithm enables direct messaging unregulated to function as entry points to forced marriage and sexual slavery.

7.4. *Bihar Shelter Home Abuse Case, 2025*

In the State of Bihar, 2025SSC Online SC 1490, the Supreme Court struck down a bail order issued by the High Court in favor of an official guilty of running a heinous abuse and trafficking network inside a state-run shelter facility for women. The Supreme Court ruled that the granting of bail cannot be mechanical in all cases of trafficking and sexual abuse in institutions involving women and girls. Secure video conferencing was made mandatory as testimony safeguards, thereby allowing statements to be recorded without forcing victims to confront the accused traffickers directly inside open courtrooms.

7.5. *Prajwala Vs Union of India, 2026*

Arising from PIL, filed by the Anti Trafficking Organization. In this matter the Supreme Court of India framed a groundbreaking 297 pages' framework dealing with the shortcomings in the process of rescue, rehabilitation and protection of the victims of trafficking of women and children. The significance of this case was that the apex court set a binding scheme of victim protection throughout India, whereby the survivor has to be treated only as a victim and not an offender. The apex court held that if there was trafficking that occurred through cyber deception, extortion and exploitation of vulnerability then it would be legally nullified. In addition, this case reiterated that the right to life under Article 21 also includes digital rehabilitation.

8. IMPACT AND VULNERABILITY OF THE VICTIMS

The effect of Child Exploitation goes well beyond the initial act of violation and includes significant and long-lasting effects

on psychological, social and developmental levels. Digitally mediated cases. This damage often takes place because of the repetitive and everlasting nature of the exploitive materials, as well as continuous access of the victim to the preparators. On the psychological level, victims usually suffer from trauma in the form of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation. Many scholars point out that Child Exploitation is highly correlated with the internalizing problems like depression and withdrawal and the externalizing ones such as aggression and risk-taking behaviour. Moreover, being exposed to exploitation, especially in digital environments, can trigger victimization cycle in which previous traumatization contributes to the further exploitation. The digital aspect makes the damage even more substantial. Contrary to the traditional ways of exploitation, online violation leads to an everlasting circulation of the materials. The victims are therefore being exposed to the continuous psychological distress as they know that their image will never stop being viewed and distributed. Many researches indicate that those children who have been abused before, socially isolated or those suffering from mental issues and having economic problems are at a higher risk of victimization. In terms of digital environment, these weaknesses are intensified by the use of algorithms, anonymity and lack of adequate supervision. Exploiters intentionally take advantage of these factors through the use of specific grooming techniques, targeting their victims according to emotional distress indicators and behavioural patterns. Furthermore, the effects of victimization are felt in the sphere of social development. For instance, the victim may suffer from stigmatization and disruption of educational process, as well as inability to form trustful relations in future. The loss of individuality and autonomy, especially when the manipulation of digital identity occurs, makes it even harder for victims since it cuts off their communication and delays the process of intervention. Another aspect of vulnerability relates to insufficient digital literacy among children which leads to ignorance of grooming or cohesion, especially if it is presented to the victim in form of friendship or mentoring. Besides, fear of stigmatization or retaliatory measures, as well as disbelief of adults, does not allow the child to report the incident.

9. REGULATORY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The legal approach to the problem of human trafficking is embedded in a multilayered system comprising constitutional mandates, domestic criminal law, special legislations and international commitments. The fragmented but developing legal structure is characterized by the complexity of human trafficking which includes human rights abuse and international organized crime. At the constitutional level, trafficking of human beings is banned under Article 23 of Indian Constitution. The constitutional provision regarding prohibition against trafficking is complemented by criminal laws on trafficking and exploitation. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, serves as the principal criminal legislation dealing with the issue of trafficking in India. According to Sections 134 and 114 of the BNS, trafficking is defined in accordance with international definitions as recruitment, transportation, harbouring or reception of persons for exploitation purposes through coercive or deceptive actions. The BNS provides strict penalties for traffickers, especially in those cases where children are involved. Along with the BNS, there is also specific legislation such as Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, and the Immoral Traffic

Prevention Act 1956 that deals with trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. Furthermore, the Information Technology Act 2000 helps to address the problem of cyber enabled trafficking through the criminalization of creation, transmission and storage of exploitive digital content. In an international context, the legal framework is based on United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the supplement to this convention – the Palermo Protocol 2000. The protocol provides a universal definition of trafficking based on three components: acts, means and purpose and promotes Tri party strategy of prevention, protection and prosecution. This international standard has considerably affected national legal systems, among them – Indian trafficking laws.

10. ENFORCEMENT AND INVESTIGATIVE CHALLENGES

Enforcement and investigation of laws addressing cyber trafficking networks is a challenge due to the complexity of legal and technological jurisdictions involved. Despite the development of legal measures that take into account digital methods of exploitation, the rapid pace of change and international nature of trafficking networks create considerable difficulties. Jurisdiction is among the main challenges associated with cyber-enabled human trafficking. Such forms of trafficking are likely to involve several people who act from various nations and make use of different servers, platforms, and financial transactions that take place within different jurisdictions. This situation complicates identification of applicable jurisdiction, slows down investigation process, and calls for assistance of international law, which is time-consuming and complicated. Evidentiary problems are likely to be among the most significant obstacles to prosecution of cyber-human trafficking cases. For instance, chat logs, metadata, and encryption make it necessary to employ specific knowledge for collection, preservation and admissibility of digital evidence. Besides, due to the volatility of evidence and use of end-to-end encryption and anonymizing technologies, it is challenging to prove responsibility of the suspect through chain of custody. Another major obstacle is the issue of the role of digital platforms and intermediary liability. Though the social media sites and instant messaging apps play a significant role in the deduction and prevention of the trafficking operations, yet their collaboration with the law enforcement officials is erratic. There may be issues related to privacy policies, encryption and liability regulations, which can prevent timely access to vital information. Absence of consistent global standards for the liability of the platforms becomes an additional problem in this case. Asymmetry of the technological capabilities between offenders and law enforcement authorities also becomes a serious problem. The traffickers use sophisticated technology including virtual private networks, dark web technologies and cryptocurrency-based financial transactions to prevent dedication of their actions. At the same time, many law enforcement organizations experience certain problems in terms of their technological capacities. Another set of complications that arise with digital human trafficking involves victim identification and protection. They may not always be physically present or recognize themselves as victims because of being manipulated, intimidated or unaware. The use of solely digital evidence tends to dehumanize crimes, thus making the process of finding and rescuing victims rather problematic. Furthermore, stigma, threats of retaliation and mistrust in the police hinder them

from revealing the crime. A conflict between data privacy and surveillance poses a perpetual problem. Even though increased surveillance and accessibility to the data are crucial in discovering human trafficking networks, there is a need to strike a balance between privacy and protection of such information.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the rapidly changing reality of cyber-facilitated human trafficking, it is necessary to move away from the reactive measures to proactive approaches based on technologies and victims' needs. Because of the magnitude, speed and international character of digital trafficking, mere legal responses are no longer enough. There is an important priority in increasing technology capabilities for detection and prevention. The application of AI tools can substantially increase the possibilities of identifying suspicious behaviour patterns, such as grooming, trafficking, trafficking networks, and distribution of exploitative materials. Proactive surveillance technology, coupled with human supervision, can help intervene at an early stage with minimal false-positive outcomes. At the same time, it should be carefully designed not to overstep privacy principles and norms. Equally important would-be increasing accountability of the platforms. Digital intermediaries have an important role in both perpetration and prevention of exploitation. Increased regulatory obligations of content moderators, reporting of illegal activity, and cooperation with law enforcement could provide better response mechanism. Moreover, standardization of global guidelines regarding intermediary liability and data sharing would increase cross-border enforcement efforts. On a legal level, it is important to adapt the current framework to the reality of digital crime. It involves improving the admissibility of digital evidence and mechanisms of international cooperation. Specialized cybercrime units in law enforcement agencies endowed with forensic capabilities are imperative in the process of investigating and prosecuting such crimes. The victim-centric approach needs to remain central to response strategies. This not only entails the need for early identification and rescue, but also for the subsequent processes of rehabilitation that will include psychosocial counselling and restoration of digital identities. There will also be the need for the special consideration of children, whose safety and well-being requires special safeguarding through safe reporting channels and enhanced digital education.

Building capacity and awareness is equally important. Training of law enforcement and judicial officials about the dynamics of cyber enable trafficking will go a long way in ensuring proper institutional responses. In addition to this, there is also the potential of public awareness efforts that would target the parents and educators as well as the youth on how to engage the digital space carefully. International collaboration is equally important given that cyber enable trafficking is boundless. There is the need for frameworks for cooperation between different countries, international organizations and technology companies.

12. CONCLUSION

The emergence of human trafficking in the context of the modern digital age represents a major shift in terms of means and magnitude whereby the process of exploitation is no longer restricted to physical spaces but becomes integrated into the day-to-day technological processes. This research has shown

that Cyber Nexus of trafficking takes place via advanced technological means whereby offenders are able to recognize, manipulate and exploit their victims, especially children, in an efficient and anonymous way. The discussion of the digital modus operandi has presented a well-organized approach starting from the online targeting and grooming process up to coercion and monetary gain due to such tools as encrypted communication, algorithmic exposure and decentralized finance. Even in light of the presence of the framework of laws and regulations, there remain issues concerning the enforcement of the laws and the investigations, especially in terms of jurisdiction and evidence standards. This is one of the shortcomings of the reactive response to technologically

advanced crime. In any case, the fight against cyber-enabled human exploitation needs a new paradigm shift into a proactive approach based on technology, as well as focused on victims. Increased international cooperation, digital forensic expertise and measures to protect children are critical for the issue

Conflict of Interest

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