

Needed: an anti-trafficking law

Human trafficking is a crime in itself, but it is also the propeller of several other crimes

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Sita was 13 years old when she was trafficked. Her parents worked in a tea garden in Assam for meagre wages. She was trafficked to a placement agency in New Delhi, and bought for about ₹20,000 as a domestic worker by a couple. Sita was not paid a single rupee. Instead, she was re-trafficked, raped, and exploited by employers and traffickers. Sita's father and I found the young girl trapped in a house in Delhi three years later. But she did not step out when we found her. She hid behind a wall, crying. "I cannot show my face to my father. I am impure now. I want to kill myself," she said.

This is the reality of thousands of women and children from the poorest sections of our society. No nation can call itself civilised if it tolerates the buying and selling of its daughters. Of what meaning is the wealth, power or progress of a nation if its children are traded as though in medieval slave trade, at a lower price than cattle?

A comprehensive Bill

Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) and various civil society groups have campaigned for decades for a strong law to end this menace of human trafficking. In 2017, Sita and thousands of survivors like her marched in the Bharat Yatra alongside students, governments, the judiciary, multifaith leaders, businesses and civil society to demand for such a law. We covered 12,000 km with over 1.2 million people on foot with the single demand that India must pass a comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation. The passionate chants of these brave hearts who survived trafficking still reverberate in my ears, "*Bikne ko taiyaar nahi hum, lutne ko taiyaar nahi hum* (We are not ready to be sold, we are not ready to be stolen)".

The Government of India has proposed the Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2021. This Bill aims to tackle all aspects of trafficking including the social and economic causes of the crime, punishment to traffickers, and the protection and rehabilitation of

survivors. This is achievable if the Bill has the necessary checks and balances against potential misuse of power by agencies, periodic reviews of the law, and adequate allocation of resources for effective implementation. The government must include these crucial provisions in the Bill and facilitate its smooth passage in the current session of Parliament.

A problem worsened by COVID

COVID-19 has further intensified the need for the law. Traffickers are taking advantage of prolonged school closures and loss of family livelihood. BBA with government agencies has rescued almost 9,000 children from trafficking since the first lockdown. In comparison, about half this number of children were rescued during the same time period of 14 months preceding the pandemic. The gravity of the situation cannot be undermined. We will not recover from the effects of the pandemic without the wherewithal to address its human impact, which comes with this law and its associated budgets.

Human trafficking is a crime in itself, but it is also the propeller of several other crimes. It creates a parallel black economy which fuels child labour, child marriage, prostitution, bonded labour, forced beggary, drug-related crimes, corruption, terrorism and other illicit businesses. The architects of our Constitution established the severity of the crime of trafficking by making it the only offence punishable under the Constitution of India itself, besides untouchability. A strong anti-trafficking law is the moral and constitutional responsibility of our elected leaders, and a necessary step towards nation-building and economic progress. It is non-negotiable for the realisation of an India that our Constitution-makers envisioned, our freedom fighters struggled for, our soldiers die for, and our children deserve. India is stepping into its 75th year of Independence. There can be no greater gift to India than the freedom of our children. I call on Parliament to urgently pass a strong anti-trafficking law.

Kailash Satyarthi is a Nobel Laureate