



Trafficking Rears its Head in Sikkim

I will give you whatever fare you want, just drive us to Melli,' an offer taxi drivers of Gyalshing in West Sikkim almost never get. Deepak Gurung said 'yes' but a couple of things made him suspicious. One: the little child with the woman appeared to be from a local school. Two: the woman was constantly speaking to someone on the phone in Bengali and even looked nervous. The driver was alert and cared to quickly inform the police. It turned out that the child was being trafficked. She was on her way back home when she was picked up. This is one case where an alert citizen intervened and saved a little girl, but hundreds are less fortunate.

Every year, thousands of girls are trafficked out of the Eastern Himalayas. Lured out of their homes with the promise of good pay, most of them are exploited, some as cheap labour in homes and others forced into the sex trade. The number of girls reported missing was relatively low a couple of years back, but this trafficking seems to have suddenly zoomed in, especially in North Bengal. According to government reports, from 196 in 2001, the numbers of those missing have gone up to over 2000 in 2014. These are primarily the cases that were officially re-

ported with the police; there are a larger number of cases that still go unreported. The hills of Darjeeling district and the Dooars are the most vulnerable because women here outnumber men. As employment opportunities shrink, most of them look to travel out to make money for their families, and hence become the prime target.

'The girls from Darjeeling and surrounding areas are high in demand because of their fair skin. These girls are forced into the sex trade not only in India but now increasingly shipped out illegally to the middle-east,' says Nirnay John Chettri, General Secretary of MARG (Mankind in Action for Rural Growth). The NGO has been fighting traffickers rescuing girls from all over the country. The perpetrators have become so brazen that they have started advertising in local newspapers. Most of these adverts call for smart girls to work in beauty and massage parlours with a promised pay of over Rs 30,000 a month. 'For a girl whose parents earn less than ₹ 3,000 a month, it is a lot of money and they often fall prey to such schemes,' says Chettri. A fraction of the missing girls from the hills have been traced. In some cases, local boys are involved—they promise marriage and a good life

in the city. Once away, they force these girls into prostitution.

The worrying trend is the involvement of local police in many cases. In 2012, the CBI's anti-human trafficking wing rescued 18 girls, mostly from the Northeast, from Dwarka's Umrahi village. The operation was carried out without the help of the local Delhi police. Sources at CBI point out that the criminal network is so organized that even top officials are compromised. In this crackdown, fake Nepalese passports were also recovered. The girls were being prepared to be sent abroad.

So, how do we stop this? By making people aware of these rackets that exist across cities. They have to be empowered to verify their future employer. NGOs can step in and be a link. A database of girls who plan to work outside of their state or are working outside has to be maintained—this will help investigators should she go 'missing'. Some of the NGOs are working on awareness programmes, but they are still few and far in between. Volunteers must be recruited from schools and colleges to raise awareness through their reach in the social media. The message has to get through. 📢

The author is Business Editor, CNN IBN.