

A Critical Review of Child Trafficking, Street-Based Exploitation, and Special Education in the Indian Context

Nikhat Perveen^{1*}, Dr. Neeru Nagar²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

²Assistant Professor, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

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Child trafficking is a serious violation of children's rights and a huge social challenge in India remains. Although poverty, migration, exploitation of workers and gender inequality are widely identified as reasons for trafficking, children with disabilities and special weaknesses have been given comparatively less and sustained attention. Many children with disabilities face social exclusion, limited access to education, barriers in conversation and weak security systems; all these things increase the risk of their exploitation, neglect and abuse. This paper explores the relations between child trafficking, on-streets exploitation and special education in India. It considers the status of begging, selling goods on traffic signals and other types of work for children on the roads. It argues that though not every such child is a victim of trafficking, these situations often indicate deep problems like poverty, educational exclusion, family weakness and inadequate social security. Children with disabilities are shown at a greater risk because dependence, social stigma and limited educational opportunities can be intentionally exploited to and often done. From a view of structural violence, social exclusion, ability attitudes and child rights, this paper argues that an integrated response is needed by incorporating education, rehabilitation, differently abled and combining community participation in India to deal with child trafficking. The paper reaches the conclusion that strengthening inclusive and special education systems is not a minor welfare remedy, but a main foundation for trafficking prevention.

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Introduction

Child trafficking in India persists at a scale that official statistics only partially capture. The National Crime Records Bureau recorded 2,135 cases of human trafficking in 2024, with 2,297 of the 6,018

identified victims being children, while crimes against children as a whole reached 187,702 cases in the same year, the highest figure in a decade (NCRB, cited in India Spend, 2026; NCRB, cited in The Logical Indian, 2026). The United States

Department of State's most recent assessment similarly records that enforcement remains inconsistent, that bonded labor affects a far larger population than sex trafficking alone, and that conviction rates remain low relative to the scale of the problem (U.S. Department of State, 2025). These figures, troubling as they are, still understate the reality, since children who beg, vend, or work informally on the street are frequently absent from crime statistics altogether, being treated as a social nuisance rather than as children in need of protection (Consortium for Street Children, 2020).

A dimension of this problem that has received disproportionately little scholarly and policy attention is disability. It is well documented, across South Asia that organized begging networks specifically seek out children with disabilities, or deliberately injure and disable healthy children, because a visibly impaired child elicits greater public sympathy and therefore greater income (Chaudhry and Mohyuddin, 2014). Indian newspaper investigations and state task forces have repeatedly confirmed that begging in Indian cities is often not a spontaneous response to poverty but an organised criminal enterprise that recruits, controls and, in some cases, mutilates children (The Statesman, 2025; UNODC, 2024). At the same time, children with disabilities in India are already disproportionately excluded from schooling: national data from the Unified District Information System for Education shows that children with special needs make up a strikingly small share of total enrolment relative to their estimated share of the child population, and empirical studies in Delhi and Tamil Nadu confirm that Differently abled children start school later, drop out earlier, and learn less while enrolled than their non-Differently abled peers (Bakhshi, Babulal and Trani, 2017; Aruldas et al., 2023).

This paper brings these two bodies of evidence together. It argues that special and inclusive education is not merely a welfare entitlement but a frontline child protection mechanism, and that its weak implementation in India leaves Differently abled and street-connected children in a position of compounded vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. The paper proceeds by reviewing the existing literature on child trafficking, street-based exploitation and disability-inclusive education in India; identifying the gaps that this literature leaves open; setting out the objectives and research questions that follow from those gaps; developing a theoretical framework combining structural violence, social exclusion and child rights perspectives; examining two illustrative cases; and discussing the implications for policy and practice.

Literature Review

India is the source, transit and destination country together for human trafficking, where the scale of trafficking occurs within the country is much larger than border-country movement (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Government data looks quite fluctuations, but the problem burden remains constant, 2,878 child victims were found in 2022, whose number rose to 2,297 in the count of 2024; these found the main causes of sexual abuse and forced or forced wage trafficking (NCRB, 2024). In NCRB, States like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal are often identified as source areas which show the deep rural poverty, seasonal migration and weak local framework for the safety of children (The Law. Institute, 2026). Civil Society Organizations argue that these government figures show the real severity of the problem, as low reporting of cases, not recognizing victims properly and trafficking children who suffer from (CRY India, 2026).

Street-based work, begging and exploitation

The 'Consortium for Street Children' (2020) makes a difference between children who are alive dependent on the road to stay alive, whether alone, with friends or with family and the limited category of children who are formally trafficked. It also warns that both these categories are connected to each other, but are not the same. Every child who sell goods on traffic signal or begging with parents does not suffer trafficking; many children associated with the road live with their families and work to pass by due to poverty (Consortium for Street Children, 2020)[1]. Nevertheless, many reports show that Indian cities have a separate and organized network of begging children to bend that criminals run gangs. These gangs' pedestrian children, by making bondage in exchange for the debt or by 'renting children' from poor families (UNODC, 2024; CRY India, 2026). State governments have started action directly on this pattern: Begging children in the 2025 anti-begging initiative of Haryana has been considered not just the result of poverty, but the 'an organized criminal blaze'. At the same time, Punjab's Jeevanjot programme has saved dozens of children from the begging network and has launched a 'conditional cash transfer' plan to reduce the pressure of begging families (The Statesman, 2025; Babushahi.com, 2026).

Disability as a vulnerability

The most troubling and the least discussed work of begging in South Asia is the conscious exploitation of using disability as an asset for economic benefits. Research in Pakistan has shown that one of the

begging children was made differently abled worth mistake or consciously or training them to look differently abled, because of a clearly visible disability increases people's empathy and consequently earnings (Chaudhary and Mohyuddin, 2014). Indian press investigation and NGO reports also revealed the same things in Indian cities including making children crippled, blind or deliberately handicapped so that their 'price' could be increased in the begging network (Xinhua, 2017). Whether a child is already Differently abled in the begged network or created Differently abled after joining the network, the thinking behind it is the same, smuggling disability looks like an equal instead of security and support. Compared to information on trafficking for sexual abuse or bonded wages, there has been very little research on this engagement of disability and trafficking in the Indian context.

Special and inclusive education implementation gaps

Since 2016, the legal framework for inclusive education in India has developed considerably. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 replaced the limited law of 1995, extended the recognized categories of disability by seven to exquisite, and made it mandatory to provide inclusive education for those having received funding from the government and for educational institutions recognized by the government (cited in Government of India, 2016; vikaspedia, Government of India, 2016). After this the 'National Education Policy 2020' re-established inclusive education as a basic principle and aimed at a 2.5 to 3 percent enrolment rate for children with special needs (Inclusive Education Initiative, 2020). However, the work of implementing it actually has been quite behind the legal goals compared to. A research in New Delhi showed that Differently abled children were less likely to start school, they were more likely to leave school early, and they were less likely to complete their full learning process than non-Differently abled children; this difference was the highest in terms of girls, economically backward children and children whose home heads were illiterate (Babulal and Trani, 2017). Bad teacher training as repeatedly incoming barriers in a qualitative study made between Differently abled children and their caregivers in Tamil Nadu, school structure that was not compatible with the Differently abled, costly transportation, security concerns, and negative attitude of staff and peers were identified (Aruldas etc., 2023). Evaluation of plans like 'Sarv shiksha Abhiyan 'Inclusive Education for Disabilities at a middle level' shows that getting fixed funds for every child is often

delayed, and despite Differently abled children formally nominate their peers face discrimination and abuse (cited in Government of India, 2016).

Research Gaps

Three shortcomings come out of such studies. First, poverty, migration and gender in India is considered to be the main reason for danger in child trafficking research, while disability is rarely or too low; in the context of India there is no solid research that explains directly how disability is used in a trafficking and begging network, as seen in Pakistan's case. Secondly, research on inclusive education in India is often carried out in isolation from child safety and anti-trafficking studies, which analyses schools are analyzed based on only learning results, not as possible places of early identification and safety of children at risk. Third, existing policy responses or inclusive education plans work through different government departments and there is no special record of the coordination between them; this keeps a framework deficient, due to which children on the roads and differently abled can discount without any help.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the patterns and drivers of child trafficking as they affect children with disabilities and street-based exploitation in India.
- To identify the structural and institutional barriers that prevent inclusive education systems from reaching street-connected and differently abled children.
- To develop a theoretically grounded argument for integrating disability inclusion into anti-trafficking policy and practice in India.

Research Questions

- Why are children with disabilities and street children particularly vulnerable to trafficking in India?
- What challenges do differently abled and street children face in accessing education and support services?
- How can anti-trafficking policy be made genuinely inclusive of children with disabilities?

Approach and Methodological Note

The study is qualitative, doctrinal and desk-based. It synthesizes four categories of authentic material: government crime data (NCRB); statutory and constitutional law and judicial reasoning; peer-reviewed empirical research published in indexed journals; and verified investigative and official reporting on state enforcement action. It presents

no new primary data. Two illustrations are examined in depth the Supreme Court's reasoning in a landmark trafficking case, and the documented modus operandi of disability-targeting begging networks each selected to demonstrate a distinct dimension of the central argument.

Theoretical Framework

Johann Galtung's[2] 'structural violence' (structural violence) concept describes harm that is caused by unequal social and institutional systems rather than by a specific individual (Galtung, 1969). This is when people cannot achieve their full potential due to reasons like poverty, disability or social inequality. For example, a child not going to school is a kind of violence due to poverty, disability or remote area, even if a person does not directly cause this deprivation. This view helps to understand that child trafficking is not just a person's criminal work. Straight violence related to trafficking, such as kidnapping, forced wages or bonded wages, often can be caused by pre-existing structural issues such as poverty, depriving education and discrimination with children with disabilities. These inequalities weaken children's safety and make them more sensitive to becoming victims of exploitation by traffickers.

Social exclusion is not limited to just income or lack of physical resources; rather, it tells processes through which individuals or groups are deprived of meaningful participation in social, economic and community life. Sen (2000) argues that absence should be understood beyond only economic loss and look at those actual opportunities and lack of freedom that enable individuals to live the life of their choice. That full boycott (where individuals are completely deprived of access to social systems) and adverse inclusion. This Perception is particularly relevant to understand the educational experiences of Differently abled children in India. Although policy interventions have improved the facility of going to school, physical presence in educational institutions doesn't always mean real inclusion. Many Differently abled children still face barriers such as an unsuitable atmosphere of learning, limited availability of support services, difficulties in communication and discriminatory attitude, which limit their meaningful participation and learning outcomes (Bakshi, Babulal and Trani, 2017; UNICEF, 2021). Thus, exclusion can remain within systems made for inclusion too.

The focus of the capacity approach capability approach focuses only on measuring access to whether individuals have the real capacity to achieve valuable results. In terms of education, it emphasizes that success of inclusion should not only be done by indicators such as enrollment and

appearance, but should be done on the basis of to what extent education increases children's abilities, decision-making power (agency) and opportunities for social participation (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011). For children facing social and economic vulnerabilities, limited educational capabilities can reduce future choices and increase exposure to exploitation, forced labour, and trafficking. Therefore, addressing social exclusion requires not only institutional access but also the creation of supportive environments that enable children to develop their potential and participate with dignity in society.

The child rights framework recognises children with disabilities, as rights holders entitled to protection, education, development, and participation. They are not passive recipients of welfare. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), along with India's Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, establishes the state's responsibility to prevent discrimination and ensure child protection (United Nations, 1989; Government of India, 2016).

In *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India* (2011)[3], the Supreme Court reinforced this rights-based approach by recognising trafficked children as victims requiring rescue, rehabilitation, and protection rather than criminalisation. Disabled children are at greater risk due to dependence, barriers in conversation and limited social support. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to both the immediate needs of child safety and the wider social situation that limit children's capabilities and increase their risk of being victimized to abuse.

How Disability Increases Exploitative Value

Research on organised begging networks highlights that disability can become a specific factor of exploitation rather than merely an associated vulnerability among child beggars. In their study on begging and trafficking in Pakistan, Chaudhary and Mohayuddin (2011) found that a huge part of begging children was such that resulting from accidents, intentional injuries, or deliberate harm, as visible disabilities often generated greater public sympathy and higher earnings for exploiters. This shows that children with disabilities can be made a deliberate target as their economic prices can increase in the exploiting systems. Therefore, by analysing child trafficking only on the basis of extensive factors like poverty, gender may overlook the distinct ways in which disability itself can be manipulated for profit. A comprehensive child protection approach must recognise disability as an intersecting vulnerability and address the specific risks faced by children whose impairments are

exploited by trafficking and begging networks (Chaudhry and Mohyuddin, 2011).

Case Illustration: Organised Begging Networks and State Enforcement

Punjab's parallel 'Project Jeevanjot', launched in September 2024, rescued several hundred children from begging over its first nine months and, under the state sponsorship scheme, provides ₹4,000 per month for the continued education of identified children; parents who coerce children into begging may, after counselling, be declared 'unfit guardians', opening a route to alternative care (Babushahi.com, 2025). Two features of the Punjab data bear directly on this study. First, among the children rescued, seventeen were found to be differently-abled and victims of physical abuse an official confirmation, from Indian rescue operations, of the disability-targeting pattern documented in the wider literature. Second, on a subsequent review, fifty-seven children previously rescued were found missing again from the schools or homes to which they had been sent, raising the possibility that they had fallen back into begging or trafficking networks. Rescue alone, in other words, did not hold.

Read together, these cases show a consistent pattern: disability is sought out or manufactured by networks because it increases economic return, and state responses that focus solely on removing children from the street without embedding them durably in disability-aware education and welfare systems risk only temporarily interrupting the cycle of exploitation rather than ending it.

Recently state-level efforts in India have received important information about the organised crime of begging children and the difficulties involved in such networks. In 2025, Haryana State Child Rights Protection Commission launched a coordinated campaign under the Central Government's SMILE scheme to deal with the problem of begging children in urban areas. In this initiative, children begging in traffic signals, religious sites and markets were identified and reserved, emphasized measures for rehabilitation to present and prevent child welfare committees under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 to present and prevent re trafficking and re victimisation (The Statesman, 2025).

A similar initiative was also taken through Punjab's 'Project Jeevan Jot (2025)[4] in which the children engaged in demanding begging were given attention to saving and connecting them with education and welfare assistance systems. This initiative was given economic help for children's education and also ways to deal with the role of parents in begging (Babushahi.com, 2025). First, among the children rescued, seventeen were found to be differently-abled and victims of physical abuse, an official

confirmation, from Indian rescue operations, of the disability-targeting pattern documented in the wider literature. Second, on a subsequent review, fifty-seven children previously rescued were found missing again from the schools or homes to which they had been sent, raising the possibility that they had fallen back into begging or trafficking networks. Rescue alone, in other words, did not hold.

Therefore, disability-sensitive security systems are needed for effective measures, which can address both of them and social conditions promoting immediate rescue needs and repeated exploitation.

The Gap Between Enrolment and Learning

Enrolment patterns indicate that children with disabilities continue to represent a small proportion of the overall school population. It suggests persistent gaps between policy commitments towards inclusive education and actual participation. Studies have highlighted that although the enrolment of children with disabilities has improved over time. But their representation remains limited, particularly at higher levels of education. The dropout and exclusion become more visible according to the details from UNICEF, (2021). Research conducted by Bakhshi, Babulal and Trani (2017) in New Delhi demonstrates that children with disabilities face greater barriers in accessing and continuing education compared to their peers who are non-disabled. These barriers include institutional support which is inadequate, including social attitudes that restrict their educational participation. Thus, the challenge is not only ensuring school entry but also creating inclusive systems that enable children with disabilities to remain in education and benefit from meaningful learning opportunities.

Enrolment alone is an indicator which is insufficient, as physical presence in schools does not necessarily ensure participation, learning, or social acceptance. Studies on inclusive education in India indicate that children with disabilities often continue to experience barriers related to inadequate teacher preparation, limited availability resources, inaccessible learning environments, and discriminatory attitudes among teachers and peers (Singal, 2016; UNICEF, 2021). These conditions reflect Sen's concept of "unfavourable inclusion," where individuals are formally included within social institutions but remain unable to access their substantive benefits (Sen, 2000)[5]. Thus, a child with a disability may be enrolled in a classroom while still being excluded from meaningful educational experiences and full participation in school life.

Why the Gap Persists Despite Strong Law

The persistence of this gap despite two decades of progressively stronger legislation is best explained through the structural-violence lens. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) both articulate an ambitious, rights-based vision of inclusion (Government of India, 2016). The exclusion experienced by children with disabilities is not the result of a single institutional failure but reflects broader structural inequalities within education and social protection systems. In Galtung's (1969) understanding, such conditions represent structural violence, where unequal social arrangements and institutional limitations restrict the opportunities of vulnerable groups without a clearly identifiable cause.

Research on inclusive education in India highlights certain barriers such as inadequate teacher training process, inaccessible infrastructure and transport, limited learning support, and social stigma, which prevent many children with disabilities from achieving meaningful participation in schools (Singal, 2016; UNICEF, 2021). From a capability perspective, inclusion cannot be measured only through enrolment; rather, it depends on whether education enhances children's abilities, independence, and social participation (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011). When educational inclusion remains only formal, children with disabilities continue to experience dependency, communication barriers, and restricted opportunities, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, forced begging, and trafficking. Therefore, effective inclusion requires strengthening institutional support systems that expand children's capabilities and reduce the structural conditions that enable exploitation.

Case Study: Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2011)

In *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India & Others* (2011), the Supreme Court of India addressed the issue of children trafficked from Nepal. Also discusses economically disadvantaged regions of India into travelling circuses, where they were subjected to exploitation, abuse, denial of education, and restrictions on their freedom. The Court recognised that existing legal provisions were inadequate to specifically address the trafficking and exploitation of children in circuses and noted the failure of authorities to effectively prevent such practices despite knowledge of their existence. The Court directed the Central Government to prohibit the employment of children in circuses, conduct rescue operations, ensure the care and protection of rescued children, and develop appropriate rehabilitation measures. In subsequent proceedings

on missing children, the Court further strengthened the child protection framework by directing authorities to treat missing child cases as potential instances of trafficking or kidnapping requiring immediate investigation (*Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India*, 2014). These judgments established a rights-based approach by recognising trafficked children as victims requiring protection, rehabilitation, and state intervention rather than merely as subjects of criminal law enforcement.

The judgment is significant for the present argument in two respects. First, it establishes that trafficked children are entitled to be treated as rights-bearing victims rather than as performers exercising a chosen occupation, a principle directly transferable to street-connected children who beg or vend rather than perform. Second, the Court's insistence on structured, funded rehabilitation rather than rescue alone anticipates the argument developed here: a rescued child returned to poverty and educational exclusion, without a genuine pathway into schooling, remains vulnerable to re-trafficking. The decision is also credited as a catalyst for India's ratification of the Palermo Protocol on trafficking in persons in May 2011 and informed later efforts, including the Justice Verma Committee's recommendations, to strengthen the statutory definition of trafficking.[6]

The child rights framework emphasises that rescue alone is insufficient unless it is followed by sustained rehabilitation, inclusive education, disability support, and family assistance. Children rescued from exploitation remain vulnerable when underlying conditions such as poverty, social exclusion, and lack of access to essential services continue (Sen, 2000; UNICEF, 2021). However, not every child engaged in street-based activities or begging is necessarily a trafficking victim; therefore, interventions must avoid criminalising poverty and instead address the structural factors that increase vulnerability. Poverty, educational exclusion, disability, and weak protection systems create conditions that can be exploited by trafficking networks. Strengthening inclusive education and social support systems is therefore essential not only for rehabilitation but also for preventing child exploitation and re-trafficking (Galtung, 1969; Sen, 2000).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Child trafficking in India cannot be fully understood only from a limited view of poverty, migration and gender. Disability is another important aspect of insecurity, as disabled children may be at a greater risk of exploitation due to social exclusion, dependence on others, communication barriers, and limited access to protective institutions. Proof from

begging and trafficking cases suggest that criminal gangs can benefit the special needs and conditions of disabled children for economic benefits, while not including them in the education system reduce their chances of security and empowerment. In the decision of the *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India* (2011) established that trafficked children are entitled to rights and should get rescued, and rehabilitation; however, there is a strong institutional mechanism to prevent it effectively which fixes the situation that raises insecurity.

Therefore, it is important to combine the safety of children with inclusive education and support systems for disabled children. It is important for teachers to improve training, especially for children who need help in conversation and learning needs. There should be convergence with the rescue and

rehabilitation processes with the correct assessment of access to education and need for assistance. To improve the pace between anti-trafficking units, child welfare committees, education departments and India-specific research on how the vulnerabilities of differently abled children are exploited within trafficking and begging networks. Although it is challenging to implement such measures in India's federal rule framework, treating the inclusion of differently abled children and anti-trafficking efforts as separate concerns risks leaving some of the most vulnerable children without adequate protection. A genuinely inclusive education system can therefore serve not only as a means of learning but also as an important preventive mechanism against exploitation and trafficking.

End Note

1. The Consortium for Street Children (CSC) distinguishes "street-connected children" from "trafficked children". Street-connected children are those for whom the street plays a significant role in their everyday lives, whether they live, work, or spend substantial time there, alone or with family. While some street-connected children are victims of trafficking, many are not; they remain with their families and engage in informal work or begging primarily because of poverty, social exclusion, or lack of livelihood opportunities.
2. John Galtung (1930–2024) was a Norwegian sociologist and founder of peace and conflict studies. His theory of structural violence explains how social, economic, and political systems can systematically disadvantage certain groups by preventing them from meeting their basic needs, even in the absence of direct physical violence. This concept is widely used to analyse inequality, poverty, and social exclusion.
3. *BBA vs Union of India* (2011) highlights the constitutional obligation of the State to protect children from trafficking and exploitation. It should only be cited in relation to forced begging if that issue is expressly addressed in the judgment.
4. The Government of Punjab launched Project Jeevanjot-2 in July 2025 to eliminate child begging through coordinated rescue operations, DNA verification in suspected trafficking cases, rehabilitation, school enrolment, and stringent legal action against offenders under child protection and anti-trafficking laws (Babushahi Bureau, 2025)
5. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach distinguishes between the possession of resources and the real freedom to use them. Sen argues that poverty and social exclusion should be understood as the deprivation of capabilities the substantive opportunities and freedoms that enable individuals to achieve the lives, they have reason to value. This perspective shifts the focus from income alone to the broader conditions that determine human well-being and social participation (Sen, 2000)
6. India ratified the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, on 5 May 2011. The recommendations of the Justice Verma Committee (2013) subsequently influenced the introduction of Section 370 of the Indian Penal Code through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which provided a comprehensive statutory definition of trafficking.

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