***Review Article***

**Wildlife Trade in India: A Study on Assessing the Impact of Socio-Economic Drivers in the Proliferation of Poaching Activities**

**Abstract**

Wildlife trafficking and poaching have emerged as priority issues globally, and India is one of the world's hot spots for these crimes owing to its high biodiversity. Rising demand for keeping wildlife products as pets, using them as drugs and luxury commodities has pushed wildlife crime to record levels. This heightened demand finds support from socio-economic realities such as illiteracy, poverty and unemployment, driving native communities into a situation of exploiting and selling through poaching activities as survival strategy. There exists a well-structured legal framework in India that is enforceable, yet with weak implementation coupled with corruption allowing illegal trade to take firm ground. The current study will attempt to evaluate the present scenario of illegal wildlife trade in India with specific reference to socio-economic forces driving the same. It will attempt to investigate the problems in preventing wildlife trade and determine the market complexities that underlie such illicit trade. The research uses an extensive literature review method, combining secondary data in the form of books, research articles and reports to analyse the market forces, socio-economic drivers and regulatory issues of Indian wildlife trade. The study concludes with that illegal wildlife trade in India is being fuelled by demand for wildlife products and socio-economic drivers like poverty and illiteracy. The study recommends combat against illicit wildlife trade embracing a multidimensional approach of intensified structured framework, community engagement and global coordination. Socio-economic factors need to be addressed through alternative livelihood and rural population education to reduce their reliance on poaching. Government, NGOs, civil society and businesses need to come together and make conservation work and ensure biodiversity in the long term.

Keywords: Wildlife trade; Illegal poaching; Biodiversity; Socio-economic drivers.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays, wildlife trade has become a major point of concern for sustainable livelihoods in the near future. Wildlife trade in wild species and products which are ranging from rhino horn and elephant ivory to medicinal plants, timber, shark fins and pangolins becomes an urgent global conservation challenge that has escalated drastically in the last decade (Cooney et al., 2017). Both flora and fauna consist of wildlife in its natural habitat, which is significantly vital for maintaining Earth’s ecological balance (Rana & Kumar, 2023). The increasing rate of demand for wildlife products is resulting in wildlife crimes dominating globally. Poaching and trade are resulting in threats to biodiversity, particularly sensitive species on the verge of extinction. Rhino poaching, tiger poaching and star tortoise poaching are the main wildlife crimes in India. The bones and skin of the tigers are traded in an illegal market. The body parts of tigers are used for manufacturing medicines, and their claws are utilised for making jewellery (Roy & Kumar, 2024). Combating the effects of inflation and surviving without adequate employment opportunities are leading reasons for the significant increase in wildlife trade. Wildlife crime is a global phenomenon and poaching methods such as the sale of processed products, trade in live animals and the trade in body parts have a sudden effect on the conserved flora and fauna (Duffy, 2022). Under certain circumstances where illegal wildlife trade is hidden from the general public entirely or in part, researchers may be forced to make use of informants in the trade or undercover approaches to acquire informative data or develop approaches to respond to below-standard detection (Nijman et al., 2019). As per the World Wildlife Report, the rise of online training, particularly videos that describe the simplest and most beneficial methods of capturing particular species, has led to a notable increase in selective poaching, especially in Southeast Asia (World Wildlife Crime Report, 2020). Unfortunately, the lockdown's negative impact on the global economy, like a rise in poverty, food insecurity and loss of income, has also had a ruinous impact on the environment, speeding up deforestation and growing wildlife crime (Aditya et al., 2021). The rising rate of disease in India, the lure of easy money, the recent pandemic of COVID-19, subsequent loss of jobs and increased unemployment, indigenous medicine, spiritual beliefs, an increase in man-animal territorial conflicts due to a growing human population, global socioeconomic disparities and even adrenaline surges are being blamed on the recent phenomenon of animal crimes (Liew et al. 2021). A complex web of variables, including the desire for exotic pets, fashion and traditional medicines, as well as lax law enforcement, corruption and a lack of public knowledge, contribute to India's illegal wildlife trade (Khalsa, 2023). This objective of the study is to assess the present state of illegal wildlife trade in India, by giving a particular attention on investigating the socio-economic factors that drive this illicit activity.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

This study uses an extensive literature review approach based on secondary data from available scholarly articles, books and reports. The literature review is carried out in an organized way to select, analyse and interpret existing studies, theories and frameworks on this topic. The initial step includes setting precise exclusion and inclusion criteria for the retrieval of relevant literature. These comprise the relevance of the publication to the research inquiry, the reputation of the source and date of publication in order to include the relevant studies mostly from 2020 to 2025 by thorough searching through academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, JSTOR). The keywords which have been used to search for the relevant data are “Wildlife trafficking in India”, “Socio-economic drivers of wildlife trade” and “Wildlife conservation in India”. There exist some limitations of the study as it is based on secondary data, there is restriction on the availability of the scope of data.

**3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Root causes of illegal trade and poaching of birds should be addressed to eradicate the socio-economic factors that are stimulating these activities through enhancing public awareness and different conservation strategies. Kalra et al. (2024) in their study have discussed the key characteristics of the trade of native and exotic birds in India. Along with that, the significant drivers of trade, socio-economic dimensions and different conservation approaches were also analysed. West Bengal has been considered a significant hub for illegal wildlife trade, as stated by Mandal et al. (2024). Tigers, as they are being accorded a mythological status, are demanded in local as well as global criminal markets due to their body parts. A study based on Maharashtra, India (Chandewar, 2024) has pointed out that the Vidarbha region has become a hotspot area for wildlife trafficking. Especially the area of concern is regarding the smuggling of body parts of Tigers, Leopards and Pangolins. This study has highlighted the requirement for better enforcement of wildlife protection laws and penalties. Rana & Kumar (2023) have identified in their study that after several initiatives taken by the government, offences involving wildlife have not significantly decreased. Bear populations in Asia are facing extinction due to human conflict, habitat loss and illegal wildlife trade, as stated by Gomez (2021). He further explained about exploitation of Asiatic black bears for medicine and sloth bears for skins, enforcement efforts and monitoring are needed to reduce poaching. Khalsa (2023) has pointed out despite wildlife laws and conservation efforts, poaching, illegal trade and smuggling of endangered species remain high in India. Poor communication, weak implementation and governance failures undermine enforcement. TRAFFIC, a network for monitoring wildlife trade, collaborates with governments and agencies to prevent illegal trade and encourage sustainable practices of wildlife trade. Aditya et al. (2021) in their research, proposed that COVID-19 restrictions contributed to an increase in wildlife crime, especially targeting vulnerable species such as pangolins. They have also conducted a longitudinal examination of seizure records of India, finding a clear spike in pangolin trade during the lockdown months (March–August 2020), emphasizing the necessity for policy intervention and conservation strategies. Nittu et al. (2023) have explained tiger poaching in India (2001–2021), showing rising demand for tiger parts such as claws, teeth and bones, especially in high-seizure and border states such as Maharashtra and Assam. Their research identified key trade routes, emphasised the need for DNA-based tracking and advocated for improved forensic methods to combat poaching. The link between illegal wildlife trade (IWT) and emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) have been investigated by Rush et al. (2021). A systematic review of around 82 papers, between1990-2020, identified 240 pathogen cases of which over 60% were zoonotic. The research highlighted the need for enhanced surveillance and testing to prevent spill overs from IWT and human activities. Poaching driven by demand for elephant ivory and rhino horn remains a significant threat despite trade restrictions since the 1970s. Weak governance, resource shortages and local alienation fuel the illegal market (Di Minin et al., 2022). Empowering local communities with property rights and regulated legal trade could help combat poaching and illegal wildlife trade. After reviewing the above studies, it has been pointed out that there exists a lack of comprehensive study that gives an overview of the present scenario based on different regions of India, along with highlighting the socio-economic factors that are provoking the extension of wildlife trade, which are being difficult to control with the existing framework.

**4. OVERVIEW OF THE RECENT SCENARIO OF WILDLIFE TRADE IN INDIA**

The wildlife trade is a wide and sophisticated trade that has many taxonomic groupings under its influence, and it is also a livelihood for millions of people. Illustrations of such nature are the vast criminal organisations, local enterprises and multibillion-dollar legitimate industries (Cardoso et al., 2021). India has come to be a centre for the illegal domestic and global trade of wildlife, especially birds (Badola & Gautam, 2022), and the span of such trade is expanding (Lowen, 2021). India has a robust domestic exotic species trade, although of the more than 3,859 CITES-listed birds imported in the last 45 years, this implies an out-of-control illegal exotic species trade (CITES, 2021). Using a variety of tactics, including timing, networking, nets, traps, shooting down, bombing, poisoning and more, poachers bring wild animals to the market under false pretences. They also turn the parts of the animals into different products, such as statues, decorations, ornaments, and occasionally paint them to conceal their observable identities before selling them on the open market (Haenlein & Smith, 2017).

**4.1 Poaching hotspots in Northern India**

Uttar Pradesh has been the major poaching hub of North India, with more than 25% of the nation's wildlife crime cases since 2016. In 2016, Uttar Pradesh accounted for 302 out of the 859 cases under the Wildlife Protection Act. A major wildlife seizure was in 2017 when the STF confiscated more than 6000 endangered turtles in Amethi. Wildlife-rich Uttarakhand is a victim of trafficking along the Indo-Tibetan border and has instituted two Wildlife Crime Control Units. The state is also victimized by leopard and elephant poaching, monitor lizard penises being traded as Hatha Jodi, which have been identified using DNA analysis (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

**4.2 Persistent Wildlife Crime in Western India**

Rajasthan is the second-largest wildlife crime hub in Western India after Uttar Pradesh. In 2020, control rooms were opened in Ranthambore and Sariska to address the problem. In Gujarat, 1,531 cases were reported during 2018-2021, with the maximum numbers reported from Gir Somnath and Junagadh areas. Notwithstanding this, the Asiatic lion population in Gir National Park is steady at approximately 650. Tiger poaching and exotic animal seizures were reported in Maharashtra, such as 665 animals smuggled from Malaysia. Poachers in Goa sell wild animal meat and monitor lizard products that are sold for use in traditional medicine (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

**4.3 Wildlife Trade and Transit in Northeast India**

Northeast India, with two biodiversity centres, is a hotspot for the transit of wildlife trade to Southeast Asia. Assam, having around 70% of India's rhinos, had 191 poaching cases between 2000 and 2021, but declined to zero in 2022. Rhino horns are the locus of use in traditional medicine. Tokay geckos, traded for medical and aphrodisiac purposes, are also being consumed. Smuggling of wildlife in Assam and West Bengal is interlinked, meaning an interstate racket. 468 exotic animals were confiscated in Mizoram in 2022, whereas in 2020, Assam confiscated rare animals such as kangaroos and tortoises. Manipur confiscated critically endangered ones in 2021 (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

**4.4 Eastern India is the Worst-Hit Region for Wildlife Crime**

The worst hit area in wildlife crime is the eastern Indian states as Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand. West Bengal seized a number of endangered animals such as Tokay geckos and hornbills in 2018. The most common one being the snake venom trade, seizures amounted to crores in the year 2017. Legal complexities in the form of acquittals followed after leopard skins and pangolin scales were seized in Odisha. The freshwater turtles are also trafficked on a regular basis, and close to 2900 of them have been seized in recent years. The Bihar Gangetic River dolphins can be poisoned and hunted. In Jharkhand, elephant ivory and sloth bears are sold state-wise, where wildlife is on sale. In 2022, poachers from other states hijacked an amount of ivory in bulk (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

**4.5 Central India’s Forest States are under Threat**

Madhya Pradesh, the forest state of India, is a habitat of gigantic fauna such as tigers, leopards and gharials. But rising human-tiger conflict, tigers, elephants and bears are indicators of deforestation. The record of 170 blackbuck cases of poaching pending since 1972 is also characteristic of the state. 34 tigers were expired naturally in 2022. Not connected to Madhya Pradesh since 2000, Chhattisgarh faces poaching problems such as leopards, spotted deer and pangolins. CISF personnel were arrested for the illegal poaching of pangolins in 2021. Bastar CISF zone intercepted pangolin scales and wildlife products in 2022, and this is the ecological consequence of poaching (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

**4.6 Southern India Rise in Illegal Wildlife Trade in Kerala and Bengaluru**

Southern India wildlife crime in general has declined since 2014, apart from Kerala, where cases increased from 61 in 2018 to 303 in 2020. There were 21 wildlife crime incidents from the southern states in 2021, a sharp decrease from 103 in 2014. The Karnataka capital city of Bengaluru is a hub for wildlife crime. In 2021, the law enforcement authorities arrested 571 star tortoises, confiscated 8.25 kg of ambergris and arrested the deer killing poachers. Red sanders, shark fins, pangolins and other wildlife materials are also detected to be smuggled out from South India illegally, regularly through Chennai, as per Traffic-India (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

**5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS DRIVING ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE**

Illicit wildlife trade has very adverse effects on the environment, leading to overexploitation of threatened species, disturbance of the environment and pushing species to extinction. Illegal wildlife trade also has adverse effects on human health by offering unregulated, possibly contaminated animal products as food and for disease and zoonotic disease transmission. Declining wildlife populations cause biodiversity loss, throwing ecological balance into chaos and bringing long-term environmental degradation. Aside from that, wildlife crime also involves organised crime networks, and this brings about social and economic instability, in addition to undermining local communities and livelihoods. The complicated problem necessitates instant intervention to secure wildlife and human health (Chandewar, 2024). Economic, cultural and social aspects combine in an intricate manner to fuel the poaching and illegal wildlife trade involving birds in India. The rewarding nature of the illegal wildlife trade is among the primary causes, as the global market for luxury goods produced from the parts of animals, exotic companions and folk medicine has facilitated a high-valued market for trafficked animals.

**5.1 Cultural Beliefs and Social Pressures Along with Lack of Awareness**

Some of the traditional medicines in some societies use animal body parts such as rhino horn, tiger bones, and bear bile despite the fact that they have no scientific basis for their medicinal attributes. Likewise, wildlife products such as ivory and animal hides are culturally prized to signify wealth, rank, or religious office in certain cultures (Alves et al., 2021). Demand is elicited by the cultural value that is associated with such products, thus the presence of such markets for such products with legal and ethical issues. Ownership of such exotic animals or wildlife products is normally a status symbol, which elicits the illegal trade and a vicious cycle of luxury goods demand generated from endangered species (Duffy, 2022).

Social peer pressure could drive demand for wildlife products and exotic animals by wealthy and domestic populations (Thomas‐Walters et al., 2021). Wildlife trafficking and poaching are also conditioned in some areas as a livelihood or as a cultural practice, which leads to desensitisation of the culture and ignorance about its harmful impact.

The majority of individuals are unaware of the catastrophic ecological, environmental and moral fallout that is a direct result of wildlife trade conducted in an illegal manner (Marcet, 2021). Consumers do not realise that the buying of wildlife products contributes to extinction and habitat destruction. Even the poachers and traffickers do not comprehend the long-term effects. Some others believe that the trade is sustainable due to the availability of the products and protection when consumed (Duffy, 2022). Lack of information drives demand. Insufficient adequate public information campaigns in most states impede common recognition of adverse impacts on biodiversity, conservation and native populations, facilitating the continuation of the trade (Rianzar & Kusuma, 2025).

**5.2 Economic Factors Driving Global Demand**

In the majority of poor or rural societies, limited opportunities for earnings force people towards wildlife poaching as a survival strategy. Poaching, even though it is illegal, is seen as an acceptable way of keeping families in the face of poverty (Lyakurwa et al., 2024). Economic inequalities also expand this issue, with individuals turning to the illegal wildlife trade to prevent economic hardship (Liew et al., 2021). Where there are few jobs available, low mobility and fewer opportunities for education, wildlife trade offers a viable alternative. Lacking social security nets, governmental support and community conservation plans, this black-market operations gain legitimacy and socially become acceptable.

Illegal wildlife trade is highly lucrative, and wildlife products fetch good revenues on the black market (Van Uhm, 2021). Materials such as ivory from elephants, rhino horn, tiger and pangolin scales can be easily recouped with good prices, particularly where the demand for such materials is strong. Revenues gained from trade in such goods also outweigh other illegal trade ventures, and it is therefore an attractive venture to criminals and poachers (Sullivan, 2021). Rhino horn is more costly per kilogram than gold and thus a very lucrative product for traffickers.

**5.3 Globalisation and Its Link to Corruption**

Globalisation has increased the illegal wildlife trade, with enhanced transport and communication making the free crossing of goods across borders easy. Organised criminal groups exploit this connectivity to smuggle wildlife goods, most often hidden in legal shipments (Moreto & Van Uhm, 2021). Illegal ivory or rhino horn might be buried in legitimate goods reaching international consumers. In most developing countries, indigenous people subsist on wildlife for livelihood purposes, and poaching is a major livelihood activity in the absence of other economic opportunities (Cheloti & Mulu, 2023). Rural African and Southeast Asian poachers sell animal parts for money, which is a few dollars at a time but can be the only income source for their households.

Poor or corrupt administration is typically accompanied by ineffectual enforcement of wildlife protection law, and traffickers and poachers thus get to do as they please (Duffy, 2022). They are aided by corrupt or poorly paid local officials and police officers. The demand for exotic pets, on the rise as it is, especially in wealthier urban centres, drives illegal wildlife trade further (Singh Parmar, 2024). Animals are caught and traded for financial gain, driven by status, novelty or entertainment. Social media also romanticises the keeping of exotic pets, increasing demand. Globalisation contributes to the issue as well since enhanced communication and travel increase transnational trafficking, linking regional poaching to international markets and global demand.

Corruption among government officials and law enforcers usually facilitates the illicit wildlife trade (Jiao et al., 2021). Traffickers pay bribes to government officials in some countries so that they can turn a blind eye, establishing a culture of impunity with an incentive that far outstrips the cost. Traffickers and poachers are then given free rein. Furthermore, inadequate or outdated legal foundations, along with weak political will and finance, render wildlife protection laws ineffective (Duffy, 2022). Under these circumstances, wildlife trafficking is a high-reward business with minimal risk. Inadequate financing of wildlife conservation agencies presents traffickers with loopholes for evading the law and ongoing criminal activities.

**5.4 Inadequate Policy Implementation and Increasing Demand**

Weakening of wildlife law enforcement in many places provides an impunity environment for participants in illegal wildlife trade (Duffy, 2022). Law enforcers and traffickers frequently go without severe punishments, thus decreasing the deterrent factor against them. Fragmented and inefficient regulations, as well as law enforcement, also confirm that wildlife trafficking is a high-benefit undertaking with bearing low-risk. In a number of states, punishments against wildlife trafficking are too soft or are rarely carried out, inviting criminals to reoffend.

Demand by high-income consumers in new, developing economies such as China, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia is the main driving force of illegal wildlife trade (Prasad et al., 2022). Demand for high-end products with endangered species is vast, covering everything from exotic pets and traditional medicine to jewellery and high-end fashion accessories such as a handbag made of snake or crocodile skin. The goods will most likely be status symbols, prestige or signals of wealth. Rhino horns and Tiger bones are used in traditional medicine for certain Asian markets, and ivory is highly valued as a status symbol or cosmetic.

Growing demand from affluent urban populations for exotic animals drives most of the illegal wildlife trade (Hughes et al., 2023). People willing to pay large sums for exotic pets like monkeys, reptiles and birds drive poaching and trafficking. Wildlife items like skin, fur and bones used in fashion and home decor are highly desired as well (Achabou, 2021). Exotic animals such as birds and snakes find themselves in the market as pets and luxuries, and this gives them an incentive to be sold illegally. Syndicates of criminal organisations also fuel the trade because they organise foreign smuggling operations for it, hence making it more organised. So does tourism by having tourists unwittingly purchase illegally traded wildlife commodities such as elephant tusks and turtle shells.

**6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

India's wildlife trade is a multifaceted phenomenon that is driven by various economic, cultural, social and environmental factors. Excess exploitation of wildlife, poaching and smuggling are some of the major threat drivers of species to extinction. India possesses a firm legal system, but there exists a scope of enforcement of conservation law for wild animals, having the motivation for fear of corrupt practices and general ignorance among people, providing time for illegal trading to find elbow room. The luxury consumer demand for exotic animals and products of traditional medicines derived from animals is the chief driving force of the trade, with wealthy consumers being the chief culprits of the issue. The fact that there exists globalisation and syndicate crime has also increased the global scale of wildlife trafficking, giving the trade an international element.

For proper control of the problem, a multi-dimensional approach with the consolidation of law enforcement, people's awareness and collaboration with other countries is required. Equally important is tackling the socio-economic problems of rural society because alternative livelihood and education are the key to their weaning from poaching. India's biodiversity can be saved and illegal wildlife trade can be regulated only through a combined effort on the part of the government, NGOs and local people. Some of the policy recommendations that are lays down from the above study are:

**6.1 Strengthening Existing Legal Framework**

Implementation of robust wildlife protection legislation with tighter punishments for violators, as well as better enforcement can significantly contribute towards the reduction of illegal poaching.This involves the establishment of specialized wildlife crime units within the police force and a speeded-up judicial process to deal with wildlife cases. Sufficient finance and training must be supplied to law enforcement officers to improve their effectiveness in anti-poaching and trafficking.

**6.2 Providing Education and Awareness Campaigns for Public**

Public education campaigns are vital in reversing cultural attitudes and myths surrounding wildlife trade. Ecological and economic impacts of poaching and trafficking in the long run need to be brought to greater awareness to the public. The message regarding the significance of biodiversity and conservation can be communicated through schools, communities and the internet, specifically in places where there are high levels of trafficking.

**6.3 Community-Based Conservation Programs**

Equipping local communities with capacity to participate in conservation and with alternative livelihood sources is essential. Integration of the local populace in wildlife conservation efforts, particularly along poaching belts, makes it possible for local people's economic gain in the form of subsistence by sustainable means. Ecotourism, agriculture and vocational training in wildlife surveillance can curb subsistence reliance on wildlife trade.

**6.4 International Cooperation and Regional Collaboration**

Transnational nature is usually illicit wildlife trade, and therefore, cooperation at an international level is imperative. Enhancement of cooperation with adjoining countries and global agencies is needed to check cross-border trafficking by India. This entails better intelligence-sharing mechanisms, collaborative operations, and policy harmonization to ensure effective enforcement of wildlife protection laws across borders.

**6.5 Regulating Online Wildlife Trade**

The growth of online markets has facilitated illicit online buying and selling of wildlife products, which usually bypass traditional channels of trade. Policymakers need to collaborate with tech firms to monitor and manage online wildlife trade. Improved monitoring, reporting and punishing of online wildlife trafficking is essential in order to close this new loophole.

This study seeks to offer useful policy recommendations to policymakers, community-based tourism players and conservation stakeholders on how to build and improve on current conservation practices. By determining the socio-economic drivers of wildlife crime, the study seeks to aid in the formulation of better, locally-driven and sustainable approaches to wildlife protection.

**DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)**

Author hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

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