***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 and 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 a 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 aims to evaluate the current scenario of illegal wildlife trade in India with a specific focus on the socio-economic forces driving this phenomenon. It will attempt to investigate the problems in preventing wildlife trade and determine the market complexities that underlie such illicit trade. The research employs 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 the Indian wildlife trade. The study concludes that the illegal wildlife trade in India is being fuelled by demand for wildlife products and socio-economic drivers like poverty and illiteracy. The study recommends combating illicit wildlife trade by adopting a multidimensional approach, including an 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**

The wildlife trade has become a major concern for sustainable livelihoods in the near future. The wildlife trade in wild species and products, which range from rhino horn and elephant ivory to medicinal plants, timber, shark fins, and pangolins, has become an urgent global conservation challenge that has escalated drastically over the last decade (Cooney et al., 2017). Both flora and fauna comprise wildlife in their natural habitats, which are significantly vital for maintaining Earth’s ecological balance (Rana & Kumar, 2023). The increasing demand for wildlife products is resulting in wildlife crimes becoming a global phenomenon. Poaching and trade pose significant threats to biodiversity, particularly for sensitive species that are 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 tigers are traded on the black 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, including the sale of processed products, the trade in live animals, and the trade in body parts, have a profound impact on the conservation of flora and fauna (Duffy, 2022). Under certain circumstances where the illegal wildlife trade is hidden from the general public entirely or in part, researchers may be compelled to use informants within the trade or undercover approaches to gather informative data or develop approaches to respond to substandard detection (Nijman et al., 2019). According to the World Wildlife Report, the rise of online training, particularly videos that describe the simplest and most effective 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, including a rise in poverty, food insecurity and loss of income, has also had a devastating effect on the environment, accelerating deforestation and increasing 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, traditional medicines, as well as lax law enforcement, corruption, and a lack of public awareness, contribute to India's illegal wildlife trade (Khalsa, 2023). The objective of this study is to assess the current state of illegal wildlife trade in India, with a particular focus on investigating the socio-economic factors that drive this illicit activity.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

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

**3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The root causes of illegal trade and bird poaching should be addressed to eradicate the socio-economic factors that stimulate these activities by enhancing public awareness and different conservation strategies. Kalra et al. (2024) discuss the key characteristics of the trade of native and exotic birds in India. Additionally, the significant drivers of trade, socio-economic dimensions and different conservation approaches were also analysed. West Bengal has been identified as a significant hub for illegal wildlife trade, as noted by Mandal et al. (2024). Tigers, as they are accorded a mythological status, are in high demand in both local and global criminal markets due to their body parts. A study based in Maharashtra, India (Chandewar, 2024), has highlighted that the Vidarbha region has become a hotspot 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, despite several initiatives taken by the government, offences involving wildlife have not shown a significant decrease. Bear populations in Asia are facing extinction due to human conflict, habitat loss and illegal wildlife trade (Gomez, 2021). He further explained the exploitation of Asiatic black bears for their parts and sloth bears for their skins; enforcement efforts and monitoring are needed to reduce poaching. Khalsa (2023) has noted that, despite wildlife laws and conservation efforts, poaching, illegal trade, and smuggling of endangered species continue to be high in India. Poor communication, weak implementation and governance failures undermine enforcement. TRAFFIC, a network for monitoring the wildlife trade, collaborates with governments and agencies to prevent illegal trade and promote sustainable practices in 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 in India, finding a clear spike in pangolin trade during the lockdown months (Marc-–August 2020), emphasizing the necessity for policy intervention and conservation strategies. Nittu et al. (2023) have explained tiger poaching in India from 2001 to 2021, showing a rising demand for tiger parts, such as claws, teeth, and bones, especially in high-seizure and border states like 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) has been investigated by Rush et al. (2021). A systematic review of around 82 papers between 1990 and 2020 identified 240 pathogen cases, of which over 60% were zoonotic. The research highlighted the need for enhanced surveillance and testing to prevent spillovers 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 secure property rights and regulated legal trade can help combat poaching and the 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 broad and complex industry that encompasses numerous taxonomic groups and provides a livelihood for millions of people. Illustrations of this nature include vast criminal organisations, local enterprises, and multibillion-dollar legitimate industries (Cardoso et al., 2021). India has become a hub for the illegal domestic and global trade of wildlife, particularly 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 transform the parts of animals into various products, such as statues, decorations, and 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 in 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 occurred 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 hub for wildlife crime 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 between 2018 and 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, which are used 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, which accounts for around 70% of India's rhinos, reported 191 poaching cases between 2000 and 2021, but this number 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. In 2022, 468 exotic animals were confiscated in Mizoram, whereas in 2020, Assam confiscated rare animals, including 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-affected areas in wildlife crime are the eastern Indian states of Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand. In 2018, West Bengal seized a number of endangered animals, including Tokay geckos and hornbills. The most common one was the snake venom trade, with seizures amounting to crores in the year 2017. Legal complexities arose following the form of acquittals after leopard skins and pangolin scales were seized in Odisha. Freshwater turtles are also trafficked on a regular basis, and close to 2900 of them have been seized in recent years. The Gangetic River dolphins in Bihar are at risk of being poisoned and hunted. In Jharkhand, elephant ivory and parts of the sloth bear are sold state-wise, with wildlife being put up for 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 home to a diverse range of gigantic fauna, including tigers, leopards, and gharials. However, rising human-tiger conflict, as well as the presence of tigers, elephants, and bears, are indicators of deforestation. The record of 170 blackbuck poaching cases pending since 1972 is also characteristic of the state. Thirty-four tigers expired naturally in 2022. Not connected to Madhya Pradesh since 2000, Chhattisgarh faces poaching problems, including those involving leopards, spotted deer, and pangolins. CISF personnel were arrested for the illegal poaching of pangolins in 2021. In 2022, the Bastar CISF zone intercepted pangolin scales and wildlife products, highlighting the ecological consequences of poaching (Rana & Kumar, 2023).

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

Southern India’s wildlife crime, in general, has declined since 2014, except in 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 capital city of Karnataka, 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**

The illicit wildlife trade has extremely adverse effects on the environment, leading to the overexploitation of threatened species, environmental disturbance, and contributing to the extinction of species. The illegal wildlife trade also negatively impacts human health by offering unregulated, potentially contaminated animal products as food, as well as facilitating the transmission of diseases and zoonotic infections. Declining wildlife populations result in biodiversity loss, disrupting ecological balance and causing long-term environmental degradation. In addition, wildlife crime is associated with organised crime networks, resulting in social and economic instability, while undermining local communities and livelihoods. This complex issue necessitates immediate intervention to safeguard both wildlife and human health (Chandewar, 2024). Economic, cultural, and social factors intertwine intricately to drive the poaching and illegal wildlife trade of birds in India. The lucrative nature of the illegal wildlife trade is one of the primary causes, as the global market for luxury goods derived from animal parts, exotic companions, and traditional medicine has fostered a high-value market for trafficked animals.

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

Some traditional medicines in certain societies utilise animal body parts, such as rhino horn, tiger bones, and bear bile, despite the lack of scientific basis for their medicinal properties. Likewise, wildlife products such as ivory and animal hides are culturally prized in certain cultures to signify wealth, rank, or a religious office (Alves et al., 2021). Demand is elicited by the cultural value associated with such products, which is reflected in the presence of markets for these products that often raise legal and ethical issues. Ownership of such exotic animals or wildlife products is often a status symbol, which fuels the illegal trade and perpetuates a vicious cycle of luxury goods demand driven by endangered species (Duffy, 2022).

Social peer pressure may drive demand for wildlife products and exotic animals among 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 illegally (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 the protection they offer when consumed (Duffy, 2022). Lack of information drives demand. Inadequate public information campaigns in most states hinder widespread recognition of the adverse impacts on biodiversity, conservation, and native populations, thereby 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, despite being illegal, is often seen as an acceptable means of supporting 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 job opportunities, low mobility, and limited educational prospects, the wildlife trade presents a viable alternative. Lacking social safety nets, governmental support, and community conservation plans, these black-market operations gain legitimacy and become socially acceptable.

The illegal wildlife trade is highly lucrative, and wildlife products generate substantial revenues on the black market (Van Uhm, 2021). Materials such as ivory from elephants, rhino horn, tiger and pangolin scales can be easily recouped at 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 expensive per kilogram than gold and, thus, a highly 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 ineffective enforcement of wildlife protection laws, and traffickers and poachers thus have the freedom to act o as they please (Duffy, 2022). They are aided by corrupt or poorly paid local officials and police officers. The demand for exotic pets, which is already on the rise, especially in wealthier urban centres, drives the 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 enforcement officials often 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, combined with weak political will and insufficient funding, 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**

The weakening of wildlife law enforcement in many places creates an environment of impunity for participants in the illegal wildlife trade (Duffy, 2022). Law enforcement officials and traffickers often go unpunished, thereby 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 re-offend.

High-income consumers in new and developing economies, such as China, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia, are the primary driving force behind the illegal wildlife trade (Prasad et al., 2022). Demand for high-end products featuring endangered species is vast, encompassing everything from exotic pets and traditional medicine to jewellery and high-end fashion accessories, such as handbags made of snake or crocodile skin. The goods will most likely serve as 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 for cosmetic purposes.

The growing demand from affluent urban populations for exotic animals drives the majority 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, such as skin, fur, and bones, used in fashion and home decor are also highly sought after (Achabou, 2021). Exotic animals, such as birds and snakes, are often found in the market as pets and luxuries, which provides an incentive for them to be sold illegally. Syndicates of criminal organisations also fuel the trade by organising foreign smuggling operations, thereby making it more organised. Similarly, tourism can contribute to the illicit trade of wildlife commodities, such as elephant tusks and turtle shells, through the unwitting purchase of these items by tourists.

**6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

India's wildlife trade is a multifaceted phenomenon 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 for the enforcement of conservation laws for wild animals, largely due to the fear of corrupt practices and general ignorance among the public, which provides time for illegal trading to flourish. The luxury consumer demand for exotic animals and products derived from traditional medicines is the primary driving force behind the trade, with wealthy consumers being the chief perpetrators 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 multidimensional approach that consolidates law enforcement, public 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 keys to their weaning from poaching. India's biodiversity can be saved, and the 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 laid down from the above study are:

**6.1 Strengthening Existing Legal Framework**

The implementation of robust wildlife protection legislation, accompanied by stricter penalties for violators and enhanced enforcement, can significantly contribute to 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 financial resources and training must be provided to law enforcement officers to enhance their effectiveness in combating poaching and trafficking.

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

Public education campaigns are vital in reversing cultural attitudes and myths surrounding the wildlife trade. Ecological and economic impacts of poaching and trafficking, in the long run, need to be brought to greater awareness by 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 the capacity to participate in conservation and with alternative livelihood sources is essential. The integration of the local populace in wildlife conservation efforts, particularly along poaching belts, enables local people to achieve economic gain through sustainable subsistence. Ecotourism, agriculture, and vocational training in wildlife surveillance can help curb subsistence reliance on the wildlife trade.

**6.4 International Cooperation and Regional Collaboration**

The transnational nature of illicit wildlife trade makes cooperation at an international level imperative. Enhancing cooperation with neighbouring countries and global agencies is necessary to curb cross-border trafficking by India. This entails implementing better intelligence-sharing mechanisms, fostering collaborative operations, and harmonising policies to ensure the effective enforcement of wildlife protection laws across borders.

**6.5 Regulating Online Wildlife Trade**

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

This study aims to provide policymakers, community-based tourism stakeholders, and conservation stakeholders with useful policy recommendations on how to enhance and build upon current conservation practices. By identifying the socioeconomic drivers of wildlife crime, the study aims to inform the development of more effective, locally informed, 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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