



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

VOLUME 5 AND ISSUE 1 OF 2025

INSTITUTE OF LEGAL EDUCATION



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

APIS – 3920 – 0001 | ISSN – 2583-2344

(Open Access Journal)

Journal's Home Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/>

Journal's Editorial Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/editorial-board/>

Volume 5 and Issue 1 of 2025 (Access Full Issue on – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/volume-5-and-issue-1-of-2025/>)

Publisher

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CHILD BEGGING IN INDIA: A REALITY OR SCAM?

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BEST CITATION – ADV. SIDDHI GOKULDAS NAIK, CHILD BEGGING IN INDIA: A REALITY OR SCAM?, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 5 (1) OF 2025, PG. 1084-1091, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344.

INTRODUCTION

“Naked feet, walking on the street.

Tiny palms, begging for a treat.

Only if we could look deep into their eyes,

We will know where the reality lies!”



Childhood is regarded as the formative phase in every person's life. Having a beautiful childhood is indeed the most cherished gift of all. Unfortunately, not every child is blessed with such a fortune.

In today's hectic pace of life, we come across so many people. A popular sight on most of the Indian streets comprises innocent children with tangled hair, teary eyes, malnourished bodies, and outstretched hands constantly knocking at our windows, peeping inside the cars begging for either money or food. This is more common at Traffic signals, Temples, Mosques, and Churches. Many people shoo them away while some prefer giving them money.

But have we ever thought, What must be the lifestyle of these children? What could be their dreams? Do they beg willingly or are they forced into this dirty job? There are innumerable questions, which are perhaps difficult to answer.

CHILDHOOD LOST ON THE STREETS

Begging is a range of activities whereby an individual asks a stranger for money on being poor or needing charitable donations for basic survival, health, or religious reasons (International Labour Organization, 2004).¹⁹⁷⁰ Child Begging is using a minor to solicit or receive alms.¹⁹⁷¹ It is one such activity that can be manipulated and converted into a business by giant forces, using the innocence of children as a weapon.

According to a report by the National Human Rights Commission, an average of 44,000 children are abducted every year in India which means one child goes missing after every eight minutes. Over 11,000 of these missing children remain untraced. However, the actual figure is believed to be much higher than this as many cases go unreported.¹⁹⁷²

Studies conducted by Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations have also revealed that a large number of boys and girls go missing on account of running away from home either because they are fed up with the domestic conditions of their family or to escape abuse. Many a time they are sent/sold off by their own families who hope to gain some kind of work that will bring money at home.¹⁹⁷³

These missing children end up in different situations. Some are killed, while the rest are mostly engaged in forced labour in hazardous factories and illegal establishments. Countless children become victims of illegal adoptions and unlawful organ transplants. These innocent children are also exploited sexually and forced into Prostitution, Sex slavery, Pornography, and Forced Marriages.

As far as begging is concerned, according to the Census 2011 report,¹⁹⁷⁴ more than 3 lakh children across India from the age group of 0-14 years, are forced to beg, using everything from an addiction to drugs, to threats of violence, and actual beatings.

According to the report released by the Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, West Bengal tops the chart with 75,083 Child Beggars, followed by states like Uttar Pradesh with 57,038, and Madhya Pradesh with 25,603 Child Beggars. Child Begging is also widespread in states like Maharashtra (22,737), Rajasthan (22,548), Gujarat (12,584), Jharkhand (9,817), Chhattisgarh (9,355), Haryana (7, 971), Delhi (2,073), and Goa (229). The primary targets are homeless children, children living in slums, and children from migrant families.¹⁹⁷⁵

Begging in India is a multi-million-dollar business evolving into an industry run by Mafias and Cartels. In comparison to adult beggars, child beggars are more likely to receive donations or charity from people, this is the purpose why children are dragged into the business.

A STRUCTURED NEXUS: PATTERNS IN CHILD BEGGING

According to the research conducted by Anti-Slavery International,¹⁹⁷⁶ the major reasons recorded for child begging around the globe are drug addiction, parental coercion, organized crimes, and preachings by religious leaders. Other reasons include social disorders like anomie, cultural conflicts, industrialization, community disorganization, poverty, and breakdown of a family during natural calamities which compel children to beg for survival.

There are several forms and patterns of child begging:

¹⁹⁷⁰ International Labour Organisation, <https://www.ilo.org/> (last visited Mar.12, 2025).

¹⁹⁷¹ The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, § 139 (4), No.45, Act of Parliament, 2023 (India).

¹⁹⁷² Report of the NHRC committee on missing children, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/misc_MCRReport.PDF (last visited Mar.12, 2025).

¹⁹⁷³ Carrie A Moylan, The Effects of Child Abuse and Exposure to Domestic Violence on Adolescent Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior Problems, 2011, National Library of Medicine, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2872483/>.

¹⁹⁷⁴ Comprehensive digitised survey of persons engaged in the act of begging and those who are at risk in Delhi, <https://www.ihdindia.org/pdf/Full-Report-Beggar-Survey.pdf> (last visited Feb. 2, 2025).

¹⁹⁷⁵ FINANCIAL EXPRESS, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/west-bengal-tops-the-list-of-states-with-most-number-of-beggars-know-where-your-state-ranks/1106118/> (last visited Feb. 2, 2025).

¹⁹⁷⁶ Trafficking into crime and begging, <https://www.antislavery.org/what-we-do/past-projects/trafficking-crime-begging/> (last visited Jan.12, 2025).

1. **Children forced to beg by Parents**– Here children are forced to beg by the parents or guardian. Various techniques right from threats of violence to psychological coercion are used against the child.

Recently Mumbai Police brought to light that many parents from Mumbai had dragged their children in begging and were themselves living a comfortable life. They were using all the facilities provided by the Government under the Right to Education Act, 2009 but, were not sending their children to school.¹⁹⁷⁷

2. **Children forced to beg by Third Parties**– Here different third parties like informal networks, organized gangs called Mafias, and religious leaders force children to beg. It is reported that children are sent to religious boarding schools where they are taught how to beg.¹⁹⁷⁸

A PRE-PLANNED, WELL-ACTED SHOW!

One must have observed, women begging on the streets or at the signals are always seen carrying a baby in their arms. But have we ever wondered why are these babies always found sleeping? This is one such instance that raises doubt on the whole scenario. To unveil the reality, these babies are not sleeping but are drugged to such a length that makes them unconscious until the next working hours of the women beggars. The whole plan is plotted to exploit the emotions of people and make them take out money from their pockets. ***“The babies were rescued when we brought them to the rescue homes. We were shocked when we found them sleeping even after three days!”*** says Anitha Kanaiya, Associate Executive Director of OASIS, an NGO working against Human Trafficking who rescued 106 children from Bangalore.¹⁹⁷⁹

¹⁹⁷⁷ TIMES OF INDIA,
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/most-child-beggars-in-mumbai-pushed-by-parents-say-rescue-teams/articleshow/46974171.cms>
(last visited Jan. 13, 2025).

¹⁹⁷⁸NBC NEWS, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna24229321> (last visited Jan. 15, 2025).

¹⁹⁷⁹BANGALORE MIRROR,
<https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/cover-story/drugging->

It is shocking to know that babies are even rented from labor class mothers for the same to make them look more sympathetic to the givers.

A VICIOUS CYCLE OF ABUSE AND TORTURE- CONSEQUENCES OF BEGGING

Children are often injured, to be precise maimed and handicapped to look more pitiful and solicit empathy for higher earnings. Mafia gangs are deliberately crippling a large number of children to fill their pockets. These children have to undergo severe physical, emotional, and mental distress. They experience long working hours with no control over their income.

These children are given a daily target, which if not achieved they are not provided food, forced to beg for extra hours, and are punished heavily by the perpetrators. They have to surrender their income to their exploiters. The study also revealed the use of drugs and toxins to bully children. Three out of every four children reported sexual exploitation, and many said that they were forced to consume alcohol or hallucinogens. The majority of the girls complained that they were raped every day and they did not know how to overcome their trauma, fear, and insecurity. Children are subjected to a lifelong addiction to drugs to keep them in the mechanism. Many children die on account of an overdose of drugs.

A study by UNICEF states that children are always found in unsafe working and living conditions. These children receive little or no education, as they have to dedicate maximum hours of their day on the streets. With no education, their hopes of escaping or getting into mainstream professions using their skills and abilities are also shattered. This makes them susceptible to continuous exploitation.¹⁹⁸⁰

These children also lose on nutrition and health. They do not have proper shelter, adequate food, clean drinking water, or access to healthcare.

kids-is-childrens-play-for-begging-mafia/articleshow/21456071.cms (last visited Jan. 15, 2025).

¹⁹⁸⁰UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-labour> (last visited Mar.2, 2025).

They are abused physically, verbally, and sexually by their perpetrators. There are high chances of them contracting HIV, AIDS, Diarrhea, and other dreadful infections. Those who are forcefully disabled are left with no other option than to beg.

AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A World Vision Study has reported that nearly eight million children all over the globe have been compelled into forced begging and child labour as an outcome of the current situation. The report further claims that 85 million families in and across Asia have insufficient food stocks and income, which makes children more prone to begging.¹⁹⁸¹

In India, the situation has worsened. A Bengal Daily stated that COVID-19 has increased the demand for young children aged 6-12 years in the begging market of India. The figures relating to child begging have expanded as a result of the closure of schools, unemployment of parents, immigration from rural areas, poverty, etc. Many families are now surviving on the income brought home by their children by begging.¹⁹⁸²

As per the National Crime Records Bureau, COVID-19 has made children vulnerable to trafficking. About 2,200 cases were recorded in 2019 of which 95 percent accounted for internal trafficking. As per the official data, 2,914 children were trafficked.¹⁹⁸³

During the lockdown period, there was hardly anyone on the streets to beg from. Children were found starving on the streets queuing up for food near shelter homes and counting on the mercy of the authorities. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights has urged the NGOs to stop feeding street children and has asked them to take these children to shelter homes for further care and protection.

In addition to this, these children are at high risk of contracting the virus as they are not having any access to masks, sanitizers either because they are not able to afford it or they seem uneducated on the severity of the present situation.

CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN IN INDIA

Child Begging projects a serious problem before the entire world. It highlights the blunt future of a nation hampering its social as well as economic growth. The Constitution of India provides safeguards to children through the various Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policies enshrined under it.

1. The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children from the age group of six to fourteen years (Article 21A).
2. Trafficking of humans for begging and other similar forms of forced labour is prohibited and shall be considered as an offense punishable as per law (Article 23).
3. No child below the age of fourteen years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment (Article 24).
4. The State should direct its policy towards securing the health of children and ensure that children are not abused and forced by the economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age and strength (Article 39 (e)).
5. Children should be given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and conditions of freedom and dignity. Their childhood and youth must be protected against moral and material abandonment (Article 39 (f)).
6. The State shall endeavor to provide, within a period of 10 years from the day the Constitution was adopted for free and compulsory education to children

¹⁹⁸¹ WORLD VISION, <https://www.wvi.org/stories/facts-history-faqs-what-you-need-know-about-child-labour> (last visited Mar.2, 2025).

¹⁹⁸² CBGA, <https://www.cbgaindia.org/blog/beg-pardon-give-children-food-shelter-education-not-alms/> (last visited Mar.2, 2025).

¹⁹⁸³ INDIA TODAY, <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/covid-19-poor-marginalised-vulnerability-child-trafficking-ngos-1812519-2021-06-08> (last visited Jan.13, 2025).

up to the age of fourteen years (Article 45). Unfortunately, this goal is still a million steps away.

LEGISLATIVE AND JUDICIAL EFFORT

The Indian legislature has taken several steps to curb the menace of child begging. Various provisions prohibit Child Begging:

The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 criminalizes begging and aims to remove beggars from their current illegal profession so they may be detained, trained, and eventually employed elsewhere. Under this act, a child is defined as a boy under sixteen years of age and a girl under eighteen years of age.¹⁹⁸⁴

As per Section 5 (9) of this Act, when the beggar is a child under the age of five, the Court shall send the child to a Children's Court and will be dealt with as per the Children's Act, 1960.

Also, Section 11 of the said act states that if any person having the custody, charge, or care of a child allows or encourages the child to solicit or receive alms or uses another person as an exhibit, he/she shall be punished for a period of imprisonment of one year which can extend to three years.

In 1959, there was an amendment in the Indian Penal Code, 1860 to criminalize the exploitation of children for begging. Section 363 A (now, Section 137, BNS, 2023) was added to prohibit kidnapping by a person who is not a lawful guardian of a minor to beg. The punishment for the same is ten years of imprisonment and a fine. Whoever maims any minor for begging shall be punished with life imprisonment and a fine.

Section 76 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 makes the employment of a juvenile or a child for begging punishable with imprisonment up to five years and a fine of Rupees Ten Thousand.

In 2020, the Karnataka High Court held that forcing children to beg/sell things is violative of

Article 21 A of the Indian Constitution. The Court has ordered the State to come up with a scheme to identify destitute children and admit them in school even in the middle of an academic year.¹⁹⁸⁵

In May 2021 the Delhi High Court issued a notice to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), the Delhi Government, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and others on the PIL seeking direction to enact appropriate law and policies to stop begging and selling of products at traffic signals and junctions by children.¹⁹⁸⁶

AWFUL TALES THAT WILL MELT HEARTS

A land of opportunities and developments, India has miserably failed in providing safeguards to its children. There is a long list of millions of unfortunate children surviving in this dirty business called 'begging'. Here are a few terrible tales:

1. ***"I was sexually abused by my father, so I left home. I beg at the Purana Hanuman Mandir every day from morning to evening. I eat whatever is offered to me by the temple devotees. I earn Rupees 10-20 per day which I have to give to my friend who supplies me with drugs. If I do not give him money every day, he will beat me!"*** says Javid (named changed), a 14-years-old child beggar from Delhi.
2. ***"I cried very hard. My leg is removed here!"*** says Amir pointing to his stump and grimacing. His limb has been severed mid-calf, leaving him without feet. He was approached by a couple who drugged him at the Mumbai railway station and pushed him into this nightmare.

¹⁹⁸⁴ The, Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 § 2 (iv), No.45, Act of Parliament, 2023 (India).

¹⁹⁸⁵ BAR AND BENCH,
<https://www.barandbench.com/news/litigation/children-forced-to-beg-sell-violation-article-21a-karnataka-high-court> (last visited Mar.14, 2025).
¹⁹⁸⁶ LEGAL WORLD,
<https://legal.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/industry/delhi-hc-issues-notice-on-pil-seeking-direction-to-stop-child-begging-at-traffic-signals/82382703> (last visited Mar.14, 2025).

3. ***"I went to wash my son's nappy. When I returned my son was not there!"*** says Mohini who was tricked by a woman posing as a social worker under the pretext of examining her son. She is believed to be a part of a gang that steals babies for the beggar mafia.
4. ***"They beat me every day and do not give me food. I want to go to school. I have three brothers and all of them go to school. I don't know why my parents sent me here to beg!"*** says Nayana (named changed) who was rented out to the mafia as her family was in great debts.

SCANDALS HAPPENING IN INDIA

In the recent past, many scams and scandals have been exposed in the country.

1. A reputed media channel revealed the gruesome act of doctors of a government hospital who took commissions from the gangs for amputating the limbs of children who were later forced to beg.¹⁹⁸⁷
2. In 2019, the women police of Ahmedabad busted a begging racket and rescued 16 children and a 20-years-old woman. The youngest of the children rescued was only eight months old and was carried by other beggars to draw the attention of people.¹⁹⁸⁸
3. In 2019, the Mumbai Crime Branch busted a baby-selling racket wherein four women were arrested. They would monitor babies being born in the slums of Mumbai to parents facing financial constraints and then take undue advantage of the same.¹⁹⁸⁹

4. ***"The gangmasters hold you down and cut your tongue if they come to know that you have informed someone. They are not humans!"*** says Flintoff (18-years-old) a reformed local Indian Gangster and former child Beggar.

SO WHERE LIES THE PROBLEM?

It is very natural for a person to believe that children beg on account of their family's economic constraints. The person will feel pity for the child and provide him/her with food or money. The tricks used by the mafias remain largely unsuspected. Lack of public awareness injects more and more children into this job every day. Child Beggary has turned into a lucrative business with a revenue of around 1.8 Crore (Census 2001).¹⁹⁹⁰

In India, there is insufficient availability of official data. Very little reliable data is available on trafficking and related aspects. The last data collected and compiled by the government was in 2016. Since then four union budgets have been discussed in the Parliament, however, this issue remains at the bottom of the list. Because of this rescue and rehabilitation programs are very limited in India.

The Child Protection Service (CPS)¹⁹⁹¹ by the Ministry of Women and Child Development has been in operation for many years and it aims to provide a safe and secure environment for rescued children. However, due to inadequate funding for the scheme, the whole idea of rehabilitation is never implemented properly. When the children are forced into this business by their parents, there are high chances of them getting re-victimized due to a lack of monitoring by the authorities.

India is also lacking in providing psychological counseling and care to the rescued children. This makes them difficult to come out of the trauma and they tend to lie about their

¹⁹⁸⁷ https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-12/PrisonManualA2016_20122024.pdf (last visited Mar.12, 2025).

¹⁹⁸⁸ TIMES OF INDIA, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/16-children-rescued-from-begging-racket/articleshow/70199803.cms> (last visited Mar.12, 2025).

¹⁹⁸⁹ TIMES OF INDIA, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/four-held-in-baby-abduction-racket-in-mumbai-had-plans-to-sell-the-kid/articleshow/118886607.cms> (last visited Mar.12, 2025).

¹⁹⁹⁰ DECCAN HERALD, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/editorial/act-on-begging-mafia-977028.html> (last visited Feb. 18, 2025).

¹⁹⁹¹ CHILD PROTECTION SERVICE (CPS), <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1776865> (last visited Feb.11, 2025).

situation. This results in pushing them again into the pit of beggary.

Many Government schools have also failed to serve their purpose. It has been reported that many children do not go to schools either because they were beaten and abused by their teachers for not understanding what was being taught or because they were not given mid-day meals.

A WAY FORWARD: HOW CAN WE STOP ALL THIS?

Begging, especially child begging has emerged into a dangerous menace in our country today. Eradicating the same is next to a challenge. Here are a few things to be kept in mind while dealing with this problem.

1. The government has to enforce a ban on begging. However, a complete ban at the first instance would not serve the purpose as there are high chances that things will continue behind the curtains. Gradual steps have to be taken to tackle this menace.
2. The relevant legislation is required to protect children legally. Laws on child sex trafficking, drug trafficking, child sexual abuse, and all the related areas should be scrutinized. Serious actions have to be taken against parents and those involved in this crime. The main cause needs to be uprooted. Begging Gangs and Mafias have to be eliminated.
3. Proper rehabilitation facilities have to be provided to the rescued children.
4. Authorized Beggar homes/ Orphanages/ Shelter Homes have to be established where these rescued children can be kept sound and safe.
5. Education and other training facilities can be provided to them.
6. If these children are reintegrated with their families, a timely check has to be also conducted as many children might be re-victimized.
7. A strong awareness is a pressing need amongst parents on child rights and the problems connected with begging.
8. Government can come up with welfare policies, financial schemes, and job opportunities for migrant and slum families to bring sufficient income to the family so that they should prevent sending their children away.
9. Discouraging the public from giving money to children. Receiving money encourages children to leave home and beg.
10. Giving food and clothing also does not work out many a time because the same is sold or exchanged for illegal drugs and money.
11. Donations can be made to responsible NGOs who work for such children.
12. Education should be made compulsory and severe action must be taken against parents who refrain from sending their children to school.
13. A complete ban on corporal punishment in schools has to be implemented.
14. No child deserves to move on the streets or door to door in search of food or money. Hence we as responsible citizens need to be alert enough to identify, rescue, and rehabilitate children who are found begging or immediately call on the toll-free helpline number, 1098 to curb the proliferation of child begging.

CONCLUSION

In the words of Justice Subba Rao, ***“Social Justice must begin with children. Unless a tender plant is properly tended and nourished, it has little chance of growing into a strong and useful tree. So, the priority in the scale of social justice shall be given to the welfare of the children!”***

Child begging and Child Labor are two sides of the same coin. Both are capable of destroying

the country's future. It's high time we raise our voices against the two evil practices prevailing in our country for ages.

Let us not allow those tiny hands to work or beg!

Let those tiny hands hold a pen and a book and write the future of our nation!

