

Tracing the Invisible: Missing Persons and the Dynamics of Social Exclusion in West Bengal

Introduction

The issue of missing persons has emerged as one of the most pressing yet insufficiently addressed social crises of contemporary India. The disappearance of a loved one inflicts a distinctive and deeply traumatic form of grief — unlike other losses, it is characterised by unresolved uncertainty and what researchers call *ambiguous loss*. When a person goes missing, relatives report it to the police and appeal to the public by releasing photographs and personal details through newspapers, social media, and community networks, often with little assurance that any meaningful institutional response will follow. In India, the scale and persistence of this phenomenon have now reached a point where they demand urgent academic scrutiny and policy intervention.



An analysis of data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that West Bengal has emerged as a significant hotspot for cases of missing persons, with a staggering surge in reported disappearances over the last decade. One in every six missing children in India is from

West Bengal. Alarming, in 2023 alone, the state recorded about 12,000 cases of missing children, dominating national statistics and raising urgent questions about the underlying causes and ramifications of this crisis in the society as well as in the concerned families.

At the national level, the magnitude of the crisis is staggering. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2023 alone, as many as 8.68 lakh people were reported missing across India — yet only 4.6 lakh, representing a recovery rate of barely 53 per cent, were traced. The unresolved backlog has grown steadily: from 3.12 lakh untraced cases in 2019 to approximately 4.08 lakh by the end of 2023, meaning that nearly one in every two missing persons remains unaccounted for. These numbers reflect not merely a law enforcement failure but a deep humanitarian deficit embedded in structural inequalities of gender, class, caste, and geography. Across the country, 88 persons are reported missing every hour — that is, more than 2,100 every single day. Yet even these figures are acknowledged to be an underestimate, as large numbers of cases, particularly those involving adult men and marginalised communities, never get formally registered.

Within this national landscape, West Bengal occupies an especially troubling position. The state consistently ranks among the top three in absolute numbers of reported missing persons. NCRB data reveal that in 2023, West Bengal accounted for approximately 1.2 lakh missing cases — the second highest in the country after Maharashtra — with a recovery rate of only 52 per cent. What is even more alarming is the scale of missing children within the state. In 2022, West Bengal reported the highest number of missing children in India at 12,455, of whom 10,571 were girls. While 12,546 children were found or traced during the same year, the state still had the highest number of unrecovered or untraced children in the country at 6,994. Earlier NCRB data — for 2021, 2020, and earlier years — consistently place West Bengal among the top two states for missing children. Nationally, nearly one in six missing children in India is from West Bengal.

While the data of NCRB reveal the magnitude of the problem, it does not reveal the motivations or circumstances behind each case. Neither does the data differentiate whether a missing person intentionally left due to personal pressures or drifted away because of unstable living conditions or ran away under coercive and exploitative situations.

To understand the underlying structure of the problem, a micro-level dataset (MLD) was constructed from the notices published in *The Statesman* from time to time in the year 2025. Smaller in scale than NCRB tables notwithstanding, the MLD offer critical insights about how

factors like gender, age, and district-specific circumstances could shape the incidence of disappearance in West Bengal.



Unregulated migration and economic distress often lead to people becoming untraceable.



Behind every statistic is a family trapped in uncertainty and 'ambiguous loss'.

In order to avoid *a priori assumptions*, let us begin with finding how does the pattern of missing persons vary across age and gender. The findings reveal an interesting gender pattern. Females account for nearly 60 per cent of all missing persons, predominantly concentrated in the 15 to 26 age group, followed closely by those under 15. This alarming trend suggests that adolescent girls and young women remain the most vulnerable demographics, may be due to social insecurities, risks of trafficking, or pressures related to early marriage. In contrast, male missing cases are more evenly distributed across age groups, with a notable increase among older men above 38 years. This trend suggests links to migration, employment-related movement, or mental health problems, highlighting the different socio-economic triggers behind the missing-person phenomenon in West Bengal.

Now the question arises, how do the missing-person cases vary across different districts of West Bengal? When examining the crisis through a geographic lens, it becomes evident that the missing-person phenomenon is not uniformly distributed across the state. District-level patterns show that West Bengal's certain regions emerging as high-risk zones while others remain relatively less affected. Certain districts, particularly in the southern belt, have been identified as high-risk zones,

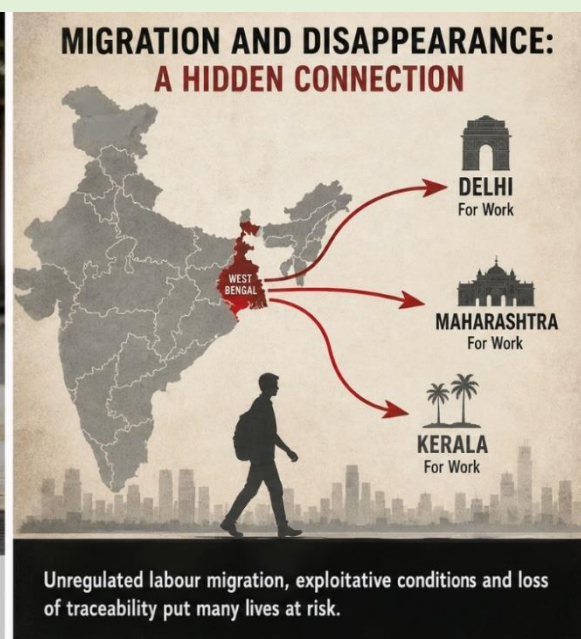
where socio-economic vulnerabilities converge with proximity to trafficking routes. South 24 Parganas stands out as the district with the highest number of missing-person cases, followed by Murshidabad, North 24 Parganas, Kolkata, and Nadia. These districts are characterised by heavy outmigration and dense urban mobility, which increase the likelihood of individuals' disappearing. In contrast, districts like Bankura, Jalpaiguri, and Jhargram report fewer cases. Despite district-wise divergent trend, the female profiles indicate that even districts with less number of missing cases, experience significant gendered vulnerabilities.

The study may not become a comprehensive one, unless we examine the crisis through a religious lens. The data reveals that the patterns of disappearance remain predominantly female-dominant and youth across communities. For Hindu communities, adolescent and young women constitute the largest share of missing cases, while Hindu men predominantly appear in older age groups. In contrast, among Muslim communities, the trend mirrors that of Hindus in respect of females, but a significant divergence occurs with respect to male missing cases. Muslim boys are found to be missing at a higher rate than their Hindu counterparts, indicating socioeconomic pressures, along with the necessity for earning bread at the early age to opting for greater risks associated with disappearance.

But then, what are the significant factors that has an underscoring role in driving West Bengal's missing-person crisis? Further study on the subject and literature review lay bare the main reasons. Dimension of the missing-person crisis in West Bengal is linked to the state's labour economy, historical migration flows, unregulated labour migration patterns created by the middlemen or



Gender inequality, violence and social exclusion are key drivers behind the disappearance of women and girls.



kinship networks. In absence of stable communication, and traceable employment records, families may lose contact with migrating members for a long period. Empirical evidence shows that districts such as Hooghly, Murshidabad, and Nadia, register high level of male outmigration. In documented cases, men migrating to states like Kerala, Maharashtra and Delhi for work become untraceable after changing jobs or falling victim to exploitative labour conditions. These migrant workers faced insurmountable challenges in returning home due to low income and identity documents.

According to the National Family Health Survey, nearly 32 per cent of women in West Bengal have experienced domestic violence, one of the highest rates among major Indian states. This statistic echoes the disproportionately high number of missing women and girls in NCRB data. Many women who go missing are not necessarily victims of kidnapping; instead, they often flee violent domestic situations or seek refuge from abusive environments.

Finally, the insights gleaned from the micro-level dataset and the broader analysis of missing-person cases in West Bengal illustrate that disappearances are deeply intertwined with systemic issues of gender inequality, poverty, and unsafe migration. The data underscore the necessity for stronger protective systems and support mechanisms for vulnerable families. As discussions around this crisis gain traction, advocacy for robust policies aimed at preventing disappearances, safeguarding at-risk populations, and addressing the root causes of social exclusion becomes paramount. Community engagement, awareness campaigns, and enhanced law enforcement responses are vital to mitigate the risks faced by those who may fall prey to the tragic phenomenon of missing persons.

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looking forward to hear from you*