The first such case of trafficking that came to light involved a young woman, Madhu, who was 18 and was offered a job in the film industry. Madhu returned after about three years and took 10 girls with her from the tribal area. These have been arrested, and they are being rehabilitated.

Case 2: Subbalakshmi

Subbalakshmi was a Class 9 student when she was forced into prostitution. According to R.P. Srinivasan, joint director of the Department of Anthropology at Andhra Pradesh University, the trade is flourishing in the region because the tribal girls do not have any alternative livelihood options.

Rajini looks downcast. She was 15 years old when she was tricked to get into prostitution and rescued in January last year by Nengo, an NGO that works on rehabilitating trafficked women. She is now home, but the thought of her time spent working as a sex worker in Bangalore and Rajahmundry is still painful for her.

There have been instances when the traffickers have used mobile phones or other gadgets to lure young girls with promises of a great city life or the promise of a rich life. These girls are not seen as victims but are considered as a source of income.

The last incident of trafficking that came to light was a case of a married man and 10-year-old girl in a tribal village. She was pushed into sex work. "I was raped by a man, and he forced her back into prostitution. The driver was already married, and there was no other option for the girls, except to work as sex workers."

The problem of employment

According to the 32 police stations spread across the 11 mandals, about 200 cases of missing girls have been recorded in the last five years. But other estimates, as per the records of the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCHR) and NGOs such as Nature's Watch, suggest that 1,500 women may have been trafficked in the last five years.

In 2020, the police recorded 18 cases of trafficking in the region, and 16 of them were cases of trafficking in Visakhapatnam. The Superintendent of Police of Visakhapatnam (Rural), Rahul Dev Saini, estimates that 10,000 to 20,000 girls could migrate to the cities each year.

Rajini says she had a tough time finding employment after her rescue. She was forced to sell the infant for ₹25,000. But other estimates show that about two-thirds of trafficked girls are used for child labor or married off after being trafficked.

Most of the trafficking cases come to light when the police raid a brothel, but things do not progress from there.

"With the rise in trafficking, certain locations, especially villages, are proving to be hotspots for traffickers. Villages that are close to main roads, railway stations, and weekly markets are vulnerable," says Anuradha Pradhan, the founder of Nynah.

"The gemstone miners and businessmen have been involved in trafficking for a long time. They have promised the girls a bright future, and they are not being viewed holistically by the authorities," she adds.

The problem of overcrowding

V.K. Nair, the founder of Nature’s Watch, says there are two angles to the problem: the supply of victims and the demand for them. "The demand for these girls is high in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata."

The movie merchants were followed by moneylenders from Nellore in the late 1980s. But the major blow came when the Adivasi girls were trafficked to Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata. "The girls were offered a good price, and they were seen as a source of income," says Satyapal.

The first such case of trafficking that came to light involved a young woman, Madhu, who was 18 and was offered a job in the film industry. Madhu returned after about three years and took 10 girls with her from the tribal area. These have been arrested, and they are being rehabilitated.

The elopement route

"The promiscuity and business among the Adivasi girls has led to a rise in elopement cases. This has been happening for a long time," says Anuradha Pradhan.

Adivasi girls from Andhra Pradesh are trafficked across India to the big cities. The traffickers use promises of a bright future and big money to lure the girls.

There have been cases where the traffickers have used social media to lure young girls with promises of a better life.

Madhu's go unreported due to social stigma. Many cases such as Subbalakshmi's go unreported because of social stigma.

"The girls are force-fed with promises of a better life," says Sunita Krishnan of Prajwala.

"We are planning to set up a helpline for these girls," says Anuradha Pradhan. "But the problem is not being viewed holistically by the authorities."