

Organized Crime and Its Impact on Indian Society

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Abstract- Organized crime in India is not merely a law enforcement problem; it is a deep-rooted socio-political phenomenon that corrodes the very foundations of democracy, governance, and social cohesion. This paper examines the historical evolution of organized crime in India, its principal manifestations, its far-reaching social, economic, and political impacts, the legal frameworks enacted to combat it, and the challenges that persist. The paper also incorporates the author's personal reflections on why this menace demands urgent and honest national reckoning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Organized crime is one of the gravest threats facing modern nation-states. Defined broadly, it refers to structured, coordinated illegal activities conducted by criminal groups that undermine governance, political stability, and the rule of law.¹ These activities encompass the illicit trafficking of firearms, drugs, endangered species, human beings, and falsified medical products, as well as financial crimes like money laundering and terror financing.²

India, with its vast population, complex socio-economic inequalities, porous borders, and layered political structures, presents fertile ground for organized criminal enterprises. According to the Global Organized Crime Index 2023, India ranks 61st among 193 countries in criminality score.³ The impact of organized crime in India is particularly alarming, with far-reaching effects on businesses, communities, and political institutions.⁴ These activities disrupt governance and development, and pose a serious challenge to public safety, demanding urgent attention and effective countermeasures.⁵

This paper argues that organized crime in India is not merely a peripheral problem of law and order it is a structural crisis embedded in the political economy of the country.

II. DEFINING ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In India, organized crime encompasses a wide range of illegal activities undertaken by criminal syndicates to gain power, amass wealth, and expand their operations.⁶ Unlike conventional crimes committed by individuals, organized crime involves structured groups operating over a prolonged period with the primary objective of gaining economic or material benefits through illegal means.⁷ Activities such as narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, cyber fraud, money laundering, and contract killings are no longer sporadic incidents but form part of coordinated criminal enterprises that undermine public order, economic stability, and the rule of law.⁸

Organized crime can be classified into two broad categories: Traditional Organized Crime, which incorporates illicit liquor, kidnapping, prostitution rackets, gambling, betting, blackmailing, trade extortion, sand mafia, contract killing, and mining mafia; and Non-Traditional Organized Crime, which consists of transnational crimes human trafficking, cybercrime, money laundering, arms smuggling, fake currency circulation, hacking, and drug smuggling.⁹

The key characteristics that distinguish organized crime from other criminal activities include:

- Continuity: It is an ongoing enterprise, not a one-time event.
- Profit Motive: The primary goal is financial or material gain.
- Covertness: Organized crime often operates in secret, making detection difficult.
- Structural Complexity: It operates through hierarchies, with a head who leads all members.¹⁰

III. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN INDIA

A. The Bombay Underworld: Origins and Rise

The history of modern organized crime in India is deeply intertwined with the rise of the Bombay (now Mumbai) underworld. Figures like Haji Mastan originally known as Mastan Haider Mirza became the first celebrity gangsters of Bombay. He worked in association with Karim Lala and by the 1960s had amassed millions from smuggling gold, silver, and electronic goods, expanding his clout in the film industry by investing money in Bollywood film production.¹¹

The most iconic figure in Indian organized crime is Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar, born on 26 December 1955 in Maharashtra. He is the leader of the organized crime syndicate known as D-Company, which he founded in Mumbai in the 1970s.¹² D-Company established itself initially through smuggling gold and silver during Mumbai's economic struggles of the 1980s, reportedly controlling approximately 25–30% of India's total gold and silver imports at its peak, creating a monopoly that allowed Dawood Ibrahim to set his own selling prices throughout India.¹³

By 1986, D-Company was one of the most powerful criminal organizations in Mumbai. Extortion became a regular source of income the gang demanded "protection money" from small businesses, shopkeepers, and landlords, while smuggling routes brought in everything from consumer electronics to drugs, using Mumbai's busy port as a gateway.¹⁴ At its peak, D-Company's network stretched into Bollywood; film financiers and producers were pressured or enticed into taking money from Dawood's associates, and according to Indian law enforcement, D-Company also played a role in fixing cricket matches using its global betting network.¹⁵

B. The Crime-Terror Nexus: The 1993 Bombay Bombings

The defining moment in India's encounter with organized crime came on March 12, 1993, when thirteen coordinated bomb blasts ripped through Mumbai, targeting the Bombay Stock Exchange, Air India headquarters, and other key locations. The

syndicate's defining notoriety stems from its alleged orchestration of these 1993 Mumbai serial bombings, which killed over 250 people and injured thousands an attack attributed to Dawood Ibrahim's retaliation, marking a shift from pure criminality to terror sponsorship.¹⁶

D-Company, under Dawood Ibrahim's leadership, evolved from a primarily criminal enterprise into a key player in the crime-terror nexus following the 1993 Mumbai bombings, leveraging its smuggling and financial networks to support Islamist militant activities aimed at destabilizing India.¹⁷ This convergence exemplifies how organized crime syndicates furnish terrorist organizations with operational capabilities, such as hawala money transfers and illicit trade routes for arms and narcotics, blurring the lines between profit-driven crime and ideological violence.¹⁸

Dawood Ibrahim was designated a global terrorist by the United Nations Security Council and by the United States in 2003, and the United States has maintained a bounty of US\$25 million on his head.¹⁹ A 2015 US Congressional report alleged that D-Company was a "5,000-member criminal syndicate operating mostly in Pakistan, India, and the United Arab Emirates," which has a "strategic alliance" with the ISI.²⁰

IV. PRINCIPAL MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN INDIA

A. Drug Trafficking

India's geostrategic location is a critical vulnerability. The country lies sandwiched between the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar–Laos–Thailand), two of the world's largest illicit drug-producing regions.²¹ India is a major destination and transit country for heroin, with key entry points along the Pakistan and Myanmar borders. Although Afghan opium production has declined in recent years, trafficking remains active, with large maritime shipments regularly intercepted off the coast of Gujarat.²²

Punjab presents the most acute crisis. According to Narcotics Control Bureau data for 2024, Punjab saw 163 cases of drug trafficking by drones during the

year, which included 187 kg of heroin.²³ The state has also witnessed the involvement of Canada-based gangsters in various criminal activities, including murder contracts and drug trafficking operations, highlighting the transnational nature of organized crime networks operating in the region.²⁴

The impact of drug trafficking extends beyond addiction, fuelling terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime while also draining national resources.²⁵ In India's northeast, insurgent organizations collect protection money from drug peddlers in lieu of safe passage of drug consignments through their territory.²⁶ It is estimated that 15% of the finances of Jammu & Kashmir militants were generated through the sale of drugs.²⁷

B. Human Trafficking

India serves as a source, destination, and transit point for human trafficking, forcing victims, including women and children, into sex work, bonded labour, or forced marriages.²⁸ Human trafficking provides revenue for terrorist organizations, and terrorist groups exploit human trafficking networks to recruit and radicalize individuals.²⁹ Trafficking routes are also used by terrorists for border infiltration and smuggling.³⁰

C. Sand Mining and Natural Resource Mafias

Criminal networks in India are most active in sectors tied to natural resources, such as sand mining, timber extraction, and the illicit liquor trade.³¹ So-called sand mafias are deeply entrenched in the construction industry, benefiting from political protection and the capacity to intimidate competitors.³² Most illegal sand mining occurs in riverine rural areas near urban centres to minimize transportation costs.³³ Organized crime networks similarly dominate the coal sector, particularly in Jharkhand, where illicit mining is deeply entrenched despite intensified enforcement efforts.³⁴

D. Gold Smuggling

Gold smuggling is a significant organized crime activity in India, with Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka serving as key transit points. Estimates suggest that between 200 and 300 tonnes of gold are smuggled into the country annually.³⁵

E. Cybercrime

The rapid growth of digital platforms has created new avenues for organized crime. Increased use of digital platforms for fraud, money laundering, and cyber-enabled crimes complicates enforcement significantly.³⁶ Modern drug trafficking increasingly uses the dark web and cryptocurrencies, posing digital security challenges and weakening traditional policing.³⁷

F. Money Laundering

Through money laundering networks, criminal groups bring illicit funds into the mainstream economy, distorting financial systems and promoting illegal economic practices.³⁸ The private sector plays a significant role in facilitating organized crime in India, especially in the real estate, extractive, and financial sectors.³⁹ According to a FICCI report, organized crime activities like smuggling and counterfeiting cost India's economy around ₹1 lakh crore annually.⁴⁰

V. IMPACT ON INDIAN SOCIETY

A. Social Impact

Human Trafficking and Women's Safety: The rise in organized crime has directly contributed to a growing sense of insecurity for women, particularly in regions where crime syndicates operate with impunity.⁴¹ Criminal activities such as contract killings, armed violence, and trafficking have resulted in countless innocent lives lost, creating widespread trauma in communities.⁴²

Youth Radicalization: Criminal syndicates, often linked with extremist groups, target vulnerable youth, luring them into illegal activities or radicalizing them for political or ideological reasons.⁴³ The persistence of youth involvement in serious crimes and the continuous evolution of smuggling techniques indicate that criminal networks are adapting faster than enforcement agencies can respond in some areas.⁴⁴

Disruption of Social Harmony: The widespread impact of organized crime disrupts social harmony by creating divisions between communities, fostering distrust, and promoting violence.⁴⁵

B. Economic Impact

Black Money and Tax Evasion: Organized crime generates black money through illicit activities like extortion, drug trafficking, and illegal mining, undermining the legitimate economy and promoting corruption at all levels of society.⁴⁶ Criminal syndicates engage in massive tax evasion schemes, depriving the government of critical revenues needed for national development and welfare.⁴⁷

Distortion of Markets: Sand mafias, coal mafias, and other resource-based criminal networks use corrupt practices to secure market monopolies, crowding out legitimate businesses and investors.⁴⁸

Economic Drain from Drug Abuse: Drug addiction causes a huge economic drain on the country through loss of production and diversion of resources for caring and rehabilitation of addicts.⁴⁹

C. Political Impact: The Criminal-Politician Nexus

Perhaps the most corrosive impact of organized crime on Indian society is its penetration of the political system. The political-criminal nexus in India encompasses the symbiotic alliances between politicians, political parties, and organized criminal networks, whereby criminals provide financial resources, voter intimidation, and coercive enforcement to secure electoral victories and policy favors, while politicians in turn offer legal impunity, public contracts, and bureaucratic protection to their criminal associates.⁵⁰

This entrenched relationship was first officially probed by the 1993 Vohra Committee, appointed in response to Mumbai serial blasts linked to underworld-politician ties.⁵¹ Empirical analyses of election affidavits demonstrate the scale of criminal infiltration: 46% of the 543 winning candidates in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections declared criminal cases, including 29% facing serious charges such as murder, attempt to murder, and rape.⁵² Data from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) shows a rising trend in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, 30% of winning MPs faced criminal cases, increasing to 43% in 2019 and reaching 46% in 2024.⁵³

Governor N.N. Vohra himself noted in 2020 that "with known criminal elements enjoying the

protection and patronage of powerful elements in the ruling hierarchies, a 'criminal nexus' between the polity, corrupt public servants and the mafia networks has been functioning for the past many years now."⁵⁴

A 2024 India Corruption Research Report found that 79% of respondents believe there is a criminal nexus between business oligarchs and top politicians, and 71% believe Indian courts are not handling corruption cases effectively.⁵⁵

D. Impact on Governance and Institutions

Corruption extends to law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, impairing their ability to combat organized crime effectively. Criminals often exploit legal loopholes and manipulate the system, undermining the rule of law.⁵⁶ Press freedom is constrained, with government agencies conducting raids on media professionals and organizations raising concerns about political interference and reportedly leading to legal action and harassment against journalists investigating organized crime and corruption.⁵⁷

States facing organized crime, like Manipur, experience significant law and order disruptions, weakening the state's ability to maintain control and stability in key regions.⁵⁸ Criminal syndicates, particularly in border areas, often align with local insurgent groups, challenging the authority of the state and complicating governance.⁵⁹

VI. LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO COMBAT ORGANIZED CRIME

A. Historical Legislative Vacuum

For decades, Indian criminal law lacked a comprehensive and uniform framework to address organized crime. The Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) focused largely on punishing individual offences and did not recognize the collective and continuing nature of organized criminal activity.⁶⁰ This legislative vacuum compelled certain states to enact special laws, resulting in uneven enforcement across the country.⁶¹

B. State-Level Legislation: MCOCA

The Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA) is a law enacted by the state of Maharashtra to combat organized crime and terrorism. It provides the State Government with special powers, including powers of surveillance, relaxed evidentiary standards, and additional criminal penalties including the death penalty.⁶² MCOCA defines organized crime as "any continuing unlawful activity by an individual, singly or jointly, either as a member of an organised crime syndicate or on behalf of such syndicate, by use of violence or threat of violence or intimidation or coercion, or other unlawful means, with the objective of gaining pecuniary benefits."⁶³

MCOCA has been invoked in landmark cases, including those accused in the 2006 Mumbai Train Bombings, where five persons were sentenced to life imprisonment and seven others to the death penalty.⁶⁴ Organized crime is similarly covered by state laws in Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan.⁶⁵

C. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023: A National Framework

The enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS), which replaces the IPC, marks a significant shift in India's criminal jurisprudence. For the first time, organized crime has been codified as a distinct offence under Section 111 of the principal penal statute, reducing dependence on state-specific legislations and ensuring consistency in prosecution.⁶⁶ The BNS became effective from July 1, 2024.⁶⁷

Section 111 of the BNS includes crimes such as kidnapping, extortion, and cybercrime committed on behalf of a crime syndicate. The BNS also introduces petty organized crime as a distinct offence and stipulates harsher penalties, including the death penalty or life imprisonment for offences resulting in death.⁶⁸ However, legal scholars have raised concerns that the BNS uses vague and catch-all phrases, leaving room for unfettered discretion and arbitrariness on the part of investigating agencies.⁶⁹

D. Other Key Legislation

- Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA): Aimed at curbing the financial aspects of organized crime, it forbids money laundering and provides for the seizure of assets obtained through it.⁷⁰
- Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS): Addresses drug trafficking, a major aspect of transnational organized crime.⁷¹
- Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA): Fortifies the legal framework for tackling terrorism and organized crime syndicates with provisions for heightened punishments, prosecution, and preventive detention.⁷²

E. Institutional Mechanisms

- Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI): Investigates complex organized crime cases, corruption, financial fraud, and transnational crimes.⁷³
- National Investigation Agency (NIA): Focuses on terrorism-related cases but also handles organized crime with links to terrorist networks. The NIA is also planning to launch a national database of gangsters and criminals running gangs from behind jails.⁷⁴
- Enforcement Directorate (ED): Investigates financial crimes such as money laundering and foreign exchange violations related to organized crime.⁷⁵

VII. CHALLENGES IN COMBATING ORGANIZED CRIME

Despite the legislative and institutional framework, several structural challenges persist:

1. Transnational Nature: Organized crime increasingly operates across borders, with syndicates exploiting international routes for drug trafficking and human trafficking.⁷⁶ India faces significant challenges in border security due to its geographical location and poorly monitored borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar.⁷⁷
2. Weak Coordination: Cooperation among agencies like the CBI, Enforcement Directorate, and state police is often

fragmented, which weakens efforts to tackle organized crime.⁷⁸

3. **Technological Adaptation:** Cross-border smuggling networks remain highly active, utilizing sophisticated methods including drone technology, encrypted communications, and corruption of officials at border checkpoints.⁷⁹ Organized crime groups have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, continuously evolving their tactics to circumvent law enforcement.⁸⁰
4. **Political Patronage:** Political figures sometimes protect organized criminals, allowing them to operate with impunity.⁸¹ Efforts to prevent organized crime are largely sector-specific rather than part of a unified national strategy.⁸²
5. **Press Freedom and Civil Society Constraints:** Non-state actors, including media organizations and civil society groups, face increasing restrictions in India. Additionally, restrictions on foreign funding and official registration have limited the operational capacity of civil society organizations.⁸³
6. **Victim and Witness Protection:** India lacks a comprehensive national framework for victim and witness protection. Current safeguards are limited, and implementation is inconsistent.⁸⁴

VIII. PERSONAL OPINION

(The following section represents the personal views of the author)

Having examined the evidence, I am convinced that organized crime in India is not primarily a failure of law enforcement, it is a failure of political will. The statistics are damning: nearly half of all elected Members of Parliament in 2024 declared criminal cases against themselves. This is not an anomaly; it is a system working exactly as designed by those who benefit from it.

What troubles me most is not the existence of crime syndicates like D-Company or the sand mafias criminal organizations exist in every society. What is uniquely dangerous in the Indian context is the degree to which the state itself has become complicit. The Vohra Committee submitted its report in 1993. More than three decades later, successive

governments of all political persuasions have chosen to bury it rather than act on it. This silence is not neutral; it is a form of institutional endorsement.

The enactment of Section 111 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita is a welcome step. However, I am skeptical that legal reform alone can address a problem that is fundamentally about incentives. As long as criminal muscle and black money remain reliable pathways to electoral success, the nexus between politics and organized crime will endure. The law can only be as strong as the institutions that enforce it, and those institutions are themselves deeply penetrated by the very nexus they are meant to dismantle.

I also believe that the media's role deserves greater attention. Journalists who investigate organized crime and political corruption in India do so at enormous personal risk. The killing of journalist Mukesh Chandrakar in Chhattisgarh in January 2025, after he exposed a ₹120 crore corruption case, is a grim reminder that the tentacles of the criminal-political nexus reach beyond the ballot box and into the press room. A democracy that cannot protect its journalists cannot protect itself from organized crime.

Finally, I want to emphasize the human cost that statistics often obscure. Behind every trafficking case is a person, often a woman or child, whose life has been shattered. Behind every drug seizure is a community — often poor, often marginalized that has been hollowed out by addiction and violence. Organized crime is not an abstraction. It is a daily lived reality for millions of Indians, particularly the most vulnerable. Any serious response must begin with that acknowledgement.

The path forward requires not just stronger laws and better-funded police forces, but a fundamental restructuring of political incentives, genuine judicial independence, robust witness protection, and a free press. Without these, India will continue to fight organized crime with one hand tied behind its back.

IX. CONCLUSION

Organized crime poses a significant threat to the social, economic, and political fabric of India.⁸⁵ While the country has made considerable progress in

enacting laws and implementing measures to combat organized crime, there is still room for improvement.⁸⁶ The battle against organized crime requires a multifaceted approach that includes strong legal frameworks, enhanced law enforcement capabilities, and proactive measures to address the root causes, including poverty, inequality, political corruption, and weak institutional accountability. Understanding organized crime within the Indian context requires a nuanced approach that considers the socio-economic, cultural, and political factors at play.⁸⁷ Addressing these challenges necessitates comprehensive strategies that promote social development, enhance legal frameworks, and foster community engagement.⁸⁸ By acknowledging the unique characteristics of organized crime in India, policymakers and society can work towards effective interventions that not only combat criminal activities but also contribute to a more just and equitable society.⁸⁹

FOOTNOTES

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