

From Local Syndicates to Transnational Networks: The Impact of Globalization on Organized Crime in India

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ABSTRACT

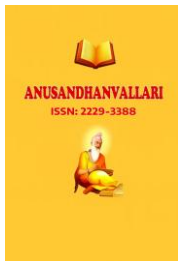
Globalization has profoundly transformed the landscape of organized crime in India, facilitating the evolution of localized criminal syndicates into complex transnational networks. This paper traces the historical trajectory of organized crime in India, examining its geographical distribution, structural shifts, and the impact of economic liberalization. It argues that globalization has not merely expanded the reach of organized crime but has fundamentally altered its organizational logic, enabling criminal groups to exploit cross-border markets, financial systems, and technological advancements. The analysis reveals that India's legal and institutional responses have struggled to keep pace with this transformation, constrained by territorial jurisdiction, procedural rigidity, and limited inter-agency coordination. While specialized legislations signify a recognition of the transnational nature of contemporary crime, they remain largely reactive and fragmented. Moreover, the increasing reliance on stringent legal measures reflects a security-driven approach that often prioritizes short-term incapacitation over long-term structural disruption of criminal networks. The paper highlights the enduring tension between security imperatives and constitutional safeguards, emphasizing the need for a recalibrated strategy that combines intelligence-led enforcement, international cooperation, and robust rights-based safeguards. It concludes by calling for future research to empirically evaluate existing frameworks and explore comparative models that balance crime control with constitutional accountability in an increasingly interconnected world.

KEYWORDS: Transnational networks, Globalization, Organized crime, Criminal syndicates

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Organised Crime in India

Organized crime in India, once largely confined to national networks, has undergone a significant transformation, evolving into transnational enterprises with financial capacities comparable to the gross domestic product of some nations and an extensive global reach similar to multinational corporations (Karthi, 2000). This evolution is largely attributable to globalization, which has facilitated the expansion of criminal activities beyond traditional borders, leveraging advancements in information technology, financial systems, and transportation infrastructure (Neumann & Elsenbroich, 2016). This global interconnectedness has enabled criminal syndicates to operate with unprecedented fluidity, establishing complex networks that exploit disparities in international legal frameworks and enforcement capabilities (Chimni, 2006; McCarthy-Jones & Turner, 2024). These groups capitalize on rapid communication, movement of capital, and international travel to expand their operations, transforming the global landscape into a vast market for illicit activities (Sharma, 2010; Tikhute, 2023). Such criminal innovation and illicit global markets have been particularly revitalized in Asia due to economic opening and intensification, driving diverse consumer demands for both licit and illicit goods (Broadhurst, 2017). This has led to the emergence of new entrepreneurial crime groups and the revitalization of traditional ones, significantly contributing to the surge in illicit distribution and use of narcotics and other contraband worldwide (Broadhurst, 2017). The



unprecedented levels of global communication and movement have fostered an environment highly conducive to the expansion and proliferation of these criminal networks (Ungar, 2016).

1.2 Evolution Of Criminal Networks Over Time

Initially, criminal organizations operated predominantly within national or regional boundaries, focusing on localized illicit markets and often maintaining a hierarchical structure (Srikanth, 2016). However, the advent of globalization has fostered a paradigm shift, transitioning these localized entities into more diffuse, transnational networks capable of orchestrating complex operations across multiple jurisdictions (Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2021). This structural evolution has been characterized by a move from rigid hierarchies to more fluid, ad hoc coalitions, leveraging improved communication and transportation to facilitate diverse illegal activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, and cybercrime (Moreto & Uhm, 2021). This shift toward decentralized, agile networks allows criminal enterprises to quickly adapt to changing enforcement landscapes and exploit emerging opportunities by forming temporary alliances with other groups, including those involved in terrorism or arms dealing (Idler, 2021). These transnational criminal organizations exploit vulnerabilities in global governance and weak state institutions, often engaging in corruption to facilitate their operations and evade prosecution (Sullivan, 2023). This global expansion of illicit trade mirrors the legitimate global economy, with criminal activities encompassing diverse markets from sophisticated weaponry to human trafficking (Magliocca et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2023).

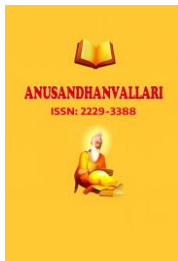
1.3 Brief Overview Of Globalization's Impact on Criminal Activities

Globalization has profoundly reshaped the landscape of organized crime, fostering the growth of transnational criminal networks and illicit activities like drug trafficking through the increased cross-border exchange of goods, services, and information (NAAYIF, 2023). This interconnectedness has enabled criminal syndicates to exploit global disparities, expand their reach, and diversify their illicit operations, including the trade in new psychoactive substances (Naayif, 2023; Zuriyani & Despica, 2020). The increased flow of people, money, information, and goods across international borders, facilitated by globalization, has enabled crime groups to restructure from hierarchical organizations to more loosely structured "dark networks" that effectively exploit illicit transnational business opportunities (DUMAGÖL, 2009; McCarthy-Jones & Turner, 2024). This shift toward decentralized, agile networks allows criminal enterprises to quickly adapt to changing enforcement landscapes and exploit emerging opportunities by forming temporary alliances with other groups, including those involved in terrorism or arms dealing (McCarthy-Jones & Turner, 2024). This global interconnectedness has also challenged traditional law enforcement methods, necessitating international cooperation and innovative strategies to combat these evolving threats (Wilkinson, 2010). Moreover, the development of globalized legal frameworks, such as the *lex mercatoria*, inadvertently creates environments where illicit activities can flourish, as transnational corporate actors often engage in decentralized law-making processes that lack public oversight and can be exploited to avoid legal liabilities (Chimni, 2006). This complexity underscores how the proliferation of global norms, while intended to foster legitimate commerce, can inadvertently create loopholes that transnational criminal organizations adeptly leverage for their illicit gains (Fernandes & Pathak, 2020).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Relevant Criminological Theories on Organised Crime

To comprehend the intricate evolution of organized crime in the era of globalization, an examination of foundational criminological theories such as social disorganization theory, differential association theory, and strain theory is imperative, as they offer frameworks for understanding the emergence and perpetuation of criminal enterprises within specific socio-economic contexts. However, to fully grasp the transnational dimensions of



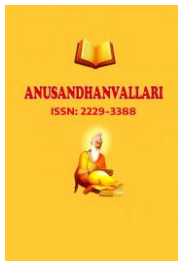
contemporary organized crime, it is also crucial to integrate perspectives that account for the impact of globalization on these criminal ecosystems (Calderón & Beltrán, 2018). This includes theories focusing on transnational legal processes and the global diffusion of criminal prohibitions, which provide insight into how global interconnectedness facilitates and shapes criminal activities across borders (Aaronson & Shaffer, 2020). Furthermore, approaches emphasizing the legal ethnographies of globalization highlight how the impact of globalization, including its legal and illicit productions, manifests both within and beyond the formal boundaries of nation-states, thereby complicating traditional notions of jurisdiction and territoriality (Chimni, 2006; Eslava & Pahuja, 2012). Specifically, the advancement of globalization has facilitated the proliferation of transnational crime by weakening traditional territorial jurisdictions and enabling criminal organizations to operate across national borders (Schroeder, 2020). This expansion necessitates a re-evaluation of enforcement strategies, moving beyond traditional national responses to embrace more globally coordinated efforts, as the very nature of transnational organized crime transcends conventional jurisdictional limitations (Reichel, 2018).

3. Globalisation Theories Applicable to Transnational Criminal Networks

The functionalist argument, for instance, posits that globalization, while promoting progress, can also destabilize societies, leading to the breakdown of social controls and the emergence of deviant normative standards (Laverick, 2016). This disruption provides fertile ground for the growth of transnational criminal networks, which capitalize on the eroded social cohesion and weakened institutional oversight to expand their illicit operations (Hansen & Uldam, 2015). Moreover, theories focusing on the cultural dimensions of globalization offer insights into how homogenizing cultural trends can inadvertently facilitate shared conceptualizations among criminal actors, leading to the establishment of illicit markets that span diverse geographical and cultural landscapes (Aaronson & Shaffer, 2020). The interconnectedness fostered by globalization also enables the rapid dissemination of illicit innovations, such as the use of cryptocurrencies for untraceable financial flows, further complicating enforcement efforts (Obregon et al., 2024). Such conceptualizations of globalization extend to understanding how the proliferation of multilateral treaties, aiming to standardize criminalization duties across nations, inadvertently shapes the operational environment for transnational criminal networks, necessitating a transnational processual framework for analysis (Aaronson & Shaffer, 2020). This framework is critical for analyzing how international legal norms, despite their intent to curb transnational crime, often necessitate adaptive strategies from criminal organizations to exploit jurisdictional gaps and varying enforcement capacities (Chimni, 2006; Obregon et al., 2024). Furthermore, the formation of global networks of legal and law enforcement professionals to address common global problems signifies a nascent global legal order that, while still developing, works to unify the emerging global state in its efforts to combat transnational illicit activities (Chimni, 2006).

3.1 Integration of Criminal Law Perspectives

This integration necessitates a deep dive into how various national criminal laws interact—or fail to interact—in the face of crimes that transgress traditional jurisdictional boundaries, thereby creating legal lacunae that transnational criminal organizations exploit (Schroeder, 2020). A critical analysis of these interactions reveals the asymmetrical recognition of criminal acts across different legal systems, which hinders effective prosecution and facilitates the ongoing operations of these networks (Galicia, 2018; Lindahl, 2018). Moreover, the disparities in investigative and prosecutorial capacities among nations further exacerbate these challenges, allowing sophisticated criminal enterprises to thrive by strategically locating their operations in jurisdictions with weaker enforcement mechanisms. These further underscores the necessity of harmonized international legal frameworks and enhanced cooperation to effectively counter the globalized threat of organized crime. This calls for a thorough examination of how international instruments and judicial bodies, such as the International Criminal Court, aim to establish universal jurisdiction over certain egregious offenses, thereby attempting to close these jurisdictional



gaps and foster a more unified global response to criminal activity (Lindahl, 2018). However, despite these efforts, the scope of such international bodies often remains constrained by issues of state sovereignty and political will, as evidenced by careful consideration of the Rome Statute (Lindahl, 2018).

4. Historical Context of Organized Crime in India

4.1 Geographical Distribution of Criminal Groups

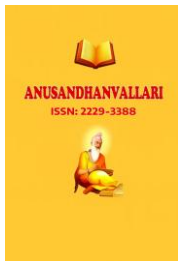
The geographical distribution of organised crime in India has historically been shaped by a combination of regional economies, trade routes, urbanisation patterns, border vulnerabilities, and socio-political conditions. Organised criminal groups did not emerge uniformly across the country; rather, they developed in specific regions where geography created opportunities for illicit activities and sustained criminal networks over time (Van Dijk et al., 2021). Coastal regions and port cities have traditionally served as major centres of organised crime. Cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Kochi historically facilitated smuggling due to maritime trade, dense commercial activity, and access to international shipping routes. In these areas, organised crime initially revolved around customs evasion, gold smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and later, financial crimes. The presence of informal labour markets and densely populated urban settlements further enabled criminal syndicates to recruit manpower and establish territorial control (Kleemans, 2007).

Border regions have also played a crucial role in shaping organised crime. India's long and porous borders with neighbouring countries created favourable conditions for cross-border smuggling of arms, drugs, cattle, counterfeit currency, and humans. Regions along the western, eastern, and north-eastern borders witnessed the growth of organised groups that operated as intermediaries between domestic markets and cross-border supply chains. In several instances, these criminal networks became deeply embedded in local economies, making them difficult to dismantle through conventional policing alone (İçduygu & Toktas, 2002). Inland regions, particularly those marked by economic deprivation and weak state presence, experienced a different trajectory. Parts of northern and central India historically saw the emergence of organised groups engaged in dacoity, land-related crimes, extortion, and later, contract killings. These groups often operated across district or state boundaries, exploiting jurisdictional limitations and administrative fragmentation. Over time, such groups transitioned from loosely organised bands to structured syndicates with defined leadership and operational hierarchies (Blackburn et al., 2017).

Urban expansion in the post-independence period further altered the geographical spread of organised crime. Rapid migration to metropolitan areas created informal settlements and unregulated markets, providing fertile ground for criminal enterprises linked to real estate, labour contracting, transport, and protection rackets. Organised crime thus became increasingly urban-centric, though its operational reach extended into rural hinterlands for recruitment, concealment, and logistical support. Overall, the geographical distribution of organised crime in India reflects a dynamic interaction between space, economy, and governance. Criminal groups adapted their structures and activities to regional conditions, resulting in diverse forms of organised crime across coastal, border, urban, and rural regions. This spatial diversity continues to influence the nature of organised crime in contemporary India and presents complex challenges for uniform legal and enforcement responses (Hambarde & Shinde, 2024).

4.2 Transition Phase: Liberalisation and Structural Shifts

The economic liberalisation of the early 1990s marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of organised crime in India. Liberalised trade, deregulation of financial systems, increased foreign exchange flows, and technological advancement expanded both legitimate and illicit economic opportunities. Organised crime groups adapted swiftly, diversifying their activities and forging connections beyond regional and national boundaries (Idler,



2021).

This period witnessed a gradual decline in purely territorial control as the primary organising principle of organised crime. Instead, criminal groups began operating through flexible networks, outsourcing functions, and collaborating with transnational actors. Smuggling routes expanded into international corridors, illicit finance moved through global channels, and organised crime became increasingly embedded within transnational markets for drugs, arms, counterfeit goods, and human trafficking (Idler, 2021).

Technological change further accelerated this transition. Improved communication systems reduced reliance on physical proximity, allowing criminal syndicates to coordinate activities across jurisdictions. The emergence of cyber-enabled crime and digital financial instruments signalled a shift from visible, violence-centric operations to less conspicuous but more scalable criminal models. Organised crime in India thus entered a phase marked by hybridity—retaining local foundations while simultaneously integrating into global criminal networks (Gundur et al., 2021). This historical evolution underscores that organised crime in India is not a static phenomenon but a continuously adapting structure shaped by broader economic, political, and technological transformations. Understanding this trajectory is essential for analysing the contemporary challenges posed by transnational organised crime and for assessing the adequacy of existing legal and institutional responses (Moreto & Uhm, 2021).

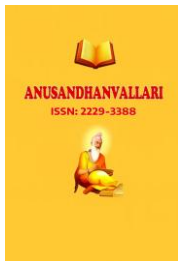
5. Globalization and the Rise of Transnational Organized Crime

5.1 Cross-Border Criminal Markets and Network Expansion

Globalisation has fundamentally altered the operational landscape of organised crime by enabling criminal groups to move beyond territorially confined activities and integrate into cross-border illicit markets. Increased global trade, improved transport infrastructure, and the liberal movement of goods and people have simultaneously facilitated legitimate commerce and illicit trafficking. Organised crime groups exploit these global flows to engage in transnational activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and the circulation of counterfeit goods. These crimes are no longer confined to bilateral routes but operate through complex, multi-country networks designed to maximise profit and minimise detection (“The Drug Problem and Organized Crime, Illicit Financial Flows, Corruption and Terrorism,” 2017). In the Indian context, transnational organised crime has expanded through India’s strategic geographical position linking South Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. Criminal networks increasingly operate through international corridors that connect production zones, transit points, and destination markets. Indian organised crime groups often function as facilitators within larger global networks rather than as isolated actors, coordinating logistics, finance, and distribution across jurisdictions. This shift reflects a move from hierarchical, locally dominant syndicates to decentralised networks characterised by collaboration, subcontracting, and role specialization (McCarthy-Jones et al., 2020). Such networks are resilient and adaptive, capable of reconfiguring routes and methods in response to law enforcement pressure. The transnationalities of organised crime have thus diluted the relevance of national borders and challenged the effectiveness of traditional policing models rooted in territorial jurisdiction.

6. Financial Globalization and Illicit Money Flows

Technological advancement has emerged as a critical enabler of transnational organised crime in the globalised era. Digital communication platforms, encrypted messaging services, and anonymizing technologies have transformed how criminal networks coordinate operations. Physical proximity is no longer necessary for organisational cohesion, allowing criminal groups to operate across continents with minimal exposure (Europol, 2021). In India, technology-driven organised crime has manifested prominently in cyber-enabled fraud, online



trafficking, and digital extortion schemes. Criminal networks leverage call centres, phishing operations, cryptocurrency transactions, and dark web marketplaces to conduct large-scale operations targeting victims across national borders. These activities exemplify a shift from violence-centric crime to technologically mediated, high-volume criminal enterprises (Martinu & McEwen, 2019). The digitalisation of organised crime has also facilitated convergence between different forms of criminality. Traditional organised crime groups increasingly collaborate with cybercriminals, financial intermediaries, and transnational facilitators, creating hybrid networks that are difficult to classify or dismantle. This convergence has significantly reduced entry barriers to organised crime, enabling smaller groups to participate in global illicit markets without maintaining extensive territorial control (McCarthy-Jones et al., 2020). Overall, globalisation has transformed organised crime in India into a networked, transnational phenomenon characterised by cross-border markets, financial sophistication, and technological adaptability. This transformation has profound implications for legal frameworks, enforcement strategies, and international cooperation, necessitating a shift from reactive, territorially bound responses to proactive, intelligence-driven, and globally coordinated approaches.

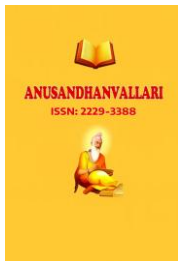
7. Legal And Institutional Response to Transnational Organised Crime in India

7.1 Domestic Legal Framework: Strengths and Structural Limitations

India's legal response to organised crime has historically evolved in a fragmented and reactive manner. For a long time, the general provisions of the Indian Penal Code were relied upon to prosecute organised criminal activity through offences such as criminal conspiracy, abetment, extortion, and cheating. While these provisions addressed individual criminal acts, they were ill-suited to capture the collective, continuous, and networked nature of organised crime. The absence of a comprehensive conceptualization of organised crime resulted in enforcement approaches that targeted symptoms rather than underlying structures. In response, specialised legislations were enacted at both the state and central levels to address organised and transnational criminality. These laws introduced expanded definitions, enhanced investigative powers, and stringent procedural provisions. While such measures strengthened the State's capacity to disrupt criminal networks, they also raised significant concerns regarding over-criminalisation, preventive detention, and dilution of procedural safeguards. The heavy reliance on extraordinary powers reflects an enforcement-centric approach that prioritises security outcomes, often at the expense of long-term institutional capacity building (UNODC, 2021). A critical limitation of the domestic legal framework lies in its territorial orientation. Organised crime laws are primarily designed to operate within defined jurisdictions, whereas transnational criminal networks function across borders with fluid organisational structures. Jurisdictional fragmentation, overlapping enforcement mandates, and uneven implementation across states weaken the effectiveness of domestic laws in addressing crimes that are inherently global in character (Christensen, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This review has traced the evolution of organised crime in India from territorially anchored local syndicates to complex transnational networks shaped by globalisation. Historically rooted in regional socio-economic conditions and local power structures, organised crime has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt to structural transformations brought about by economic liberalisation, financial integration, and technological advancement. The analysis shows that globalisation has not merely expanded the geographical reach of organised crime but has fundamentally altered its organisational logic—shifting from hierarchical, violence-centered models to flexible, network-based operations embedded within global illicit markets. The paper has further demonstrated that India's legal and institutional responses have struggled to keep pace with this transformation. While

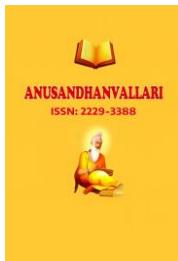


specialised legislations and enhanced enforcement mechanisms signify a recognition of the organised and transnational nature of contemporary crime, these measures remain largely reactive and fragmented. Territorial jurisdiction, procedural rigidity, and limited inter-agency coordination continue to constrain effective responses to crimes that operate across borders and financial systems. Moreover, the increasing reliance on stringent and preventive legal measures reflects a security-driven approach that often prioritises short-term incapacitation over long-term structural disruption of criminal networks.

Finally, the review highlights the enduring tension between security imperatives and constitutional safeguards in the governance of organised crime. The expansion of exceptional legal powers raises serious concerns regarding proportionality, due process, and access to justice, particularly for marginalised individuals. Addressing transnational organised crime in a globalised context therefore requires a recalibrated strategy that combines intelligence-led enforcement, financial and technological expertise, sustained international cooperation, and robust rights-based safeguards. Future research must empirically evaluate the effectiveness of existing frameworks and explore comparative models that balance crime control with constitutional accountability in an increasingly interconnected world.

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