

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SMUGGLER Facts and Figures of the Biggest Business in Town

"I'll give you two for 400, that's my final offer." We are sitting in a lean-to shack near Bangabazar, the table and floor littered with sarees. Very little light filters through the woven walls. Several dealers crowd the tiny room. The business deals are quick and slick, speaking of years of practice. One woman has arrived from Calcutta with fifteen sarees. They are

Money money money
That final word sums up the motives behind the widespread and near-open smuggling that is currently in practice and shows signs of unimpeded growth.
Smuggling is now no longer a hide-and-seek operation; whole communities depend on it openly for a living. Economic and geographical circumstances have conspired to ag-

S. Bari in Dhaka

(Paiz), identifies major patterns in smuggling and highlights the reasoning behind such activities, as well as possible measures to counteract it.
In an import-controlled economy such as ours, duties on foreign goods are steep, enough to annual a huge chunk of the profit. Traders cannot afford to legally import in the

different production costs, smuggled Indian sugar can go for less than domestic sugar.
Smuggled items are either agricultural goods, yarn and textiles, industrial goods, or raw materials. The popular image of shady characters slinking through the night is only a fraction of the truth. One electronics shopowner says, "We

taxable items in their suitcases. Garment companies provide another link: high-quality material is imported tax-free for the industry, then leaked to the local market and eventually even smuggled to India. In exchange, Indian cloth comes pouring in.

Bengali Mafia

Smugglers, surprisingly, don't just carry anything at hand. One cosmetic dealer's

breaking bricks.
These boss operators have the right connections with political power, policy-makers, and law-enforcement agencies. Through agents at various levels and areas, and through a systematic buying-out of the bureaucrats along the way, the smuggling gang has emerged as the most potent force in the trade. Individuals smuggle on a much smaller scale than these mini-Mafias. The person who physically carries the goods across a border is most frequently the one to get caught. But like any gang, the small fry

At the core of trade is profit, and in smuggling profit is breathtaking. The price of an Indian radio on the Indian side of the border jumps by 108% on Bangladesh territory. The same variation is 300% for sandalwood soap and 535% for glass bangles. In the other direction, Hilsa fish rise in value by 297% when smuggled to India.

know very little. The benefits of gang-controlled smuggling are lower risks for the boss, a lower cost of source-to-destination transport, and a regular flow of merchandise. The system works through a balance of trust and intimidation. Bribes are fixed beforehand, and rates established for different ranks of officials. Local inhabitants are held hostage to the gangs, economically as well as physically.

What's hot, what's not

Goods from South-East Asia as well as other sub-continental countries arrive off the Southeastern Coast, near Chittagong and such infamous

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places as Anwara, where even smugglers dare not step. Increasingly, Golden Triangle drugs are entering Bangladesh through this sector. Narcotics are consumed locally as well as smuggled abroad. On the Eastern border with Tripura and Assam, Indian fruit and timber are traded for chicken and fish. This part of India being geographically isolated



Smuggling zones outlined in bold



A haul of Indian sarees and other textile materials nabbed by the BDR along the border. — Star photo

from the rest, it is cheaper for merchandise to travel through Bangladesh: a heaven-sent incentive for smuggling. The long border with West Bengal is a hotbed of illegal trading, and most of the local population is involved in it. A fairly developed communications system and the industrial belt of West Bengal contribute to the thriving business. From women to radios, from fish to pornographic literature, almost anything crosses this border.
Down South, near the Sundarban network of canals, 80% of the country's legal export takes place. When the export-carriers make their return journey, they are laden with illegal imports.
Spices, sugar, cattle, machinery, cosmetics and crockeries are the major illegal imports. Exports through the back door are electronics, fish, jute and ready-made garments. Bangladesh also serves as a conduit for gold smuggling.

Who they are

A smuggler is a woman crossing the border at night with Indian magazines and Keo-Karpin hair oil (sold in Dhaka for twice the Indian price) in her bags. A smuggler is the doctor selling banned foreign medicine to you. A smuggler is the man with a

knife who glares at you threateningly as you interrogate his associates on how they got their cigarettes. The man driving around Gulshan in a car bought with money from illegal machine parts is a smuggler. The housewife going to Calcutta to buy sarees and selling them to her friends is a smuggler.
Though till a while ago surveys of smugglers' backgrounds showed them to be involved in other professions as well, nowadays there is open avowal. High unemployment and attractive returns have made smuggling a near-legitimate business. Moral stigmas attached to it are no longer relevant in areas where one is lucky to make a living at all.
Smuggling activities are financed mainly by smuggling itself, though there is merchant capital backing and local moneylending. Most transactions are made in cash. The

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NOTICE

Due to unavoidable circumstances the regular weekly column MY WORLD by S.M. Ali could not be published this week. However, the same will reappear on this page next Friday.

WHAT WE BUY

- Grapes
- Cows
- Turmeric
- Cement
- Cigarettes
- Imitation jewellery
- Refrigerators
- Nail polish
- Watches
- Pornographic postcards
- Beralgn
- Umbrellas
- Wire
- Perfume
- Lock and key sets
- Sandals
- Tubelights
- Lungis
- Sarees
- Pineapples
- Prawn
- Timber
- Henna
- Cloves
- Lentils
- Sugar and molasses
- Fertilizer
- Carbon paper



An exalted group of shoppers selecting their pick of Indian sarees — a prime item among the smuggled articles — during the shopping spree on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr. — Star photo

WHAT WE SELL (OR RE-SELL)

- Urea
- Mango
- Postadana
- Hilsa
- Mustard oil
- Shirts
- Blankets
- Silk
- VCRs
- Cigarettes
- Poultry
- Ready-made clothes
- Soap
- Cameras
- Contraceptives
- Women
- Children
- Petroleum
- Goats
- Gold
- Foreign currency
- Koi fish
- Jute
- Chili
- Bras
- Yarn

bag had bottles of Estee Lauder and Christian Dior skincare products, all wrapped carefully in cloth. The cardboard packages were neatly folded, waiting to be reshaped and sold. "I only bring this kind of thing. That's what they want me to do. Some people bring anything they can get their hands on. But with cosmetics, you can sell the stuff for so much that you don't need hundreds of boxes." The shopkeeper he was visiting bought thirty of this, forty of that. "My clients ask for this cream, so I make sure I have it." But is there a steady supply? "Oh yes, if I sell ten today, tomorrow twenty will arrive from abroad."

The man with the bagful of bottles is the most likely to get caught, not the man above him who pays him to bring the goods. At the top of the illegal trade pyramid are big-city financiers, operating through agents, sub-agents, and carriers. Saleha, who brings medicine, oil, sarees and any other small items from the border towns to Dhaka, does not know the man who carries them across. "There is somebody. But I just pick the stuff up at a friend's place. She told me it was good work, and it is. But I don't know the guy who coordinates it all. I just do my part. In Dhaka, I drop the things off. I guess there's some man getting rich at the end of it all." There is. And he provides a living to thousands of Salehas, for whom smuggling is more rewarding than

snapped up in as many minutes, taka 170 per piece. Just a few feet away, in the din of the market, the sarees go off the stands for 190 a piece. The low margin of profit is not a problem for Munshi, a seller of Indian sarees: "We sell so many every day that I can afford to keep the prices attractive to the buyer."

Does he sell Bangladesh-made sarees? "No," he smiles, "everybody wants Indian sarees." Not only does the customer think it is more chic to wear foreign-made clothes, sadly enough it's also cheaper.

gravate the situation. A new survey by the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies, entitled "Illegal International Trade in Bangladesh" (authors Abul Ghafur, Mutnul Islam, Naushad

quantities that the market demands. Customs duty and sales tax make legal imports costly once they hit the shops. Smuggling sidesteps duty and fulfills the market's demands at the same time.

don't hide things in suitcases, you know. We pay tax - but say I'm getting 500 stereo sets, I'll declare only 200. So the other three hundred are where I make maximum profit." The BIDS report confirms that this 'fake' smuggling works through

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misdeclaration and under-invoicing. Legitimate ports of entry are not above suspicion: in fact a large volume of smuggled goods enter through these ports. For every pumpkin stuffed with cotton sarees, there are ten 'baggage smugglers', businessmen or returning migrants with undeclared

CALCUTTA: In the pre-Partition days, the river Ichhamoti in south Bengal used to inspire Bengali literary souls to indulge in romantic fancy and compose nostalgic poems and fiction. The famous novelist Bibhutibhusan Naydopadhyay (whose 'Pather Panchali' has been immortalized in celluloid by Satyajit Ray) even wrote a novel entitled 'Ichhamoti', describing the life and times of the villagers of Mollahati in Jessore on the banks of the river during the 19th century rebellion of indigo cultivators (known as 'Neel Bidroho').

Ichhamoti today however inspires different feelings—far removed from the romantic sentiments of the old poets as well as from the anti-colonial rebellious instincts of the Bengali peasants, whom Bibhutibhusan celebrated. Filled with the deadly water-hyacinths, the river has been reduced to a withered and squalid channel for smuggling goods from India to Bangladesh and vice versa, with all the paraphernalia of sneaking underworld dealings that accompany such activities. The river divides Bangladesh and India, with Jessore on one side and Bongaon in West Bengal on the Indian border on the other. Any Indian who chooses to visit the spot any day can be impressed by the

official presence of the Indian BSF (Border Security Force) who are supposed to check smuggling and illegal transactions—of both goods and human beings—between the two states. But if the visitor cares

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to parry for some time and keeps his eyes and ears open, he will find how one of the most lucrative international trade is being conducted outside the officially recognized framework of norms of world commerce.

Between Cows and Heroin

Sumanta Banerjee in Calcutta

spired 'Bhatiali' songs—can turn within minutes into commercial vehicles for a nefarious trade. They transport edible oil, salt, pulses, and spices to the other bank of the Bangladesh border and carry back to West Bengal Western and Japanese-made electronic goods as well as the famous 'Dhakal Sari' (much in demand among the sophisticated womenfolk not only in West Bengal, but other parts of India too). Electronic goods like VCPs and VCRs in particular are in great demand in these border districts of West Bengal, as well as other parts of the state.

In an India where strict import restrictions at the official level prevent the affluent classes from easy access to Western consumer goods, the West Bengal rich find such access through the unofficial channels which bring at their doorsteps the smuggled goods via Bangladesh. It is not only the electronic hardware like VCRs which can be bought cheap through these channels (which otherwise in the normal trade channel would have to be imported by paying ex-

orbitant customs duties). The smuggled softwares also finds its way into the homes of the Bengali nouveau riche of India. Video cassettes of blue films produced in Hong Kong or Paris, which first reach

Sex have become an important incentive for this flourishing business of smuggling across the borders...In West Dinajpur, there is a thriving trade involving the smuggling of cows from India in exchange of girls from Bangladesh.

Bangladesh are later rerouted to the border districts of West Bengal. Video parlours showing these films have sprung up even in the small towns skirting the border—Bongaon, Haktampur, Hasanabad, Basirhat, Itindaghat.

Sex has become an important incentive for this flourishing business of smuggling across the borders. It is no longer confined to electronic software, but has expanded to



An Indian watchtower along Bangladesh border.

PORTRAIT OF A SMUGGLER

The following chart provides an overview of the educational, professional and political backgrounds of field-level operators. They are not actual carriers, nor are they principal financiers of an operation.
The role of these men and women is mainly organizational: they are the local brains behind the action.



Chart

The BIDS report shows that illegal trade on the southeast and southwest coasts is more heavily gang-controlled than in other regions. This is echoed in the fact that the educational level of operators in these areas is relatively higher. Smaller traders with lower educational qualifications work the western land borders.

As for professional fields, many of the subjects list other occupations but a telling percentage depend solely on smuggling. In many border regions, and among a certain class of businessmen, illegal trade is no longer something to hide. This speaks of close collaboration with law-enforcement officers.

The high number of smugglers who have some political affiliation or other also proves that success in this line de-

pends to a large extent on proximity to power and liaisons with bureaucrats.

Most smugglers have been in their profession for over six to ten years. On the south-west border, there is a sharp rise in the number of people involved in smuggling over the last five years, an indication of booming business.

The number of arrests for illegal international trade is dismally low; the convictions even fewer. Out of the subjects questioned, in one sector 92.94% had never been arrested. The rate of convictions is zero in most areas. Those who are arrested are overwhelmingly of the lower ranks, usually illiterate. Law-enforcement disproportionately focuses on this class of operator.

Individuals are captured far more than gang members, who have protection higher up.

Education	Occupation	Political Affiliation	Convictions
Illiterate 35.16	Local trader 42.86	Unclear 14.12	No conviction 91.21
Primary 13.19	Government employee 18.68	Identified with a political party	1 to 3 convictions 7.67
Secondary 34.07	Non-local trader 2.20	85.88	More than 4 convictions 1.10
SSC degree 14.29			
Higher degree 3.29	Smuggler 36.26		

These figures reflect the answers of smugglers, in percentages. Except for the column on political affiliation, the figures are from operators on the southeastern land border. The exception is from the southeast coast.