

The Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle is located in the area where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet at the confluence of the Ruak and Mekong Rivers. Along with the Golden Crescent, it is regarded as one of the largest producers of opium in the world since the 1950s until it was overtaken by the Golden Crescent in the early 21st century.

The Origin of the Golden Triangle

Before the advent of the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent, China accounted for most of the world's opium production and trade following an unjust treaty imposed on it by Britain. The treaty was signed by the Chinese following their defeat at the hands of the British during the Opium Wars of the mid 19th century.

The situation began to change post-world war II however as the Chinese Communist Party gained power. They ordered millions of opium addicts into compulsory rehab, had dealers arrested and executed, and opium-producing regions either burnt or planted with new crops. These measures forced the remaining opium producers to shift their operations to the south of the Chinese border. These areas would become the future Golden Triangle region.

The Kuomintang (KMT), a US-supported anti-communist resistance group, were the forbearers of the many private narcotics armies now operating in the Golden Triangle. Prior to the arrival of the KMT, the opium trade had already developed as a local economy under the colonial rule of the British. Once the KMT arrived they forced the local villagers to become its recruits in exchange for food and money. In the name of protection, they even extracted a heavy tax on the opium farmers, forcing them to increase production to make ends meet. In the 1950s the annual production was close to 600 tons.

Production and Trafficking Operations of the Golden Triangle

After Afghanistan, Myanmar has been a significant cog of the transnational drug trade as it is the second-largest producer of illicit opium. As per the data by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) it is estimated that there were 430 square kilometres (167 sq mi) of opium cultivation in Myanmar in 2005.

The opium and heroin base produced in northeastern Myanmar is transported by donkey and horse caravan to refineries along the Thailand-Burma border where they are converted to the final products. The finished products are then shipped across the border to towns in Northern Thailand and down to Bangkok for further distribution to international markets.

Heroin from the Golden Triangle is brought to the United States by couriers, usually, by Thai and U.S nationals flying in commercial airlines. The states of California and Hawaii are the primary U.S. entry points for Golden Triangle heroin, but small percentages of the drug are trafficked into New York City and Washington, D.C. as well. While Southeast Asian groups have had success in trafficking heroin to the United States, they initially had difficulty arranging street-level distribution.

This changed when Asian traffickers were incarcerated in American prisons during the 1970s crackdown on drugs. This period of imprisonment led to the development of contacts between Asian and American prisoners. These contacts have allowed Southeast Asian traffickers access to gangs and organizations distributing heroin at the retail level.

How is India affected by the Golden Triangle?

With close proximity to the Golden Triangle region, India's populace is badly affected by the high volume of drugs passing through the region. The problem is further compounded by a porous and poorly guarded border, which is an enabling environment for drug traffickers.

Heroin, which was introduced in the mid-seventies in India's Northeast, became easily available in the region after 1984 and by 1990 the region witnessed a substantial rise in the consumption of heroin. This fact can be ascertained by the massive jump noted in the number of addicts which increased from under one per cent in 1990 to over 50 per cent in 1991 and 80.01 per cent in 1997.

However, heroin smuggled into the Northeast is not for large-scale commercial sale but mainly for local consumption. Statistics also indicate that the heroin of South-East Asian origin constitutes only one to two per cent of the total heroin seized in the country.

At the same time, it could be argued that the low narcotics seizure figures could also be because of poor vigil along the international border. The fact that officials continue to seize consignments of heroin in Guwahati and other cities such as Kolkata and Delhi indicate that the trafficking of heroin from Myanmar is witnessing an increasing trend.