

CURRENCY and gold in a hole made in the holy book; integrated circuits (profit 200 per cent) in whisky cartons, specially designed shoes and false-bottomed suitcases containing contraband, watches and gold biscuits in two-in-ones or TV sets, dollars in the frames of holy pictures, handicraft items stuffed with foreign currency, women faking pregnancy and coffins weighted down with contraband articles, gold necklaces stitched into handkerchiefs.

The men in white at the country's international airports have had to contend with all this and much more besides not the least being pilloried for "harassing" the "innocent dollar-earning traveller". "You want all these people let off without checking just to end the cries of customs harassment?" asked a custom official. It is not a job calculated to win friends and influence people. "If we make a thorough examination of the baggage, it takes time. So you say it is harassment. Suppose we let the passengers go with all the stuff they bring. Then you say we are corrupt" said another customs officer, not bothering to conceal the bitterness in his voice.

"The Customs Act is tughlakian," he added. "If you go to the Gulf and return tomorrow, you can bring things worth Rs 1,250. But the fellow who has slogged for five years can also bring in only that much of non-dutiable items unless he is coming on a 'transfer of residence'. So they try to smuggle in things. And what can 26 or 45 officers do when hundreds line up before the counters? Should we let all of them get away with all that stuff?"

The problem is particularly acute with passengers returning from the Gulf especially during the holiday season, when incoming flights bunched together—16 to 18 in six hours—disgorge hundreds of workers. The situation is largely the same—be it at Bombay, Delhi or Trivandrum. Says O P Hasija, additional collector of customs at Delhi's Palam Airport: "They come loaded. A large majority of them carry excess baggage which is dutiable". And it is in the levying of duty, governed as it is by myriad of rules and regulations besides the discretion of the customs officer concerned, that raises the cry of "customs harassment" from the poorer passengers. Said Babu Ahmed, a worker returning from

Customs: The other side of the coin

from the Gulf: "I earned my money the hard way, paid Rs 25 for each extra kilogram that I carried, only to be charged a further duty of Rs 11,000 for a couple of electronic gadgets".

What irks the Gulf returnees most is the dual standards the customs seems to apply in dealing with them as compared

to the treatment meted out to the more affluent passengers returning from the West. But customs authorities deny any such preference and insist that clearance procedures have been simplified for all. "For prompt clearance we have a random check on ten per cent of the traffic flow," said Hasija. But even a cursory examination at Delhi airport shows that while the affluent passengers are allowed to walk through the green channel with relative impunity, workers employed in the Gulf come in for much closer and harsher scrutiny. This, despite the fact that at some airports, there are separate counters for women and children and passengers who have only a single electronic item, besides a larger number of customs superintendents to speed up clearance.

All this, however, has had only a marginal impact in ameliorating the difficulties faced by Indians returning from abroad. For, added to the cry of harassment is the charge of corruption among customs officers. And enough instances have come to light to lend some credence to the charge. For instance, almost every industrial house importing electronic items and mini-computers caters to a syndicate of customs officials, who for a specified sum at times allow import of banned items. One industrial house in fact which routinely imported banned electronic items with the connivance of customs officials once found to their surprise that their consignment had been stolen by a local smuggler who later sold it back at double the price.

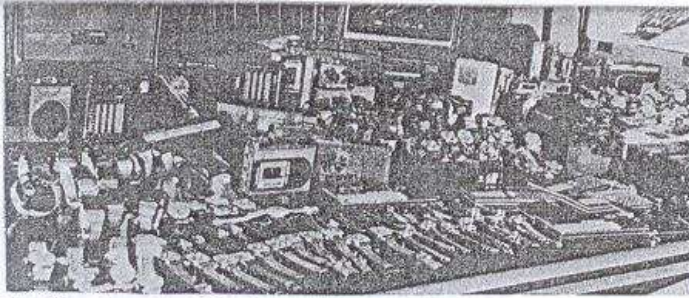
Insiders point out other interesting examples of customs corruption. One officer, it is said, made Rs 10 lakh within two years of his joining the service. As the news spread, an inquiry was conducted and he was found guilty. However, the man was so influential that he managed to get a transfer with promotion to a bigger airport where he could operate on a wider plane. The CBI once seized Rs 20 lakh worth of property including foreign currency found in his possession. But CBI or no CBI, he continues to don the white uniform. And his tribe is fast growing.

There is the case of another officer who led a raid into the house of a Dubai passenger for confiscation of some gold. The culprit later told the customs officials: "Sir, I don't mind being caught and punished. But your officer who



Plugging loopholes: Sealed drawers (circled)

PICTURE BY M. K. VARGHESE



Why blame the customs? Goods seized from passengers

raided my place took away 1,000 dirhams which he did not mention in the report. I want them to be restored to me or surrendered to the government". A written complaint was made, an inquiry conducted. The officer admitted that he had taken the dirhams and 'misplaced' the money somewhere. No action was taken. The file was closed with the following remark by the person who had the power to punish him: "When Mr... was asked about this, nothing came out".

When Assistant Collector Gopalakrishnan found that the drawers of the counters at Trivandrum airport were being used to store 'gifts' from passengers, he ordered their sealing with wooden planks. For this and a few suspensions Gopalakrishnan became unpopular among the staff. A dis-

gruntled airport inspector burst out in anger: "Hitherto if someone was caught in a deal, the punishment was to transfer him to some other section where the guy would not be able to make money this way. But now the minimum punishment is suspension." The day THE WEEK correspondent was permitted to study the problem inside the hall at a particular airport, three officers were suspended. The staff were furious. One of them said: "I must try to get a transfer to some other airport".

What is the way out? A high-ranking official suggested the following steps to root out corruption:

"Firstly, the person in charge of the staff should be given powers to transfer any officer caught red-handed. Now, so

COVER STORY

many forces are at interplay. Hence, even if one is found guilty, nothing much can be done against him. Often the junior officers pull the right strings at the right place to stay on.

"Secondly, the selection of officers has to be strictly on merit. Airport duty being a sensitive one, only men of integrity should be posted there. Thirdly, youngsters in the age group of 28 and 32 should be preferred for duty at the airport. The older the man, the greater are his monetary needs. Finally, no officer should have more than Rs 50 in his person when he is on duty. There should be an authorised person to search the officers concerned and if they are found with more money, they should be punished."

Perhaps these can be no perfect solution to the problem. Now, there is a system of periodic statement of assets by customs men. Confession however does not help where lakhs and lakhs of rupees are involved. Constant vigil and exemplary punishment where the guilt is proved seem to be the only remedy. Otherwise, corruption at airports—now a joint venture by the passengers and the customs to deprive the government of its revenue—will continue.

— M F