

War on Drugs: Challenges for the Punjab Government

R K ARORA
VINAY KAURA

ABSTRACT Most analysts agree that a dangerous mix of demand, supply and currency is responsible for Punjab's drug menace. Punjab is both a transit point and a market for the drugs smuggled from the so-called Golden Crescent that is Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. While the heroin produced in Afghanistan is smuggled through the 553-km-long, porous India-Pakistan border, the opium, poppy husk, charas and hashish, among other drugs, come from the neighbouring states. This paper looks at the various challenges confronting the new Congress-led Punjab government in rooting out the state's drug problem. It offers recommendations to stem both the supply and demand, as well as some measures that can be undertaken by the government.

INTRODUCTION

When a strategy fails to achieve its objectives, a visionary and courageous political leadership must change course, adopt new strategic approaches to minimise dangers and increase the prospects for success. Given the significant shortcomings of the existing strategy in countering the alarming proportions of drug addiction in Punjab, the state's new political leadership was expected to look for new strategies that did not rely on political

gimmickry or quick-fixes. However, while it may seem that Captain Amarinder Singh's government in Punjab is making all the right noises, there remain huge obstacles in the way of finding solutions to the drug menace in the state.

Drug trafficking and rampant drug abuse have become one of Punjab's most significant socio-political challenges, even threatening the

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entire country's national security in many ways. The magnitude of the problem, especially in such a sensitive border state, makes it necessary to wage an all-out battle that may take many years to succeed, if at all it will. The drug problem has only gotten worse over the years, and was a major issue in the assembly elections that concluded in early 2017. During the electoral campaign, the then Congress Party's chief ministerial candidate, Amarinder Singh, promised to eradicate the drug menace within four weeks of coming to power. It was a bizarre promise at the outset; rooting out a widely prevalent and deep-rooted problem in less than a month is an uphill task. However, as the election results demonstrated, the people of Punjab have entrusted Singh to undertake this fight.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S INITIATIVES

The early efforts of the new government are encouraging. The Special Task Force (STF) was constituted on 31 March 2017 to address the illegal drugs situation under the command of the Additional Director General of Police (ADGP), Harpreet Sidhu, who has just completed his deputation with the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). He will be assisted by three Inspector General (IG)-rank officers in the STF. Singh is monitoring the anti-drug drive personally. Sidhu has been given a position at the Chief Minister's Office so that he can report to Singh directly on a daily basis.¹ On 24 April 2017, the chief minister gave the green signal to set up an anti-terror squad (ATS) as part of Punjab's intelligence wing. The ATS' objective is to break the nexus between the terrorists and gangsters in the state's prisons, which has become stronger in recent years. Special security measures have also been announced for prisons.²

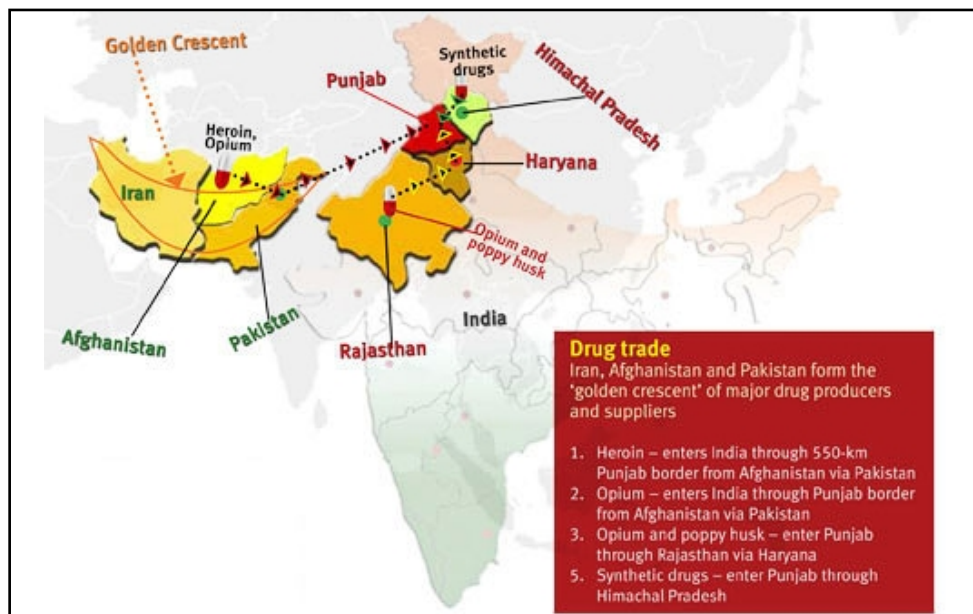
The Station House Officer-level teams, backed by the anti-narcotics cell units, have been formed in every district. Moreover, the concerned state agencies have been directed to coordinate their activities with Central agencies, such as the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), to check drug smuggling into Punjab from other parts of India and abroad.³ All police stations have been directed to make lists of drug peddlers and bootleggers, who have been booked at least twice in the past 10 years, and to put them under surveillance. While these are positive initiatives, they are not sufficient by themselves. The task set out for the STF is highly complicated given how widely prevalent and entrenched drug abuse is in Punjab. The fact is that Punjab is a huge market for drugs. Consequently, breaking up only the supply infrastructure will not eradicate the demand. In fact, Sidhu has also said that “only seizure and crackdown won't help. We need a synchronised strategy for prevention, seizures and rehabilitation of the addicts.”⁴

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Smugglers' modus operandi

Punjab is no exception to the rule that drug smuggling leads to drug addiction in the areas along the smuggling routes. Punjab's proximity to the heroin-producing Golden Crescent—Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran — makes it extremely vulnerable. Located on a long-standing smuggling route that sees heroin transported from Afghanistan via neighbouring Pakistan and on to markets elsewhere in the region, Punjab, once regarded as India's “bread basket” has emerged as a final destination for various illegal drugs.

Drugs syndicates and smugglers based in Pakistan procure heroin from Afghanistan, and then smuggle it into India through Amritsar,

Figure1: The Golden Crescent⁵

Tarn Taran, Gurdaspur, Ferozepur and Fazilka districts of Punjab and some districts of the neighbouring states. The Amritsar sector, in particular, is the preferred choice of most smugglers. Until recently, either the Border Security Force (BSF) or the Punjab police recovered a huge quantity of poppy and opium in some border districts of Punjab on a daily basis. The smugglers have been forced to innovate because of increased vigil along the India-Pakistan border. This includes throwing the drugs from the Pakistan side of the border to the Indian couriers waiting near the fenced border, passing the drugs through hollow plastic pipes across the barbed electric fence, and using the shallow river water to cross the border for delivering the drugs. Drug seizure during the last few months also indicates that the drug mafia has begun to use other border states such as Jammu and Kashmir and Rajasthan as well.

However, things are not as simple as they appear to be. The drug mafia in Punjab, as well as in Pakistan, carries out their ground operations in a well-coordinated, organised and professional manner. A precise analysis and

comprehensive study of a combination of factors such as weather, topography, standing crops, 'phases of the moon' connectivity, mode of transportation, landmarks on the ground, deployment and movement of the security forces, availability of surveillance technology and their local contacts and sympathisers in the areas to be used for smuggling, leads to selection of the site and timing of the smuggling operation. Before taking a final call on the date and time, the smugglers also conduct a rehearsal, particularly observing the police *naka* (a temporary police arrangement) location in-depth and the patrolling patterns of the BSF, in order to preempt any possible challenges. As this varies across areas, the operations differ in their modus operandi and execution, throwing some intractable challenges before the BSF and police to detect the smuggling patterns.⁶

The drug mafia maintains a proper database of all the points, where they either carried out the recce or a successful operation, and they also have full knowledge of the area that allows them easy access to Pakistan's mobile networks. The well-networked drug mafia uses sophisticated

modus operandi, avoiding police and intelligence surveillance, to smuggle the drugs across the border. The Indian and Pakistani drug smugglers use SIM cards from Pakistan and India, respectively, making detection difficult for intelligence and security agencies.⁷ The lack of well-paved roads at the India-Pakistan border also makes it convenient for the transfer of large-scale drug consignment by digging out tunnels under the fences. Once the drugs are successfully smuggled into India, couriers on the Indian side hand them over to the second-tier courier team for transportation into Punjab as well as to other destinations like New Delhi, Mumbai, Goa and Manali. A substantial portion also makes its way to Europe and North America by sea routes.

Besides the Golden Crescent route, heroin also enters Punjab from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.⁸ Cultivation and sale of opium poppy husk is legal in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, accounting for the presence of these two substances in abundance in the districts near Rajasthan, such as Bathinda, Fazilka and

Mansa.⁹ Heroin can also be obtained from the neighbouring states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, according to Kaustubh Sharma, Zonal Director of NCB, who said that “heroin availability has increased in these two states and can be sourced from there”.¹⁰

Deficient Security Mechanism

In Punjab, the international border (IB) between India and Pakistan is 553 km long. Nearly 18 battalions of the BSF guard the barbed-wire fenced IB, supported by modern technological innovations such as Night Vision Devices (NVD), Hand-Held Thermal Imagers (HHTI), Battle Field Surveillance Radars (BFSR), Long Range Finders (LRF), and High Powered Telescopes.¹¹ The wire fencing on the IB, despite its completion, is not foolproof due to gaps caused by terrain difficulties. During the Pathankot attack in January 2016, for instance, the Pakistan-based terrorists had used one of the riverine tracts located five km downstream of Bamiyal, near the Tash border outpost in Punjab, to enter the Indian territory.¹²

Figure 2: Seizure of drugs along the Indo-Pak border by a joint team of the BSF and the Punjab police¹³



Maintenance of law and order is the responsibility of the Punjab Police. Some central agencies are active in Punjab, including the Intelligence Bureau, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence and NCB. One of the main reasons Punjab has failed to tackle the drug problem is because of the way the state has managed its security mechanism. There is hardly any coordination among the police, the BSF, and the state and central intelligence agencies for curbing the problem. In fact, the previous Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Punjab had often accused the BSF of not manning the IB adequately. In its defence, the BSF has rightly claimed that the heroin and opium smuggled from Pakistan is responsible only for a minuscule proportion of all illegal drugs that find their way to Punjab.¹⁴

Cross-border cooperation for tackling the drug menace is almost non-existent given the hostile India-Pakistan relations. The lack of cooperation between the Pakistan Rangers and their Indian counterparts makes the anti-drugs efforts even more challenging.

Legal Hurdles and Lack of Expertise

The Punjab Police has limited capacity to investigate narco-terror, particularly related to modern technological and scientific tools to counter the problem. Investigations have not always had early successes and have sometimes been characterised by poor practices. The low conviction rates and delay in punishment under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act have also proved to be problem areas. According to the present provisions of the NDPS Act, a seizure of less than five grams of heroin can lead to an imprisonment of up to six months and a fine up to INR 10,000. Moreover, the suspect can easily secure bail. In order to take advantage of the

legal loopholes, most of the trafficking takes place in small quantities. Once heroin is smuggled into Punjab, it is not supplied in big quantities. Most often, drug addicts are used as couriers to carry small quantities.

The P-P-P (Police-Politician-Peddler) Nexus

Politics and drugs are inextricably linked in Punjab. Shashi Kant, a retired Indian Police Service officer, has claimed that major political parties are hand-in-glove with drug smugglers as Punjab is witnessing the era of “Narco Politics”. He had prepared a list of 90 people involved in drug smuggling and handed it over to the previous SAD-BJP government. He claimed that “there were politicians from across the spectrum, some sitting ministers, a number of former ministers, sitting and former MLAs, certain very senior police officers, administrative services officers and a large number of Station House Officer rank officers. A few NGOs were also in that list”.¹⁵ However, the state government preferred to remain quiet, hoping that the issue would die a natural death. In January 2014, wrestler-turned-drug peddler Jagdish Singh Bhola had claimed that Bikram Singh Majithia, Punjab's former Revenue Minister was involved in the multi-crore drug trafficking racket.¹⁶ Nothing substantial has emerged from the subsequent investigation into the case.

Kant has submitted before the Punjab High Court that political parties are becoming increasingly dependent on drug money to fund the increased cost of election campaigns, and they use narcotics with impunity to woo voters. Kant has even claimed that “some of the black sheep in Punjab police, narcotics control bureau, intelligence bureau and Border Security Force are involved in drug smuggling”.¹⁷ The Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju,

also admitted in the Rajya Sabha in June 2016 that some 68 employees of Punjab Police, state jail department, Punjab Home Guards, BSF, railway protection force and Chandigarh Police have been arrested since 2014 due to their involvement in the drug trade. Of these 68 arrests, 53 were from Punjab Police alone, followed by seven from the state jail department, four from BSF, two from Punjab home guards, and one from Chandigarh Police.¹⁸ The terror attack on the Pathankot Air Force base in January 2016 again brought the issue of drugs to centrestage. The links between politicians, cross-border drug cartels and Pakistan-based terror groups reportedly played a key role in facilitating the terrorists to infiltrate the Punjab border. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, headed by former Union Home Minister P Chidambaram, flagged the release of Punjab Police officer Salwinder Singh by the terrorists after snatching his official vehicle and using it to reach the Pathankot airbase. While attacking the Punjab Police's role, and questioning the National Investigation Agency's (NIA) role, the committee, in its report submitted in February 2017, has asked the government to probe the role of drug smugglers in facilitating the jihadists' entry into India.¹⁹

Last year, the state police had to create the system of centralised warehouses, with well-equipped security features, to contain the 'recirculation' of seized drugs from police storage places. According to Punjab's DGP, Suresh Arora, "there is a perception that seized drugs which are kept at the police stations are being misused by the cops but I must say that all policemen are not corrupt... But because of the accusations being raised, it has been decided that there would be centralised drug maalkhanas at important districts of the state".²⁰

CONCLUSION

While drug addicts are being caught, the big suppliers have virtually remained untouched. The Amarinder Singh government has not spelt out clearly how the new strategy to target the suppliers would be different from that pursued by the previous government. Except for public statements, there is no blueprint on how the government proposes to tackle the enduring police-politician-peddler nexus.

If the new Congress government is able to make a decisive change, this nexus will cease to exist. One of the biggest challenges would be to bring all the law enforcement agencies to agree to a common agenda.

Pakistan's anti-India strategy has enabled it to impose significant military, financial, social and political costs on India. Cross-border smuggling in drugs, weapons and fake currency is an essential part of that strategy as it avoids the dangers of direct conflict and military intervention with India. Consequently, continuation of Punjab's drug problem is in the interests of Pakistan's security establishment. The new Congress government should recognise the huge challenge in weaning away the Punjabi youth from drugs. Therefore, creation of employment opportunities, infrastructure for recreational activities and sports should not be ignored.

Some of the most immediate steps that can be taken include the following:

- The Amarinder Singh government should immediately create an institutionalised mechanism where the state police, BSF, DRI, NCB, Intelligence Bureau and other important agencies are represented. This joint platform will help in better coordination among various agencies,

creating synergy and avoiding overlap in operations.

- Lack of manpower, poor drug detection training and some avoidable procedural delays hamper the effectiveness of the drug prevention efforts in Punjab. There should be an increase in funding for specialised training of police professionals dealing with drug detection and investigations.
- The BSF and the Punjab Police are considered as the first and second line of defence for border security, respectively. Therefore, there should be regular meetings between District Superintendent of Police and local commandants of the BSF for better coordination. The lack of information sharing mechanism among security agencies in Punjab has been exploited in the past by the drug mafia. The BSF, Punjab Police, DRI, Intelligence Bureau and other agencies should come forward to share whatever data is available with them regarding past crime patterns, investigation records, among others.
- Top priority must be accorded to the investigation of drug-related cases that have been stalled for a long time, particularly those arrested on charges of drug smuggling and supplying. As a large number of drug smugglers are arrested by the BSF and Punjab Police, there has to be proper follow-up of these cases by the police as well as by the BSF.
- The government should actively promote intelligence sharing between state and central agencies. The delay in intelligence sharing between state and central agencies has been a major hurdle to the flow of intelligence between the grassroots and the middle level users. Intelligence agencies across India are facing challenges for sharing

intelligence, and Punjab is no exception. They are restricted in doing so by different intelligence cultures, the existence of multiple agencies essentially doing the same thing, and lack of trust. Unfortunately, all the leading agencies are prone to not sharing intelligence for all the above reasons and also because of a culture that is usually skeptical of the intelligence function.

- The drug syndicates carry out their smuggling activities after a proper reconnaissance and planning. They have to execute their operations by the fastest means possible, which compels them to use lateral roads and tracks near the border to save time and to deceive the BSF. As BSF has a mandate for its operations upto five km along the Punjab IB, a joint team comprising members of the Punjab Police and its special branch, and the BSF and its G branch, may identify 10-15 key points per BSF battalion, parallel to the IB, within five km of the border, for the purpose of joint domination. This 'multi-agency domination system' can surprise the drug cartels and, at the same time, will bring more transparency and create trust among all the agencies involved. In addition to this, the second tier will provide depth and restrict the movement of peddlers to the border area. The key points identified earlier can be randomly occupied during daytime as a psychological tool to deter the activities of the criminal elements active in the border areas. Most of the drug smuggling activities along the border has been noticed during the hours of midnight and four a.m. The security agencies should improve domination particularly during this time.
- Many jail inmates addicted to drugs in several jails in Punjab have been getting regular drug supply. They deposit the money

for the transactions in their relatives' bank accounts. Thus, the drug smugglers serving the jail terms should be under close police scrutiny to prevent them from carrying out their operations from within the prisons.

- The government tends to give credit to only one organisation for a successful operation, disregarding the fact that it is the result of combined efforts of several agencies. This may not be the intention, or done deliberately, but the practice often leads to disharmony and bitterness among agencies.
- As a pilot project, the new Punjab government should create border police stations per border district for investigating border crimes alone; it is likely to lead to more conviction of smugglers and better synergy among various agencies.
- The new Punjab government's recently declared new measures to crack the flourishing nexus of terrorists and gangsters is likely to lead to reduction in these criminal gangs being patronised by politicians. Simultaneously, politicians with known record of having links with drug peddlers must be targeted with clear directions to the police and intelligence agencies not to spare anyone. Investigations into those cases must be expedited.

This paper also recommends the following long-term measures:

- Punjab's border areas are suffering from poor infrastructure and lack of connectivity and transportation. Improvement of security infrastructure and surveillance capability at India-Pakistan border should be accorded priority by the Amarinder Singh government. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, chaired by P. Chidambaram, in its reported submitted to

the Rajya Sabha on 11 April 2017, has also expressed serious concern “about the delay in construction of Border Out Posts on India's most sensitive border”.²¹ The Committee has noted that the government should have anticipated the “issues of public protests, land acquisition, clearances” while taking “exception to the delay as it hampers surveillance and domination of IPB (Indo-Pak Border)”. The Committee has underlined the urgency for “regular maintenance of flood lights so that damage is minimal. In the flood prone areas, pre-emptive and protective steps should be taken to ensure that flood lights are not affected”.²² When the Committee visited the border areas of Punjab for its study, it “found extremely poor roads which can significantly slow down the movement of Forces and cause hardship to them during an emergency”, forcing it to strongly recommend the construction of lateral and axial roads in Punjab without any further delay as they are essential for patrolling and surveillance purposes.²³

- The Central government should develop ways of providing additional focus on anti-corruption measures, the modernisation of the police and some aspects of lower and subordinate judiciary, even though they fall predominantly within state government jurisdictions. Without leadership from New Delhi in these areas, the current drive for cleaning up the drug menace is unlikely to prove sustainable. Although the central government, due to the Constitutional provisions, can play a limited role in law and order in Punjab, there are a number of other avenues where it can become more active in these areas.
- The residents of villages located on the India-Pakistan border often work as couriers for

drug smugglers as they receive a very lucrative amount for carrying out this task. Therefore, the government must seriously think of recruitment of 'Border Volunteers' from those areas, which fall within five km of the border zone for a period of three years with a fixed compensation, as this practice has proved successful in many crime infested areas. If implemented properly, the scheme would engage the youth in meaningful jobs and reduce the crime rate, while leading to improvement in the local intelligence system in border areas.

- Demand-side interventions are as important as tackling the supply. Besides checking the illegal drug trade and confiscating the illegally acquired assets of those involved with the drug trade, there must be initiatives aimed at reducing the demand for drugs. This should include initiatives to strengthen civil society groups, and help NGOs to develop institutional links with the state organisations to control drug abuse.
- Community policing can play a meaningful role in building partnerships with parents and community leaders to become mentors for the prevention and treatment of drug abuse.
- The government should encourage sports and other recreational facilities for youth, so that they can focus on healthy and productive ways of spending their free time. The lack of money among the youth is also forcing them to commit drug-related crimes. There should be efforts to create job opportunities for the youth.
- There is significant evidence of organised drug cartels and powerful drug traffickers in Punjab having dramatically changed and weakened the law enforcement agencies and local political organisations. Therefore, the


behaviour of police and other bureaucrats responsible for implementing state projects must be monitored by the SIT to ensure that they perform their jobs properly. This can also help to reduce corruption and ensure effective policy implementation.

- All technological innovations are like double-edged swords. The law enforcement agencies in Punjab should keep in mind the possible use of unmanned aerial vehicles or drones by well-organised drug mafia to transport drugs as this would be cheaper, convenient and safe, particularly when the border guarding agencies and non-state actors from Pakistan are supporting the drug mafia. The use of drones for smuggling has already been noticed in border areas of some countries.²⁴
- Performance assessment, monitoring and evaluation are important tools for any successful system. Thus, regular assessment and feedback of ground realities of the anti-drug drive must be ensured by the government.

The Punjab youth has suffered the worst because of the state's drug problem. Although illicit drugs of all kinds are easily available in the state, the demand is largely met from sources outside Punjab, through a supply network operated by the local, interstate, and international drug traffickers. Given the complexities involved in the issue, the scope of this paper remains confined to the policing and security dimension of the current 'war on drugs'. The challenges involved in the rehabilitation of drug addicts and curbing the domestic cultivation of poppy, without which the current campaign against drugs remains incomplete, are too comprehensive to be addressed here.

What the people of Punjab really demand and deserve at this time is a strong political will to tackle the drug problem. The strong vested

interests among all stakeholders involved with the drug trafficking have allowed this problem to grow over the years. Though the measures adopted by the new government have triggered off a positive public perception so far, it must be hoped that the government dares to go beyond

the rhetorical, populist and short-term measures, and tackles the issue in its entirety. It should keep in view that dearth of employment opportunities and lack of economic growth often create a conducive environment for conflict and organised crime to flourish. 

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

R K Arora, Commandant, is a Professor at the department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Rajasthan. He is also the Program Coordinator at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies Jaipur. He can be reached at raj@policeuniversity.ac.in.

Vinay Kaura, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Rajasthan. He is also the Coordinator at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Jaipur. His email address is vinay@policeuniversity.ac.in.

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