

The 'Drug Menace' in Punjab: Causes, Consequences and Policy Challenges

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Drug trafficking and massive drug abuse are wreaking havoc in Punjab. The epidemic of substance abuse in the young generation has assumed alarming dimensions in the state. Experts say that the state may lose an entire generation to rampant abuse of smack, heroin and synthetic drugs. The people of Punjab demand a strong political will to tackle the drug menace. The problem could be adequately addressed only when seen in a wider socio-economic context. The aim of present paper is to analyse the gravity of drug menace; its causes, initiatives taken by the state government to curb the problem and some suggestions to uproot the evil from social fabric of the state.

Introduction

Drug abuse is becoming one of the most potent problems in the world. Besides the use of natural drugs there is an increasing trend in the use of synthetic and prescription drugs. It has become the third largest business in the world, next to petroleum and arms trade. Today, there is no part of the world that is free from the curse of drug abuse and drug trafficking. But its extent and characteristics differ from region to region. About 190 million people of the world consume one drug or another. Illicit drug abuse not only affects the health and lives of individuals but also the political, social and cultural foundation of the country. Never before in the history of mankind has the abuse of drugs been such a threat to the quality of life as it is today. However, use of drugs for various purposes is not new to any country. But it has received greater attention in recent times due to the increasing magnitude of the problem and the changing trends in the usage of drugs. In the past, the substances in use were not as dangerous as they are today. The advent of far more hazardous drugs like heroin, Lysergic Acid, Diethylamide, Amphetamine and methaqualone on the scene and also the growing incidence of drug abuse even amongst school-going children and adolescents has brought the problem into focus throughout the world.

India too is caught in the vicious circle of drug abuse. The number of drug addicts is increasing day by day. According to a United Nations Report, one million heroin addicts are registered in India, and unofficially, there are as many as five million.¹ It has become a matter of grave concern in the country especially in the state of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Western Rajasthan. However, the situation in Punjab is the worst one. The reason could be its proximity to porous international borders and international drug-trafficking zones: the 'Golden Crescent' (Iran, Afghanistan

and Pakistan). Drugs come into Punjab not just through the India-Pakistan border, but also from neighbouring Indian states. *Charas* and hashish routed in the state through Himachal Pradesh; Opium and Poppy husk smuggled from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. In July 2018, the state had sought 'special category' status under the National Health Protection Scheme by projecting itself as the 'biggest victim of Pakistan-sponsored narcotics terrorism.'² Punjab being a border-state is not only the transit point, but also a big market for drugs.

Understanding Rise in Drug Menace

Many reasons can be stated for growing dependency on drugs in Punjab like militancy, poverty, a lack of job opportunities, agrarian crisis and easy availability of narcotic substances etc. When terrorism gained ground in the state, militants attacked liquor shops and drinkers, so injecting drugs bought illegally became a safer method. The smugglers turned their attention towards porous borders in Punjab, Rajasthan and Jammu & Kashmir. Peddling drugs from Indo-Pak border became a lucrative profession. Smugglers earned handsome amount of money for just one consignment or per kg of heroin.³ In the meanwhile, locals too started consuming it. This created the real problem. On one hand farming is getting unprofitable and on the other, poor quality of education fails to incentivize youth to enroll themselves in higher education and even the educated youth fails to get decent paying job, which results in frustration and thus the support of drugs comes into play. There is also the fact that pharmaceuticals such as pain relieving opioids and sedatives are easily available from chemists. Punjabi culture of heavy drinking and partying as well as the habit of landowners supplying raw opium to farm labourers to encourage them to work harder, has further contributed to the problem. The pop culture of bhangra music has always promoted drugs as a 'cool' thing to do. This has always influenced the youth into trying out drugs. Apart from this peer pressure, depression, loneliness, etc. also play a huge role.

Moreover, ignorance of issues by government and the wider society fueled the problem. According to one available source, heroin is bought from Afghanistan at 1 lakh per kilogram. Passing through Pakistan and west Punjab, it is smuggled into Indian Punjab and sold for 30 lakh per kilogram. Further, it is sold in other parts of India at 1 crore per kg, and for the international market the rate goes up to 5 crores. Thus, the comparatively low price in Punjab makes the state a hotspot for the local youth to fall prey to in this viscous cycle. According to police sources, heroin (popularly known as *chitta* in Punjab) costs an addict not less than Rs. 2000 per day. After begging, borrowing and stealing, when an addict can no longer buy his fix, the dealer has a deal for him- sell 10 and get one.⁴ Akin to multi-level marketing, the strategy helps dealers not only retain existing customers but also add new ones rapidly.

One of India's most prosperous states and nation's bread basket has to struggle with a serious problem that is now reaching wide-ranging proportions. The alarming thing is that it is growing among youth between the age of 15 to 25 years. According to a survey, 66% of the school-going students in the state

consume *gutka* or tobacco; every third male and every tenth female student have taken to drugs on one pretext or another and seven out of ten college-going students are into drug abuse.⁵ After Nagaland, Punjab ranks second in the country for drug abuse. Drug and substance abuse are the problems that are threatening the future of the next generation in Punjab. The number of deaths due to drug abuse is increasing day by day. One of the main reasons of increased deaths is use of injections already used by HIV or HCV infected person and in this way HIV and HCV is also spreading in the society.

Role of Narco-Politics

Punjab has gone through several periods of crisis, including militancy from 1980s and 1990s, and is currently grappling with the twin challenge of drug addiction and drug smuggling. Drug abuse is becoming the sixth flowing river in the land of five rivers. Record levels of heroin seizures; full-to-capacity drug de-addiction centres, wailing families of drug addicts, youngsters lying in heaps of garbage with syringes stuck in their veins and police-politician-drug nexus are certain situations that explain the plight of Punjab.⁶ Rahul Gandhi once flagged the issue of drug abuse in Punjab. However the then ruling party, in a statement of denial, blamed the Congress for ‘engineering a conspiracy to defame brave Punjabis’ and tarnishing Punjab’s image.⁷ Later on, the SAD government accused the Border Security Force for allowing the drug trade to occur easily between the borders. The spread of drugs across the state has grown to such proportions that some term it ‘narco-terrorism’⁸ and others ‘narco politics’,⁹ pointing towards the illicit involvement of state and non-state actors. Shashi Kant, a retired Indian Police officer, has claimed that many politicians from various parties run ‘the racket’ either directly or through henchmen in connivance with the police. He had prepared a list of 90 people involved in drug smuggling and handed it over to the previous SAD-BJP government. In January 2014, wrestler-turned-drug peddler Jagdish Singh Bhola directly named a state Minister, as the mastermind of drug trafficking in Punjab.¹⁰ The ruling party has denied the allegations. The Congress Party demanded a CBI probe into the matter but nothing substantial emerged from the subsequent investigation into the case.

Kant has submitted before the Punjab and Haryana High Court that state elections are fought with the help of drugs and drug money. He 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’.¹¹ 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.¹² The terror attack on the Pathankot Air Force base in January 2016 again brought the issue of drugs

to centre-stage. 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.¹³

The bane of drug abuse and drug trafficking has not only shaken the entire society in the state but has also presented an extraordinary challenge for the Punjab government. The problem has not only gotten worse over the years, but was a major issue during the previous elections.¹⁴ During the 2017 assembly electoral campaign, the then Congress Party's chief ministerial candidate, Amarinder Singh, had pledged to wipe out the drug menace within four weeks of coming to power. To eliminate a widely prevalent and deep-rooted problem in less than one month is an amazing uphill task. However, as the election results demonstrated the people of Punjab entrusted Punjab government to undertake this fight although how effective this fight will be remains to be seen.

New Government Initiatives

After coming to power, the Chief Minister decided to introduce an immediate effective strategy to nail this growing menace and to have zero tolerance against executors of this crime. The aim was also to have a compassionate outlook and programme for those who unfortunately fell prey to the evil of drugs. Consequently, Punjab government directed Punjab Police to launch a special campaign against people involved in trafficking and smuggling of drugs in the state. The government also constituted a Special Task Force (STF) with the aim of choking off the supply line of drugs. The STF was mandated with three pronged strategies of EDP i.e. Enforcement, De-addiction and Prevention to fight the menace of drugs. The state government gave the green signal to set up an anti-terror squad (ATS) as part of Punjab's intelligence wing. The main objective of ATS was to break the nexus between terrorists and gangsters in the state's prisons, which had become stronger in recent years. The Station House Officer-level teams, backed by the anti-narcotics cell units, were formed in every district. Moreover, the concerned state agencies were 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. All police stations were 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.

After doing intensive research on world-wide models to fight the menace of drugs, two programmes Drug Abuse Prevention Officer (DAPO) and Buddy have been introduced by the STF. These are mass communication programmes for common people and students respectively. The DAPOs act as counsellors for the addicts at the grassroots level. The Buddy programme was launched to teach students about the ill effects of drugs and to inculcate the spirit to say 'No to drugs' among them. Punjab Police Helpline 181 encouraged people to come forward with their ideas/suggestions/ complaints and appealed to them to share their information about anyone involved in drug smuggling/supply/dealing/peddling. The Punjab Police formulated a policy under which government

employees and informers would be rewarded if information provided by them lead to seizure of narcotic drugs, psychotropic and controlled substances.¹⁵ Apart from this, various programmes, seminars and educational campaigns have been organised to generate awareness among the public against drug abuse.

There is a paradigm shift in methodology from the conventional treatment offered to drug addicts in De-Addiction and Rehabilitation centres; a path-breaking approach of giving medicines to addicts and sending them back to work/home in Outpatient Opioid Assisted Treatment (OOAT) Centres have been adopted.¹⁶ The government renamed the De-Addiction and Rehabilitation centres as Navjeevan Kendras and Navnirman Kendras so that the stigma of being addicted does not stick. The state government also announced a mandatory dope test for all government employees, including police personnel, right from the time of their recruitment through every stage of their service. However, this degenerated into a farce when demands were put forth to the Cabinet, including the Chief Minister, through a dope test.¹⁷ The Punjab Cabinet asked the Centre to amend the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985 to include the death penalty for even first-time offenders.

Cross Border Drug Smuggling

While these are positive steps, they are not enough by themselves. Despite the crackdown on drugs, severe restrictions on pharmaceutical drugs and the Outpatient Opioids Assisted Treatment steered by the state, the drug menace remains severe. The Punjab Opioid Dependency Survey of 2015 conducted by the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre AIIMS, put the figure of dependent users in need of treatment at 2.32 lakh. The latest survey in 2019 by the same body says the number has increased to 7.2 lakh.¹⁸ The goal set out for the STF is not sufficiently challenging as the drug problem is rampant and deeply entrenched in Punjab. Therefore, by only breaking up the supply infrastructure will itself not wipe out the problem. Moreover, as a very senior Police officer stated 'only seizure and crackdown won't help. We need a synchronised strategy for prevention, for seizures and rehabilitation of the addicts.'¹⁹

Until recently, either the Border Security Force (BSF) or the Punjab Police recovered vast quantities of poppy and opium in some border districts of Punjab on a daily basis. Recently, the seizure of over 550 kg of heroin and 52 kg of other narcotics concealed in rock salt by the Customs Department at Attari border was one of the biggest-ever seizures.²⁰ More than 717 kg of heroin have already been recovered by authorities in Punjab in 2019, in addition to 285 kg of opium, 18,702 kg of poppy husk (a major source for a range of opiates), and significant quantities of other drugs.²¹ The smugglers have been forced to find new methods because of increased vigilance 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 reveal that the drug mafia has begun to use other border states such as Jammu and Kashmir and Rajasthan as well.

The drug mafia in Punjab, as well as in Pakistan, carries out their ground operations in a well-coordinated, organised and professional manner. They throw packets of contraband across the border and use locals, who are well-versed with the topography, as couriers. They also deploy 10-12 meter-long plastic pipes for bulk smuggling to dodge electric fencing; use cavities in vehicles plying across the border; and use even farmers, despite the deployment of BSF's 'Kisan Guards'. In areas where there is no fencing because of riverine gaps, such as in Firozpur, Amritsar (Ramdass) and Gurdaspur (Dera Baba Nanak) districts, Pakistani couriers sometimes physically cross the river Beas to deliver the contraband to the Indian side. In some cases, smugglers have also dug tunnels to breach border fencing.²² Before taking a final call on the date and time, the smugglers also conduct a rehearsal, particularly for 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. To remain in touch with their Pakistani counterparts, smugglers on the Indian side use Pakistani SIM cards to make detection difficult for intelligence and security agencies. 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.

One of the main reasons why Punjab has remained unsuccessful in tackling 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) led government in Punjab had often accused the BSF of not manning the IB adequately. Also, the Punjab Police has limited capacity to investigate narco-terror, particularly related to modern technological and scientific tools to counter the problem. According to current 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. From January 2019 to March 2019, the official data reveals that the accused, involved in as many as 296 intermediate and big quantity NDPS cases, get bail.²³ 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.

Evaluation of anti-drug policies

While drug addicts are being caught, the big suppliers have virtually remained untouched. The state government should recognise the huge challenge in weaning away Punjabi youth from drugs. More of the population in Punjab

becomes dependent on drugs and even some on drug trade for generating income to provide food for their families due to absence of dignified employment opportunities. Therefore, creation of employment opportunities, infrastructure for recreational activities and sports should not be ignored. 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. There should be efforts to create job opportunities for the youth. The state government must realise that addressing core economic grievances and providing employment to the educated youth will reduce drug demand and at the same time provide a boost to the economy and trim down crime rate.

Lack of manpower, poor drug detection training and some avoidable procedural delays hamper the effectiveness of 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 Police officers and local commandants of the BSF for better coordination. The lack of information sharing mechanisms among security agencies in Punjab have 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. As a large number of drug smugglers are arrested by the BSF and Punjab Police, there has to be proper follow up and a database created of these cases by the police as well as by the BSF.

The drug syndicates carry out their smuggling activities after proper 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. Most of the drug smuggling activities along the border has been noticed during the hours of midnight. The security agencies should improve domination particularly during this time. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, chaired by P. Chidambaram, in its report submitted to the Rajya Sabha on 11 April 2017, strongly recommend the construction of lateral and axial roads in Punjab without any further delay as they are essential for patrolling and surveillance purposes. Improvement of security infrastructure and surveillance capability at the India-Pakistan border should be accorded priority by the Punjab government.

Many prisoners addicted to drugs have been getting regular drug supply in several jails. Thus, the drug smugglers serving jail terms should be under close police scrutiny to prevent them from carrying out their operations from within the prisons. The new Punjab government recently declared new measures to crack the flourishing nexus of terrorists and gangsters and this 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.

The government should develop ways of providing additional focus on anti-corruption measures and modernisation of the police. 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 and accountability.

Demand-side interventions are as important as tackling the supply side. 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 assistance to NGOs to develop institutional links with the state organisations to control drug abuse. State educational institutions must take steps to create drug awareness among students by introducing chapters/papers on the harmful effects of drugs.

The Punjab government's launch of 'war on drugs' to wipe out the menace from the state is a step in the right direction. Government ordered a mandatory drug test for all government employees including Police. But its impact will be limited as there are only some 3.5 lakh government employees. It is well-known that the vast majority of drug addicts are unemployed youth. It is this segment of youth who need to be targeted for proactive and preventive measures. This can be done by involving volunteers and elders from localities and villages. Families and teachers need to be put through counselling and training to identify potential victims and look for early signs of trouble. Most people of the state refuse to go for treatment fearing social stigma and mistreatment at de-addiction centres. The health department in 2017 prepared a report highlighting lack of facilities and staff, rampant torture, illegal confinement and overcrowding of addicts at rehabilitation centres, many of which also lack psychiatrists. The current campaign against drugs remains incomplete, without taking into consideration the challenges involved in the rehabilitation of drug addicts and curbing the domestic cultivation of poppy. The recommendation of death penalty for first-time offenders is also a harsh step. At the moment, more than 15,000 drug peddlers are in Punjab jails, many for being in possession of minute quantities. It is well known that death sentence does not deter crime.

Mexico's war on drugs is a prime example of how things can spiral out of control if the drug trade is not addressed by using a suitable approach in time. The drug hurricane in Mexico occurs because authorities there allow it, and because the supply meets the growing demand for drugs. To prevent drug trade, the Mexican government started a 'war on drugs' in 2006, which was a complete failure. It failed because it entirely focused on defeating organised crime and the drug cartels rather than addressing 'poverty, unemployment and economic inequality' that allow the drug trade to survive. The experiences of Mexico and Phillipines have clearly shown that mere police crackdowns and more stringent laws neither curb drug use nor effect criminal and drug cartels. It only leads to

the deaths of petty drug peddlers, who take it mainly due to unemployment, amongst other factors.

Therefore, lessons from Mexico need to be understood in the context of Punjab. The state is in the grip of a new challenge. The people of Punjab in Majha, Malwa and Doaba are talking about the drug problem. The Punjab youth has suffered the worst because of this. Heroin and synthetic drugs are compelling its users into crime, penury and irreversible ill-health. Political parties blame each other for not being able to tackle the menace that has claimed several thousands of lives and ruined countless homes. A rising drug trade and its impact on already declining economy, high levels of corruption, and a history of insurgency supported by Pakistan all pose a serious threat to Punjab's stability. There are accusations of involvement of politicians in the drug trade; the BSF and Punjab Police are also implicated in facilitating the drug trade, and little is being done to reduce drug demand. Thousands of peddlers are in jail but the supply chain is still working efficiently. Peddlers have started to mix synthetic drugs and other combinations such as talcum powder, salt and painkillers, to fill in the supply crunch. There is no end to the deaths caused by overdoses and adulterated drugs. We 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. All of these present serious challenge for the State government and requires a sensitive handling of the problem.

Some Conclusions

Time has come to rise above political interests to contain the menace through pragmatic measures. The government can be successful in curbing the menace only when the root causes of problem are addressed. The state should concentrate on reducing drug demand, fighting corruption, and in holding politicians accountable, rather than a focus on prosecuting low-level peddlers and users. It is clear that the nexus between drug lords, law enforcement agencies and politicians need to be identified and completely destroyed. The government should focus on cracking down on big suppliers. It ought to propose tighter controls at the border through which most of the narcotics enter; and draw up a comprehensive health based policy to deal with addiction; education and awareness campaign for youth. A collective response from society, community leaders, social and mass media can play a meaningful role for the prevention of drug abuse. Harm reduction measures should be adopted to restrict or minimize the effect of drugs. The Centre and the beleaguered states need to work in close co-ordination to tackle the alarming situation with ample funds and manpower. The security forces must take serious steps to block the inflow. This is a national problem as a substantial portion of drugs that land in Punjab make their way to the rest of the country. National security is also involved because drug money and terror often have close links. This is a complex problem and needs to be addressed at various levels. The 'silent killer' must be crushed with an iron hand before it eats away the state's young generation.

Notes

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