

Drug Trafficking by the 'Men in Uniform' and its Impact on Women in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Manipur, which shares a border with Myanmar, is considered as one of the world's leading producers of opium and amphetamines. People from almost every section of the Manipuri society, including the insurgents, are involved in drug trafficking. The porous geographical boundary and its proximity to the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand), coupled with decades of armed conflict and total breakdown of law and order have created a suitable environment for drug trafficking in Manipur. The article attempts to look into and analyze the cases of drug trafficking by the 'Men in Uniform' (Indian Armed Forces, and state police) in Manipur. It also looks into the impact that this has had on the people, especially on women, living in Manipur.

1. Introduction

The northeastern states of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal share border with Myanmar. There has been a growing number of cases in trafficking of drugs such as heroine, brown sugar, cocaine, opium and amphetamines from Myanmar to India; and Pseudoephedrine Hydrochloride (PH) –content and Ketamine Hydrochloride (KH)- content drugs from India to Southeast Asian countries through Moreh, a small town of Manipur bordering Myanmar. Manipur has become a safe haven for smuggling drugs into Southeast Asia through Myanmar and vice versa in spite of heavy militarization and check posts in every nook and corner of the state.

2. A Few Examples of Major Apprehensions

On 22 October 2003, the former Deputy Speaker of Manipur, along with two of his associates, was arrested for possession of a kilogram of high-grade heroine by the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) in Guwahati. The heroin seized was estimated at one crore in the international market.¹

On 24 February 2013, the police seized 5,880 strips of pseudoephedrine components worth 25 crores in Thoubal district from six individuals on their way to Myanmar. The case is classic in the sense that of the six individuals arrested, there included a Colonel of the Indian army, Ajay Chowdhury (PRO, Defence Wing), an Assistant Manager of Indigo airlines, and a Territorial Army jawan. They were caught in three official army vehicles with fake registration number. In connection, it also led to the arrest of a son of former Congress MLA T N Haokip.²

In April 2013, ten Manipur Police Commandos including two officers in full arms were caught transporting pseudoephedrine drugs worth 3.6 crore to the Manipur–Myanmar border in two official vehicles.³

Again in April 2013, 11 police commandos including officers in the rank of Sub Inspectors were apprehended with drugs on their way to Moreh by Thoubal police commandos after a tip off. They were caught with 4,680 strips of Pseudoephedrine tablets,

which are believed to be worth crores in the international market.⁴

In March, 2017, Raju, a head constable attached to the 1st IRB and posted at KhumanLampak Sports Complex, was apprehended for carrying a large amount SP and N-10 drugs.⁵ It was claimed that the drugs were for personal use. However, the authorities suspected that he might have been selling these drugs to the aspiring athletes who live in the sports academy.

The latest major arrest happened on 5 May 2018 wherein the Narcotics and Affairs of Border (NAB) and Tengnoupal District police arrested a retired Deputy Superintendent of Manipur police and his family who were allegedly considered to be one of the biggest suppliers of cross-border synthetic drugs spanning Myanmar and India.⁶ Following his arrest and his disclosures, many drug smugglers were arrested in Moreh.

With the rise in the amount of drugs seized, the number of drug traffickers and peddlers, and the high profile individuals involved, the situation in Manipur is extremely alarming. For the purpose of this study and analyses, both primary and secondary sources have been used.

3. Analysis

The above cases clearly indicate that the 'Men in Uniform' along with the politicians and bureaucrats have been sucked into drug trafficking. It also reveals a close connection between all those involved in the trade. So one can imagine as to how for many years the 'Men in Uniform' must have trafficked drugs using their status and power. Vehicles of the 'Men in Uniform' are not intercepted or checked anywhere, as they are considered as the keepers of law and order. Moreover, empowered by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, the 'Men in Uniform' have a free hand in misusing powers by taking advantage of the situation and engaging in illegal activities, committing heinous human right abuse, including all other forms of violence against. Being in a place where they can easily abuse the powers given to them, they are easily hooked to easy money. Considering there is so much of pressure in conflict zones, it is also a fact that they might also be easily tempted to

take drugs. One wrong step can lead to another wrong doing, and to the civilians, it becomes an even more dangerous environment if the personnel who are suppose to protect the civilians and maintain law and order indulge in drug abuse and other illegal activities. It has also become a very common phenomenon for the 'Men in Uniform' to be caught in drug trafficking, possession of drugs, or drug abuse. Former Deputy Chief Minister who was also in-charge of the Home Department had admitted to the lack of discipline among police personnel and wondered if there were certain lapses during the recruitment procedure that police personnel get involved in smuggling drugs.⁷

There are many mainland Indians (Indians who are not from the Northeast) who have been living and engaging in businesses in Moreh. Infact, the first migration of Tamils to Moreh and other border regions can be traced back to the British colonial times. But it was only in the 1970s that mainland Indians like the Tamils and Punjabis began to migrate in large numbers to engage in business and trading. The large Tamil population in Moreh, were even suspected to possess links with the LTTE in Sri Lanka.⁸ The point is that the mainland Indians living in Moreh are the ones who really controlled the businesses, including trafficking and trading of drugs as they are well-connected with dealers in Myanmar.⁹

According to drug analysts and officials concerned, the Pseudoephedrine Hydrochloride (PH)- content and Ketamine Hydrochloride (KH) content drugs manufactured in India are in high demand in illegal drug factories in South East Asia, including the Golden Traingle. These drugs are regenerated into other psychotropic drugs,¹⁰ and party drugs like 'World is Yours,' which has become so popular in recent times among the youth drug abusers as well as for the traffickers alike. Drug analysts and officials believe that the drug lords living outside Manipur and India pay a huge amount of money to influential people in the state to enable them to ferry the drugs from the manufacturing units in India to Myanmar.¹¹

So over the years, there has been large flow of PH and KH-content legitimate drugs manufactured in India being smuggled to Southeast Asian countries through Moreh as the major route. The regenerated drugs are again smuggled back to India through Moreh. Thus, the cycle continues. But it is not only the regenerated drugs, many other drugs from the Golden Triangle are trafficked to India through Moreh. The International Narcotics Control Bureau (INCB), in a global report, has said that more than 70% of the amphetamines available worldwide are produced in countries around the Golden Traingle, particularly Burma.¹² According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), opium production has gone up in the Golden Traingle by 22% and an estimated 610 tons of opium was produced in 2011, making it the world's second biggest supplier after Afghanistan.¹³

Following the arrest of Col. Ajay and the Police commandos, a large number of women anti-drug activists and leaders of 15 different organizations marched to the Chief Minister's office demanding identification and punishment of drug smugglers. There was also a demand for an investigation by the Narcotics Control Bureau including other central agencies as people no

longer trust the state government and its agencies on such matters.¹⁴

4. Impact of Drug Trafficking

It is important to look at the environmental factors for the increase in vulnerable, young people taking drugs. Not one but many factors have been responsible for decades of armed conflict and violence, which have had a tremendous negative impact on the social, political and economic fabric of Manipur. There is a rapid rise in poverty and unemployment among the youth as there are few industries and private enterprises. There are about 7 lakh unemployed educated Manipuri youths who are on the lookout for government jobs, as it considered as the only stable means to have a decent life. Drug trafficking in Manipur began in the 1970's and by the 1980's it became a user state. It was also in the 1980s that the whole of Manipur came under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. It can be argued that the beginning of drug use and the spread of HIV/AIDS in Manipur is closely linked to the imposition of Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, and its consequences. The never ending cycle of violence, rampant disrespect for human rights by the State and Non-State armed actors alike, insecurity for one's life, breakdown of social fabric, corruption and the like have led many youth including women in the state to a point of hopelessness and extreme distress. Hence, the easy availability of drugs in such an environment resulted in the vulnerability of the youth, trapping them in the pit of drugs usage. Manipur's 2.7 million people comprise of only 0.8 % of India's population, but the state accounts for 8% of the country's HIV positive cases.

The Northeast region's drug addict population is estimated to be around 1,20,000 according to the Indian Council of Medical Research, 2005.¹⁵ It is estimated that there are about 45,000 to 50,000 drugs addicts in Manipur of which nearly half are injecting drug users. Manipur has the highest percentage of female injecting drug users (28.2%) among all the northeastern states, according to a study done by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2015.¹⁶

Drug trafficking has not only led to the rise in local addicts, but also an increase in HIV positive cases as many addicts use intravenous injections and share syringes. This in turn has led to the spread of HIV through sexual encounters among youths and also through transmission from parents to child. There are many cases where entire family members are infected with HIV/AIDS under such circumstances. With the increase in poverty and economy in shambles many women including widows who have lost their husbands in armed conflict have resorted to prostitution as a means to survive in Manipur. The presence of armed forces in large numbers has also increases the demand for sex workers, and women of different background have been pushed into the profession. Thus, the risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases is very high for everyone living in such environment. While many women and children have become direct/indirect victims of drug trafficking, some others have played a big part in drug trafficking and drug peddling in Manipur.

Drug menace has also led to increase in crime rates against women in both public and in private spaces. Drug abusers in order to pay for their daily doses of drugs have also resorted to

crime such a theft, looting. Women as mothers/wives have taken the brunt of the menace due to the continuous demand for money from their addicted spouses and children, further resulting in domestic violence and abuse.

The Chief Minister of Manipur N Biren recently inaugurated a Special Court (Fast Track Court) to deal with drug menace and to facilitate speedy trial of offences relating to narcotics drugs and psychotropic substances. Also considering that school dropout is also one of the major reasons for high prevalence of drug and substance abuse, he has assured that the government will re-admit 40,000 schools dropouts under a special scheme.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

Due to its close proximity to the Golden Triangle and the total breakdown of law and order by the very people who are meant to uphold it, the drug trafficking menace has infested the

region for too long. The consequences have been unimaginable. It has led to a steep increase in drug traffickers and abusers, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, theft, broken families, and crime rates, which have particularly impacted the women in Manipur. Drug trafficking has also greatly affected every aspect of development and peace. The close nexus between the drug lords, politicians, insurgents, and the 'Men in Uniform' has been responsible for the ineffectiveness of the enforcement agencies in tackling drug trafficking in Manipur. Unless this root is axed, drug trafficking will continue to thrive and many ordinary citizens living in the region will continue to suffer.

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