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# DRUG TRAFFICKING AND TERRORISM - A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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## ABSTRACT

India is hardly an exception to the growing worldwide worry over narco-terrorism. It symbolises the merging of terrorism with drug trafficking, when terror groups and drug cartels work together to finance and support violent acts that upend societies.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between drug trafficking and terrorism in India is a serious threat to national security since it fuels internal conflict, bloodshed, and the breakdown of social order. The Northeastern states, Jammu & Kashmir, and even some areas of Punjab have been especially affected by this problem. The intricate connection between drugs, organised crime, and terrorism has made it difficult for national security organisations and law enforcement to uphold peace and security. The threat of narco-terrorism to India's internal security is examined critically in this article, along with its effects, the major actors engaged, and the difficulties in thwarting this expanding threat.

**Keywords:** Drug Trafficking, Terrorism, National Security, Golden Crescent.

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<sup>1</sup> V.K. Ahuja, *Law Relating to Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances* 45 (3rd ed. 2018).

## I. INTRODUCTION

In its broadest sense, terrorism is defined as using violence to instill fear or terror for political, religious, or ideological purposes. Additionally, it provides a niche for a variety of illegal operations, including both white-collar and blue-collar crimes. Drug trafficking is acknowledged to be one of the main illegal activities that give financial support to terrorist organisations. Drug trafficking involves a high number of perpetrators and victims, in contrast to kidnapping, extortion, forging documents, and other small-time crimes.<sup>2</sup> Drug trafficking can be referred to as "narco-terrorism" when it is done to raise money for terrorism. This phrase was first used in 1993 by Peruvian President Belaunde Terry to describe terrorist assaults against Sendero Luminoso's police forces. There are clear connections between international terrorist groups and drug trafficking organisations. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), also known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, is one such group that engages in drug trafficking and seeks to impose socialist tyranny<sup>3</sup>. The FARC has attempted to weaken the government through bombings, assassinations, and armed attacks. Afghanistan has been a major global supplier of heroin. Investigations have confirmed that al-Qa'ida and Sunni extremists are associated with drug trafficking. The 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted Alvaro Uribe, the president of Colombia, to mention the insurgency as a sign of terrorism. Attorney General John Ashcroft later regarded drug trafficking and terrorism as one and the same.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it clarified that counter-insurgency, which was previously restricted to the War on Drugs, can now be seen as the War against Terrorism. It is clear from analysing the frequent terrorist operations that narco-terrorism is a global problem that is no longer limited to the Taliban and bin Laden. Additionally, it encompasses groups such as Islamic Jihad, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hizballah, Syria and Lebanon in the Middle East, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Ireland, Sendero Luminoso in Peru, Laskar Jihad in Indonesia, the governments of North Korea and China in Asia, and the Chechens in Russia. It considers the terrible state of drug trafficking in the terrorist domain. As a result, illegal drug trafficking is a major threat to national security in many countries. This issue is so widespread that it affects economies, political views, and financial activities worldwide. In contrast to the traditional conception of

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<sup>2</sup> K.I. Vibhute, *Criminal Justice: A Human Rights Perspective of the Criminal Justice Process in India* 212 (2nd ed. 2019).

<sup>3</sup> R.T. Naylor, *Wages of Crime: Black Markets, Illegal Finance, and the Underworld Economy* 121 (Cornell Univ. Press 2004).

<sup>4</sup> S. Sharma, Narco-Terrorism: A Global Menace, 14 *Indian J. Criminology* 67, 72 (2021).

terrorists and traffickers as distinct threats, the combination of these two is significantly more dangerous. Therefore, in order to comprehend the connections between terrorism and drugs, narco-terrorism must be investigated and scrutinised.<sup>5</sup>

## II. UNDERSTANDING NARCO-TERRORISM

The term "narco-terrorism" describes the use of drug trafficking to fund and maintain terrorist operations. In this situation, terror organisations and drug cartels band together to smuggle and sell illegal drugs, using the money made to finance violent crimes, enlist fighters, and overthrow countries. Because it enables terrorist groups to become financially independent and less dependent on governmental sponsorship or donations, the connection between drugs and terrorism is especially risky. Narco-terrorism is a complex threat to India, comprising both domestic and foreign terror networks, insurgent movements, and cross-border trafficking. Narco-terrorism has a wide range of effects on India, including national security, public health, and law enforcement.<sup>6</sup>

## III. DRUG TRAFFICKING AND TERRORISM IN INDIA

Due to its geographic location, India is vulnerable to an influx of illegal substances from nearby nations, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan. The terrain of narco-terrorism is heavily influenced by these areas, which have long been linked to instability, drug production, and terrorist activity.<sup>7</sup>

**Afghanistan and Pakistan:** One of the world's biggest producers of opium, which is turned into heroin, is Afghanistan. This heroin frequently passes via Pakistan, where terrorist groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are active. These organisations are known to engage in drug trafficking, which provides funding for their violent acts against India. The influx of drugs into India, where they are dispersed throughout the nation, is made possible by Pakistan's porous borders and lax enforcement measures.

**Northeastern States:** Ethnic conflicts and insurgencies have long plagued India's northeastern states. These regions are popular locations for the smuggling of drugs, especially opium and

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<sup>5</sup> S. Bose, Narco-Terrorism and Global Security, 18 *Indian J. Int'l L.* 201, 210 (2020).

<sup>6</sup> P. Williams, Terrorist Financing and Organized Crime Nexus, 12 *J. Fin. Crime* 201, 208 (2019).

<sup>7</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* 89 (Brookings Inst. Press 2010).

methamphetamines, due to their porous borders with China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Drug trafficking is a common source of funding for insurgent groups operating in these areas, which makes combating organised crime and terrorism much more challenging.<sup>8</sup>

**Jammu and Kashmir:** The state of Jammu and Kashmir has experienced decades of insurgency, with terrorist groups funding their operations through a variety of methods, including drug trafficking. Terrorist organisations with headquarters in Pakistan have engaged<sup>9</sup> in the trafficking of drugs, but local insurgent groups also use drug distribution as a source of funding for their activities.

#### IV. NARCO-TERRORISM'S EFFECT ON INDIA'S INTERNAL SECURITY

The relationship between drugs and terrorism affects India's internal security in significant ways. Some of the most important ways that narco-terrorism threatens the stability of the nation are listed below:

**Financing Insurgency and Terrorism:** The main effect of narco-terrorism is the financial strengthening of terrorist groups. Terror organisations obtain significant revenue from drug trafficking in order to finance their activities, purchase weapons, enlist fighters, and fortify their logistical networks. For instance, a number of terrorist groups operating in Jammu & Kashmir and other regions of the nation receive funding from the sale of heroin, which is frequently trafficked via the porous Indo-Pakistani border<sup>10</sup>.

**Violence and Criminal Activity:** Organised crime and violence have increased as a result of drug trafficking and its connection to terrorism. While drug cartels frequently employ terrorism to frighten government officials and law enforcement, terrorist organisations use violence to protect drug trade routes. This results in more fighting, explosions, assaults on security forces, and overall civilian instability in places like Jammu and Kashmir.

**Drug Abuse and Public Health Crisis:** As a result of the expanding narcotics trade, heroin, methamphetamines, and synthetic opioids have become more common in India. Millions of Indians suffer from addiction as a result of drug consumption, which has created a public health emergency and heightened social instability. The effects are even more noticeable in areas like

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<sup>8</sup> K. Menon, Drug Trafficking and Insurgency in Northeast India, 9 *Asian J. Criminology* 145, 150 (2021).

<sup>9</sup> A. Kumar, Terror Financing in Jammu & Kashmir, 7 *J. Nat'l Sec. L.* 120, 125 (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Ajay K. Mehra, Financing of Terrorism through Narcotics, 13 *Indian J. Criminology* 89, 95 (2017).

Punjab, which have been badly impacted by drug addiction, with an increasing number of young people becoming victims of drug abuse.<sup>11</sup>

**Corruption and Governance Issues:** The money made from the drug trade frequently corrupts politicians, law enforcement officers, and local officials, making it more challenging to stop the flow of drugs into India. Strong drug cartels' participation in these areas erodes governance, making it more difficult for the government to successfully fight narco-terrorism. The execution of programs intended to reduce drug trafficking and the enforcement of laws are hampered by corruption.<sup>12</sup>

The South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan are still at risk from the growing opiate trafficking from Afghanistan along the maritime route, according to the International Narcotics Control Bureau, with more drugs being seized on these routes than on land. Sixty to seventy percent of the substances used by drug trafficking syndicates and organised crime networks in the Golden Crescent are smuggled by sea to South Africa, Sri Lanka, and India. According to data from India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways<sup>13</sup> the country's ports and coastal seas seized 2,826 kg of drugs in 2023—the most in five years—mostly heroin and cocaine. A boat carrying about 3,132 kg of cocaine worth over INR 1,000 crores (about US\$119 million) was apprehended by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and the Indian Navy in February 2024<sup>14</sup> in one of their largest interdictions. The NCB<sup>15</sup> claims that although heroin is the most commonly trafficked narcotic via this channel, other drugs including cocaine are also confiscated.

In *NCB vs. Kishan Lal*<sup>16</sup>, Supreme court highlights the significance of the Act's statutory provisions over its general provisions. It even restricts the High Court's ability to grant bail while adhering to the provision mentioned in Section 37 of the NDPS Act, taking into account the legislative statute's intention to provide for the strict provisions related to offences

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<sup>11</sup> R. Singh, Drug Abuse and Public Health Crisis in Punjab, 6 *Indian J. Pub. Health* 55, 60 (2021).

<sup>12</sup> Sanjay Kumar, Governance Challenges in Combating Drug Trafficking, 6 *Indian J. Pub. Admin.* 178, 183 (2019).

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Government of India, “Annual Report 2023-24” p. 214 (Government of India Publications, New Delhi, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “NCB and Indian Navy Seize 3,132 Kg Narcotics in Major Maritime Operation”, Press Information Bureau, 29 February 2024, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2009954> (last visited on May 10, 2026).

<sup>15</sup> Narcotics Control Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, “Annual Report 2023” pp. 54-56 (Government of India Publications, New Delhi, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> 1 S.C.R. 139 [1991]

involving narcotics, drugs, and psychotropic substances. The Court implied that the NDPS Act's preamble demonstrates the Act's goal of amending and consolidating the laws pertaining to narcotic drugs as well as establishing strict guidelines for the management and regulation of activities involving narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

The non-obstante phrase at the beginning of Section 37, as revised, states that no one accused of an offence specified in the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, shall be released on bail unless the requirements specified therein are met. Regarding the current case, the High Court's authority under Section 439 of the Cr.P.C. shall be subject to Section 37 of the NDPS Act and shall not conflict with the special statute such as the NDPS Act. When the High Court's authority to issue bail under Section 439 of the Cr.P.C. is clearly superseded by a non-obstante clause. The High Court's authority to grant bail under Section 439 is not preserved by Section 36 A sub-section 3; instead, it must be used in accordance with Section 37 of the NDPS Act. Since the accused had been on bail for a considerable amount of time and the Narcotic Bureau had not requested that the bail be revoked, the Supreme Court in this case permitted the accused to stay on bail.

## V. IMPORTANT FIGURES IN THE NEXUS OF NARCO-TERRORISM

The narco-terrorism nexus in India involves a number of important actors, including terrorist organisations, corrupt officials, and organised crime syndicates.<sup>17</sup>

**Terrorist Organisations:** Narcotics trafficking has been linked to terror groups like as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hizbul Mujahideen, and others<sup>18</sup>. These groups use drugs to fund their violent campaigns in both the northeastern states and the Kashmir Valley. Terrorist organisations occasionally serve as middlemen, enabling drug sales in return for money and weapons.

**Insurgent Organisations:** To fund their operations, insurgent organisations in northeastern India, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland<sup>19</sup> (NSCN) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), frequently smuggle drugs.<sup>20</sup> Synthetic drugs like methamphetamines, which are manufactured in the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand) and trafficked

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<sup>17</sup> Bimal N. Patel, *India and International Law* 233 (2nd ed. 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Louise Shelley, *Terrorism and Organized Crime Nexus*, 15 *J. Int'l Aff.* 45, 50 (2014).

<sup>19</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Insurgency and Drug Trade in Northeast India*, 41 *Asian Survey* 890, 896 (2001).

<sup>20</sup> Phil Williams, *Terrorism and Transnational Crime*, 32 *Crime L. & Soc. Change* 129, 135 (1999).

into India, are created and distributed by these groups.<sup>21</sup>

**Drug Cartels and Smuggling Syndicates:** Cartels based in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Myanmar frequently control the global drug trade. In order to distribute drugs, these cartels have set up intricate smuggling routes across India's borders, working with regional criminal organisations. Due to a combination of geography and corruption, these cartels are able to evade law enforcement in areas like Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and the Northeast.<sup>22</sup>

**Corrupt Officials and Law Enforcement:** In places where law enforcement is either nonexistent or compromised, the drug trade flourishes.<sup>23</sup> The drug trade is occasionally directly facilitated by corrupt authorities at all levels of government, from border security troops to local police. Effective countermeasures are thwarted by this corruption, which fosters the growth of the narco-terrorism network in these areas.

## VI. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act)<sup>24</sup> is India's primary statute in this regard. The legal system is changing to make India capable of preventing narco-terror. The NDPS Act (1985) has strong legal provisions for drug control that make nearly all activities involving narcotic narcotics, psychotropic substances, and precursor chemicals illegal. The Act has occasionally been amended, and the penalty for violations involving excessive amounts of these narcotics has progressively risen. The Indian legislative takes the concept of narco-terrorism very seriously, as seen by the recent revisions that followed the pattern. The Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1988 (Act 27 of 1988) is the second significant piece of law enacted to prevent drug proliferation in India. It gives the authorities the authority to hold someone who is engaged in drug trafficking.

India's reactions to the narrative around narco-terrorism have been significantly influenced by

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<sup>21</sup> K. Satyanarayana, Drug Trafficking and Insurgent Groups in Northeast India, 12 *Indian J. Criminology* 145, 150 (2021).

<sup>22</sup> Moisés Naím, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy* 82 (2005).

<sup>23</sup> Vito Tanzi, Corruption Around the World: Causes, Consequences, Scope, and Cures, 45 *IMF Staff Papers* 559, 565 (1998).

<sup>24</sup> The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (Act 61 of 1985).

judicial interpretations. The Supreme Court stressed in *State of Punjab v. Baldev Singh*<sup>25</sup> that the NDPS Act's "basic procedural safeguards which are operational" cannot be "bypassed and scuttled in the name of exigencies of war against trafficking in prohibited drugs aimed at neutralising constitutional guarantees." The Supreme Court outlined the following limitations on anticipatory release for drug-related offences in *Gurbaksh Singh Sibbia v. State of Punjab*.<sup>26</sup> In order to achieve successful law enforcement, the principles of liberty inherent in constitutional guarantees must be balanced with the requirements of sound justice administration. The trillion-dollar illegal drug trade both inside and outside of our borders is the aim of this law, which is a crucial tool in criminalising the growing menace of narco-terrorism.

The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967<sup>27</sup> (UAPA) is one of India's anti-terrorist laws. It prohibits the raising of armed forces with the intention of compromising the nation's sovereignty and integrity as well as certain illegal activities by individuals and organisations that are detrimental to the nation's harmony and integrity. Additionally, the Act contains a number of provisions aimed at preventing and combating terrorism, including narco-terrorism. The Act specifies any individual or group that engages in, collaborates in, conspires, or aids in any act, including narcoterrorism, individuals engaging in terrorist activities, or terrorists. The transnational trafficking in substances, including drugs like heroin, cocaine, and other psychotropic drugs and narcotics, has posed a variety of risks to nations like India. Weapons smuggling, human trafficking, and smuggling from north to south—and possibly even in the opposite direction—are other aspects of this terror network.

## VII. METHODS FOR ADDRESSING NARCO-TERRORISM IN INDIA

The public, law enforcement, and national security organisations must work together to combat narco-terrorism. India can tackle the intricate problem of narco-terrorism in a number of ways:

**Enhancing Border Security:** In order to stop the illicit supply of drugs, India's extensive and porous borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, and other nations must be strengthened. In order to monitor cross-border travel, this entails stepping up surveillance, bolstering border

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<sup>25</sup> (1999) 6 SCC 172.

<sup>26</sup> (1980) 2 SCC 565.

<sup>27</sup> The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (Act 37 of 1967).

police, and using cutting-edge technologies like drones and biometric systems.<sup>28</sup>

**International Cooperation:** India needs to work with its neighbours to fight drug trafficking because narco-terrorism is a transnational menace<sup>29</sup>. Dismantling transnational drug cartels requires cooperative operations, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic relations with nations like Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

**Counter-Narcotics Operations:** To improve its counter-narcotics operations, the Indian government has taken action. While the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Border Security Force (BSF) are responsible for upholding security in conflict areas, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) is a major player in the fight against drug trafficking<sup>31</sup>. These organisations should continue to have the tools and training needed to successfully combat narco-terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

**De-radicalization and Rehabilitation Programs:** In order to end the cycle of addiction and radicalisation,<sup>33</sup> rehabilitation programs are essential in addition to counterterrorism initiatives. The pool of potential recruits for terrorist groups can be decreased via community-based de-radicalization initiatives that concentrate on the reintegration of former militants and insurgents.

**Addressing Socio-Economic Factors:** Drug trafficking and terrorism flourish in some areas due to poverty, unemployment, and a lack of education. Preventing the recruitment of people into the drug trade and terrorist operations requires addressing the underlying causes of these socioeconomic problems. Initiatives for infrastructure, jobs, and education can lessen the susceptibility of underprivileged groups to the allure of narcotics and terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Narco-terrorism poses a complicated and multidimensional threat to India's internal security,

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<sup>28</sup> Ajey Lele, Smart Borders and National Security in India, 15 *J. Def. Stud.* 72, 78 (2021).

<sup>29</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, International Cooperation in Countering Terrorism, 18 *Stud. Conflict & Terrorism* 45, 52 (2015).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* 156 (Oxford Univ. Press 2013).

<sup>31</sup> R. K. Tiwari, Capacity Building in Counter-Narcotics Enforcement, 8 *Indian J. Pub. Admin.* 122, 128 (2020).

<sup>32</sup> Ajai Sahni, Internal Security and Paramilitary Forces in India, 12 *J. Def. Stud.* 45, 51 (2018).

<sup>33</sup> Tore Bjørge, *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism* 176 (Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

<sup>34</sup> S. Mahendra Dev, Poverty, Employment and Social Stability in India, 15 *Indian J. Labour Econ.* 67, 72 (2019).

with major ramifications for public health and safety.<sup>35</sup> By financially supporting terrorist groups and escalating bloodshed and instability, the combination of drug trafficking with terrorism threatens national security. India is particularly vulnerable to this menace due to its geopolitical setting, which includes its close proximity to drug-producing regions and its porous borders.<sup>36</sup> A coordinated, multifaceted strategy is needed to combat narco-terrorism, involving increased border security, international collaboration, counter-narcotic operations, and socioeconomic growth. India can move toward a more secure and stable future by tackling the underlying causes of narco-terrorism as well as its manifestations. The fight against narco-terrorism is obviously difficult, but it is a vital undertaking to protect India's security and citizens' welfare.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> S. D. Muni, Internal Security Challenges and Regional Dynamics in South Asia, 22 *Strategic Analysis* 145, 150 (2018).

<sup>36</sup> Paul R. Pillar, Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 12 *Int'l Sec.* 33, 40 (2001).

<sup>37</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* 124 (Oxford Univ. Press 1999).

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