

Vulnerable India Faces a New Threat

by Ramtanu Maitra

India is becoming increasingly unstable and is under attack from various terrorist networks working from inside, with adequate help from outside. While this has become obvious to many, both within India and abroad, the ruling coalition United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, took a three-year policy-holiday from dealing with it.

Singh's obsession, which is widely acknowledged in India, was to see the U.S.-India nuclear deal through. That process, and the efforts to keep it going all this time, have further weakened the government (the UPA is now a minority government, having lost the support of at least 60 parliamentarians because of its single-minded pursuit of the nuclear deal, to the exclusion of other vital issues) and have strengthened the negative forces gnawing at India's stability.

A Drug Transit Station

The latest source of instability is the growing inflow of drugs and the establishment of drug-trafficking networks inside India. Those who choose to ignore history are oblivious to the fact that the violence that is causing the disintegration of Afghanistan and Pakistan today has its genesis in the opium culture, which was allowed to develop there. The opium culture not only has corrupted many people in high places, and weakened the functional institutions in those countries, but it has also become the source of funds to recruit manpower—the so-called jihadis, suicide bombers—arms, and ammunition to commit violent acts against society. Many of the conflicts in the Balkans and on Russia's southern flank were aided by drug money generated elsewhere.

In March 2008, the annual report of the International Narcotics Control Board pointed out that the use of courier services for drug trafficking is on the rise in India, and the country is increasingly being used as a major transit as well as destination country for smug-



gling of banned substances. The report added that Indian law enforcement agencies are seizing an ever-increasing quantity of heroin from the India-Pakistan border, indicating a rise in trafficking from neighboring nations. In 2007, drug traffickers used Bangladeshi and Indian couriers to ship illicit drugs to Canada and South Africa, according to the report.

The document noted that smuggling across the porous borders between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal is relatively easy. The quantity of heroin entering India from Pakistan and Afghanistan increased more in 2007 than in previous years. "Law enforcement agencies in the north-western part of India are seizing ever-increasing quantities of heroin originating in Afghanistan and Pakistan and en route to Europe via Pakistan and India," the report said. Indian heroin is reportedly becoming available in Bangladesh, and there is evidence that Europe-bound heroin is increasingly passing through India.

Trafficking and Production

The report did not delve into either the drug trafficking or illegal drug production networks that already exist inside the country. However, a number of local media reports indicate that drug traffickers are sinking deep roots. A news report, “Manali Drug Traffickers: Growing Menace,” penned by Harish Thakur, pointed out that like Goa, Delhi, and Rajasthan, the state of Himachal Pradesh, bordering Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana, has turned into a major attraction for drugs for foreign tourists.

The article cited Allan D’Sa, Deputy Superintendent of Police and Anti-Narcotics Chief of Goa, admitting on the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, that “Goa has become a transit point for all the drug peddlers, and from here drugs like charas, hashish, and ganja are being pushed, and Ecstasy, LSD, and cocaine come into Goa from western countries.” He said drugs entering Goa are mostly from Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, besides Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nepal.

In recent years, Goa has become well known as the transit point for drugs shipped out to various European countries, and a production center for synthetic “party drugs.” In keeping with the trend among drug smugglers worldwide in adopting innovative ideas to escape the law, drug lords based in Goa are using minors as drug-smuggling “mules,” and carbonized suitcases to ship their drugs to Europe.

What Thakur pointed out about drug activities in Himachal Pradesh is an eye-opener. It shows how deeply rooted the problem has become. The Soviet intrusion of Afghanistan and consequent settlement of displaced Afghans in Kullu, in Himachal Pradesh, led to the first planned business in trade and cultivation of narcotics in that area. Afghan settlers preferred the hilly terrain of Kullu-Manali for climatic reasons. They gradually developed links with local youths, and soon heralded the era of “smack, heroin, and brown sugar” in that region.

As a result of these developments, which went wholly unreported, the narcotics trade has assumed a horrific shape in Kullu, where a large number of tourists, mostly Israelis, visit every year. Nearly 50,000 foreigners visit Himachal Pradesh annually, and they move around in different parts of the state, such as Shimla, Kullu, Manali, Dharamshala—the abode of the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama and his contin-

gent. The presence of drug users among the tourists has inspired local farmers to clandestinely cultivate poppy or cannabis crops to earn some quick money.

What is of particular interest is the presence of a large number of Israelis in the drug trade. Thakur says Israeli monopolization of the trade has become plainly visible, from the fact that people of Kasol village in Kullu have learned to speak Hebrew! Cannabis took root in the area after 3,000 Israelis made Kasol their home.

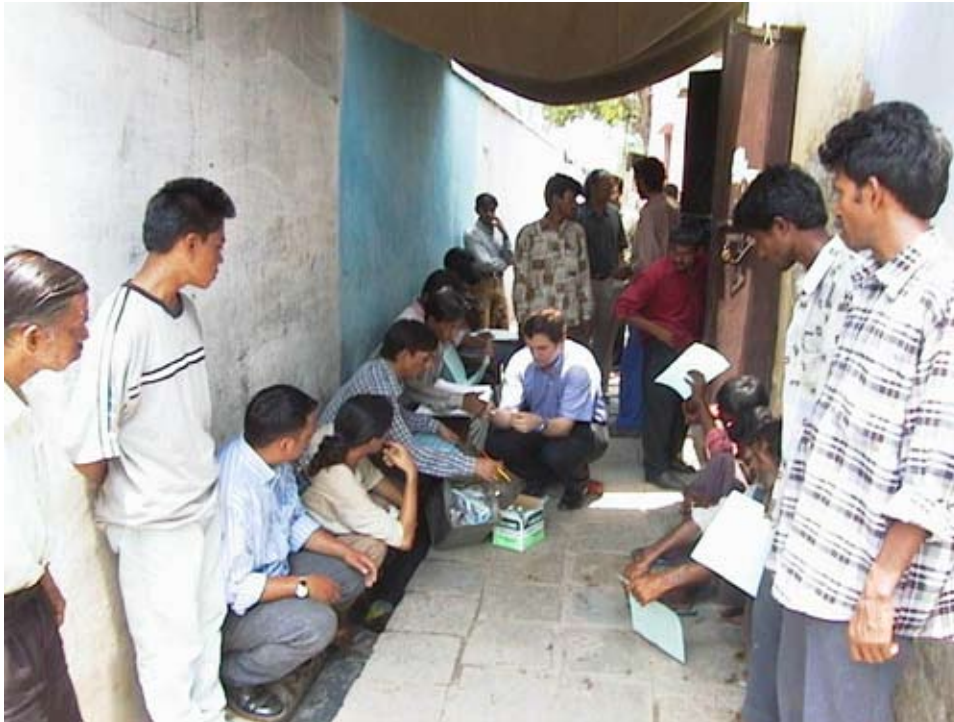
Drug users and traffickers have also come from Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Holland. “Every year the area under cannabis cultivation has been increasing, thanks to the patronage of foreigners,” a senior police official told Thakur. “One set of foreigners gets hybrid cannabis seeds, and another sets up residence here and monitors the cultivation through local folks. The produce is then smuggled out by villagers to Delhi, Mumbai, and Goa to be shipped abroad. The new inhabitants have re-christened their habitats. For instance, the valley next to Malana, about 15 km from here, is called ‘Magic Valley.’”

An Israeli revealed to Thakur some pertinent facts about the trade. Kutla, a remote village in Parvati Valley, is the hub of charas cultivation. Police have little access here and people work fearlessly. Foreigners hire one acre of land for just 10,000 rupees (about \$223), and raise about 40 kilograms of charas. Cheap Nepali labor makes things easy, as villages such as Malana, Kasol, and Tosh compete for higher production.

The drug mafia has set up “headline fields,” which can be sacrificed if the police carry out a raid. But fields in the higher slopes of the mountains have been left untouched, and production there thrives. The trade in this area is mostly controlled by drug cartels from Israel and Italy, Thakur said. According to a State Narcotics Report, over 3,000 acres of mountain land in Himachal Pradesh is under illegal cannabis cultivation, run by the Italian and Israeli drug mafia through local residents.

Maoists on a Rampage

Besides the fact that these drug traffickers are ostensibly linked to the international drug mafia, which provides succor to many insurgent movements and assassination squads, the direct threat the drug operations pose inside a vulnerable India is too large to ignore.



UNDP

Addicts at a needle-exchange program in New Delhi. The government is ignoring the dangerous effect of the introduction of drug-trafficking into the country.

It is widely recognized that the Maoists in India have taken control of a huge swath of land, running from the state of Bihar in the North to the state of Tamil Nadu in the South, encompassing highly underdeveloped areas of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. The common thread that runs through this massive stretch of land is: underdevelopment and poverty. The area where the Maoists exhibit their strength through violent acts is bereft of physical infrastructure, including educational facilities, health-care centers, power, water, and railroads.

Because Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Nepal, and Uttar Pradesh are contiguous, development of drug trafficking, and some drug production, in Himachal Pradesh, would further undermine the security of India and provide a potential financial base to the Maoists. The Pakistani Taliban, which raised its head only in 2006, was supported and nourished by drugs from Afghanistan and from Pakistan's tribal areas.

The problem with the policies pursued by the Manmohan Singh government, is that its interest in developing some of India's infrastructure is primarily in-

tended to lure foreign investors. The process would require showing satisfactory GDP growth and keeping the educated and skilled class reasonably satisfied, the UPA argues. The UPA government does not prioritize infrastructure projects in these areas, because such projects would not yield a significant leap in GDP growth.

This policy has fueled the growth of the Maoists in the vast underprivileged areas. While other ingredients, such as outside interference, play a role in expanding the Maoists' power, the Maoists themselves now pose a threat to the security of the nation.

The Other Threats

India has been ravaged in recent years by terrorist acts, such as the bombings in crowded places, killing scores of innocent people. Bombs went off in Jaipur, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, and Delhi in recent years, killing many. These terrorist acts followed the seven coordinated blasts that ripped through trains on Mumbai's busy commuter network on July 11, 2006, killing at least 200 people. New Delhi has pointed its finger at the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for these acts, but did little to eliminate the linkages that the terrorist have developed within the country.

In addition, wedged between Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China's Tibet province, are India's northeastern states. Some of these, particularly Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur, have remained unstable. From time to time, secessionist forces, aided from outside, commit terrorist acts. These are not the handiwork of the Islamic jihadis, since these areas are inhabited by various tribal groups, converted Christians, and Hindus. Such secessionist forces pose a serious threat to India's efforts to develop infrastructure to Myanmar and beyond, to develop strong cooperation with Southeast Asia.