Why Narcotics in India Should Be Treated as a Threat to National Security

By Saroj Kumar Rath

India’s history of drug use and cultivation dates back centuries, which is one reason the public sees illegal narcotics as a victimless crime. But in recent years, drug dealing and smuggling have become a countrywide problem as both external terrorists and domestic extremists use drugs to fund their operations.

Saroj Kumar Rath argues that a new approach is needed: ‘securitization,’ or the urgent treatment of narcotics as a national security threat.

India has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the world producing legal opium gum for export and domestic medical use. It also has large-scale illegal opium under cultivation, while being a target for smugglers from both Afghanistan and the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia. Moreover, it is the world’s largest consumer of opiates, with the underground trade helping to fund extremist insurgents and terrorists.

This combination — ready demand, bountiful supply and a network of internal and external enemies using the drug trade — is undermining national security. In this essay I discuss the extent of the narcotics problem, its links with organized crime and terrorism and the threat it poses. In conclusion, I ask why has India not securitized the drug issue, and can the country’s legislative, bureaucratic and judicial labyrinth understand the extent of the threat?

NARCOTICS IN INDIA: A LONG HISTORY

A tolerant attitude toward narcotics in India can be traced back to ancient times. The canonical Hindu text, the Rigveda, says, ‘According to primeval plan this Soma,’ with his stream, effused flows purely on, a God for Gods.’ In Hindu mythology, various psychoactive preparations containing cannabis — Soma was a ritual drink made by extracting juice containing an ephedrine-like drug from a leafless plant — were sacred to the gods, and indeed the...
most powerful Hindu god, Lord Shiva, had a nickname as Lord of Bhang (a form of cannabis).

India’s long tradition of monks, sages and holy men finding salvation through physical hardship adds to the legacy. Before enduring physical trials holy men might consume various narcotics to enhance their performance.

Opium became a source of government revenue during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in the 16th century. In the 1650s, the merchants of the Dutch East India Company began exporting opium to Southeast Asia and China. The British took over and entered the trade around 1708, with production rising steadily throughout the 18th century. The Royal Commission on Opium in 1895 — set up by British Prime Minister William Gladstone to inquire into questions regarding the prohibition and sale of opium, financial effects of potential prohibition, medical use of opium and views on opium in Indian society — noted that opium was an important household remedy in India used to treat “diarrhea, dysentery, chills … and indeed in all painful wasting diseases of any kind.”

So valuable was the trade that when the Qing dynasty tried to ban its import, the British government awarded two infamous Opium Wars to entrench the drug in China. Responsibility for the opium monopoly then rested with the Board of Customs, Opium and Salt.

In post-independence India, opium was kept under the Ministry of Finance. Even today, narcotic policies are co-ordinated by the Department of Revenue. Opium cultivation was governed by the liberal Opium Acts of 1858 and 1878 and the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1930, which after massive international pressure were repealed in 1995 and the National Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act was introduced, which imposed harsher sanctions.

One anecdote highlights the issue. In 2007, former Finance Minister Jaswant Singh, who was in charge of drugs policy under the Department of Revenue, was photographed apparently offering opium to guests at a public function at his ancestral home in Rajasthan. He later denied that the substance had been opium, and a court case was inconclusive.

India also lent legitimacy to opium by producing legal opium gum. India is now the only legal procurer of morphine in the world. The US and Japan are the biggest importers of opium gum. India also supplied 100 percent of the world’s morphine.

LINGAKES WITH SECURITY

It is well established that narcotics trafficking is a major source of revenue for international terrorists and organized criminal networks. In return for financing, terrorist groups provide criminal groups with access to sophisticated weapons.

India’s Naxalite rebellion shows that the country is not immune from this phenomenon. On April 15, 2010, former Home Minister P. Chidambaram told parliament that the financial strength of Maoist Naxalite rebels had improved extraordinarily. Although Chidambaram did not reveal the source of the money, he said the Naxalites were aiming for the “seizure of political power.”

Subsequently, Deputy Home Minister Jitendra Singh claimed that the Maoist rebels used “poppy and ganja [marijuana] cultivation in order to collect money for their activities … in some areas of Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar.”

With Indian insurgents relying on drug trafficking for fund-raising, a strong case can be made that illegal drugs become a national security issue that demands securitization. The figures with the image at the start of this story illustrate the scale of the problem.

NARCOTIC-TERROURISM AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN INDIA

The challenges facing India in treating narcotics as a major security threat are both external and internal. Immediately after independence India faced tremendous security challenges. In the four conventional wars that India has fought against Pakistan, including the Kargil war in 1999, a total of 9,857 Indian soldiers have lost their lives — but compare this to the 62,221 civilians who have lost their lives to terrorism in just the past 15 years, a figure six times greater.

The US State Department has said that India is the second-worst affected country by terrorist violence after Iraq, with attacks coming from both domestic and foreign terrorist organizations and separatist movements.

Indian officials have often contended that Pakistan is sheltering different terrorist groups, who operate from safe havens in Pakistan. With such other pressing and popular security issues at hands, it is not surprising that few Indians view the smuggling of ganja, opium and other narcotics as a threat.

But illicit drugs generate huge amounts of money that threaten many states by financing terrorism and extremism. The trade in illegal narcotics is estimated to be the second-largest by value in the world today, surpassed only by the weapons industry.

In 2001, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that between $500 billion and $1.5 trillion — equivalent to 1.5 percent to 4.5 percent of the world economy — is laundered through the international banking system. Drug traffickers, often allied with insurgent groups, are theoretically in a position to buy a controlling interest in governments they cannot overthrow by force.

With its long porous borders, lengthy coastline and location between the Golden Crescent of Southwest Asia and the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia, India is greatly susceptible to the drug trade. This strategic location has also made it vulnerable to various terrorist networks such as Lashkar-e-Toiba, the National Socialistic Council of Nagaland, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) and Naxalites working inside as well as outside India and using narcotics to fund their operations.

No Asian conflict has proved more deadly, costly or intractable than the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir. Under former dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan began a stated policy of “bleeding India through a thousand cuts.” This use of low-intensity conflict came about because Pakistan could not match India’s military power directly in conventional wars.

The policy has continued and has helped feed the growth of terrorist training centers in Pakistan, Pakistani-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Afghanistan.
The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and terrorist groups based in Pakistan and Afghanistan have aided and promoted the narcotics trade to fund terrorist groups that carry out anti-Indian activities. India’s Group of Ministers on Internal Security has alleged that the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir and the separatist movement in Punjab State were funded by narcotics money. Through its relationship with the Taliban, jihadi elements and Islamic extremists on one hand and international terrorists and the narcotics traders on the other, Pakistan poses a threat not only to India but to regional stability.

A lurid graphic in a June 2012 report in the mass-market Mail Today carried a dire warning that “The Drug Trail” from Pakistan and Afghanistan into India meant “easy drugs for all” and the scourge of heroin addiction. Heroin is first bought in Afghanistan for about 100,000 rupees ($1,800) per kilo and is then moved to Pakistan, usually Karachi or Lahore, for shipping and packaging. By the time it reaches India’s Punjab State, the price has been inflated 30-fold to 3 million rupees a kilo. On the streets of Punjab it grows to 10 million rupees and when it reaches the rest of the country, the price is as high as 50 million rupees per kilo.

India has entered into bilateral agreements with several countries including the US on co-operation in drug-related matters, and is keen to see more co-operation from Pakistan. But given the suspicions of Indian intelligence agencies, which accused the ISI of aiding and abetting drug smuggling across the border into India, this seems unlikely.

NARCOTICS AND LEFT-WING EXTREMISM

While we have seen that the issue of narcotics is closely linked to national security, the peculiar history of the drugs trade in India kept it from getting the attention it deserved. It was only in 2003 that the Narcotics Control Bureau was shifted from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, this was only a cosmetic rearrangement, which did not address the broader question of narcotics securitization.

The diverse groups of Maoist insurgents known as Naxalites have taken control of a huge swath of land, running from the state of Bihar in the north to Tamil Nadu in the south, including underdeveloped areas of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, along with large tracts of land in northeastern states. According to the Narcotics Control Bureau, the Naxalites thrive on money earned through the illicit cultivation of opium poppies and cannabis. Of all the marijuana that gets seized in the country, the price is as high as 50 million rupees per kilo.

Figure 1 does insurGENCY FOLLOW the Drug Trail

Source: Data compiled by Narcotics Control Bureau and UNODC (Self), The Red Corridor: New Public (Right)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Incidents</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1608</td>
<td>677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
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A CASE FOR SECURITIZATION

It is essential to understand exactly what securitization means. Professor Ole Wæver from the Copenhagen School of International Relations is credited with creating the concept in 1995. In simple terms as defined by Wæver, securitization means discussing particular issues as security threats. SECURITIZATION OF AN ISSUE MEANS “TO START A POLITICAL DEBATE ON THE SUBJECT.”

Securitization is thus an extreme version of politicization that enables the use of extraordinary means in the name of security. In theory, any public issue can be located on a spectrum ranging from non-politicized through politicized to securitized. An issue becomes a security issue when it is argued that it represents an existential threat to the state and must take absolute priority. All other political concerns are irrelevant if the securitized issue is not addressed. The state thereby claims a right to handle the issue through extraordinary means such as the use of state secrecy, new taxes, mass conscription or placing limitations on otherwise inviolable rights. “SECURITY” IS THEN A SELF-REFERENTIAL PRACTICE, BECAUSE IT IS THROUGH THE PRACTICE ITSELF THAT THE ISSUE BECOMES SECURITIZED. This creates confusion.

In a diverse and democratic country like India, securitizing any issue is very difficult. There are other ministries and federal units involved in illicit drug control and no federal coordination exists among them despite the unveiling of the comprehensive National Policy on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in 2012, which is intended to coordinate the policy.50 The policy does not change the fact that different aspects of the drug problems are still handled by different ministries and agencies at the central and state level.

Therefore, a comprehensive picture of illicit drugs is hard to find in India. Neither the extent of supply nor the scale of abuse is known. Such a chaotic and confusing scenario coupled with India’s executive and political inertia inhibits the securitization of the illicit drug problem. India needs a truly comprehensive narcotics policy before the malaise of illicit narcotics threatens the very existence of the country.

CONCLUSION

India’s opiate consumption is higher than any other nation, both in terms of number of users and quantity of opiates consumed. The use of narcotics for non-medical purposes was formally banned in 1947 and as both a major opium-cultivating nation and a signatory to various international conventions, India has made major strides in reducing drug use, including opium. But in a diverse and democratic country like India, securitizing any issue is very difficult. There are more than 950 registered political parties and more than 10,000 castes in India. The first government survey on non-governmental organizations, conducted in 2010, found that India has the largest number of active NGOs in the world, about 3.3 million organizations in 2009.

Virtually any issue in India faces fierce resistance from some group somewhere. The failure to securitize left-wing extremism in the country, however, should be a warning on the securitization of narcotics. Despite its direct impact on the state and society, left-wing extremism, principally Naxalites, has not yet been fully securitized in India. Compared to the violence of left-wing extremism, illicit drugs pose a much more insidious threat. The securitization of an illicit drugs problem is difficult for any country; in India, securitization is constrained by historical, cultural and institutional factors, not to mention an already-unstable security environment.

To date there is virtually no debate or discussion about the securitization of narcotics in India. Large-scale resistance to the narcotics law and a degree of official patronage of narcotics by the government has successfully forestalled any move on securitization.

In addition there is confusion and lack of coordination between policies and operations. The Department of Revenue is responsible for the administration of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985, but the act itself created the Narcotics Control Bureau to carry out this same function. Parliamentary questions are answered by the Department of Revenue whereas operational procedures are handled by the NCB. The departments even report to different secretaries: NCB to the Home Secretary and the Department of Revenue to the Revenue Secretary. This creates confusion.

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Saroj Kumar Rath, Ph.D. is Research Associate at the Graduate School of Law, Hosei University, Tokyo. His research interest is terrorism in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. His upcoming book, Fragile Frontiers: The Secret History of Mumbai Terror Attacks, is scheduled to be published by Routledge in 2013.