


**DRUG ABUSE
AND
ILLICIT TRAFFICKING
IN
NORTH EASTERN INDIA**



PHANJOU BAM TARAPOT

Drug addiction among the youth and consequent spread of HIV and AIDS among the general population in some parts of north eastern India particularly in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram have reached alarming proportions with the problem threatening future generations. Manipur is the worst affected, with more than 4276 HIV positive cases reported upto April 1996. The problem is posing a major threat as it is estimated that the disease would kill more people than those killed in extremist-related incidents in the last eight to ten years.

The book tries to find out why youths took to narcotic drugs particularly heroin and how it affected hundreds of families in the region. Besides dealing with how and from where the heroin is smuggled into the region, the book also briefly mentions the historical background of the north east states which are close to the 'Golden Triangle', the main source of heroin in the world.

The book uncovers how 'some' security personnel were involved in smuggling out of ganja from Manipur to other parts of the country. The book reveals that the north eastern region has become a smuggling route for heroin from the 'Golden Triangle' and other parts of neighbouring Myanmar.

Apart from picturing the problems related to narcotic drugs, it describes how 'number four' (heroin) is manufactured at 'Golden Triangle' and its surrounding areas, and who the kingpins were.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1. Manipur in the Eighties	1
2. North Eastern Region of India	13
3. Drug Abuse in North Eastern India	46
4. The Golden Triangle	64
5. The Beginning of Drug Addiction in the North East	82
6. Trafficking of narcotic drugs in the region	89
7. A Brief Note on the Drug Scenario in the Country and Surrounding Areas	116
8. The Dreaded Disease	130
Conclusions	147
<i>Appendix A</i>	158
<i>Appendix B</i>	160
<i>Appendix C</i>	162
<i>References</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	225

Introduction

What is happening in North Eastern India? Why is the region, backward despite its abundant natural resources, confronting so many problems ranging from insurgency and foreigners issues to addiction of narcotic drugs among the youth? In the region, there is hardly any state which can be considered peaceful.

Assam is the gateway to seven north eastern states bordering Myanmar, Bangladesh, China and Bhutan. In the early 1980s, the state witnessed a series of strikes and other forms of agitation launched by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad against the influx and illegal settlement of foreign nationals from neighbouring Bangladesh. Normal life was disrupted, academic institutions were closed; and social, economic and political life was greatly affected in those days.

As continuing influx had brought adverse effects upon the political, social, cultural and economic life of the state, the anti-alien stir was supported by various sections of the people. The agitation was called off after signing the Memorandum of Settlement between the Assam agitation leaders and the Central government representatives in the presence of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi on 15 August 1985.

Under the memorandum of settlement, 'foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the

provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) order 1964'.

'Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law. Immediate and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners'. There were several other provisions also. But, the Memorandum of Settlement, popularly known as the 'Assam Accord', has not been fully implemented and there is resentment among sections of the people against aliens who had settled in Assam.

Assam also witnessed ethnic violence in the Bodo-inhabited area of Kokrajhar and surrounding areas in early the 1990s and in 1996. The origin of the ethnic violence could be traced to the influx of what locals called 'outsiders' from other places to ethnic Bodo-dominated areas. Hundreds of lives were lost. The ethnic clash is intermittent. In Assam, a section of the youth is also waging an armed struggle under the banner of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) for secession of Assam from India.

Once considered a peaceful state, Arunachal Pradesh is also facing a problem arising out of the settlement of about 60,000 Chakma and Hajong refugees in the State. These refugees who had originally come from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hills tract, were settled in Arunachal Pradesh by the Central government. Things should not be taken lightly because there is resentment among people, particularly youth in the State against the Chakmas and the Hajong. Why isn't a solution found to settle the issue?

The situation in Nagaland is not very different from that of other states. The more than four-decade-old insurgency problem has resulted in the death of hundreds of security personnel, underground members and civilians. There is no sign of the problem ending in the immediate future.

After the former underground outfit Tribal National Volunteer (TNV) which had fought for secession of Tripura, signed a peace accord with the government in 1988, it was thought that peace would return to this tiny north eastern state. But it was not so. The All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) demanding a separate 'homeland' for the backward tribals emerged as the most powerful underground organisation in Tripura in early 1992. However, another agreement was signed between ATTF and the government in 1993 to end the violence. But other insurgent organisations like the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), Tripura Tribal Volunteers Force (TTVF), National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the Social Democratic Front of Tripura (SDFT) became active in 1996. The violence unleashed by these organisations has claimed hundreds of lives in the state in recent years. For how long will this go on?

When the Memorandum of Settlement was signed between the former underground organisation, Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Central government in 1986 to end the two-decade-old insurgency, everyone in the state rejoiced expecting peace to return to this border state. But there was no peace, as an organisation called the Hmar People's Convention (HPC) launched an armed struggle demanding an autonomous council for Hmar-inhabited areas in the state. But, the HPC signed an agreement with the government on 27 July 1994. However, the HPC says the agreement has not been fully implemented by the Mizoram government.

In Meghalaya, there is not much of a problem except for some sporadic incidents of clashes between tribals and non-tribals.

And in Manipur, many problems in 1990s have affected normal life in the state. The Kuki-Naga clashes in the hills since 1992 have claimed over 500 lives upto June 1996. There is no sign of the feud ending between the two major tribal communities. There were reports of

involvement of armed militants in the clashes. Why is the government unable to tackle this problem? Are politicians behind this ethnic conflict? Innocent women, children and villagers were the victims of the ethnic violence. Why cannot the more than 45,000 security personnel deployed in the state deal with a few thousand armed activists behind these lingering ethnic clashes? It is a shame that armed militants are killing innocent and helpless villagers. The origin of the clashes has been attributed to the demand for a 'homeland' of Kukis by reorganising Manipur's territory. Can Manipur with an area of 22,327 sq. kms. be divided further? Will it be practical? Also, can the idea of forming what has been termed 'Southern Nagaland' by carving out Naga-inhabited districts of the state materialise?

It is unfortunate to note that a section of the armed militants tried to drag the majority Meitei community into the Kuki-Naga clashes by killing five Meitei villagers who went to Yangnoi area in search of firewood under Manipur's Senapati district in February 1996. Intelligence sources confirmed that the five Meiteis were gunned down by militants belonging to one of the tribes. Although there was a large scale protest against the massacre, the Meitei community restrained themselves from acting in the way the militants had expected. What if it was otherwise?

Unlike the other states, at least five known guerrilla organisations are operating in Manipur. Both Muivah and Khaplang factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) are operating in Manipur and Nagaland. The other Meitei insurgent groups operating in this tiny border state are the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), Revolutionary People's Front (political wing of the People's Liberation Army), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP). They all are separately fighting for secession of Manipur from the Indian union. The insurgency problem will remain as there is no sign of any of these

organisations reaching an agreement with the government. In short, all the seven north eastern states are facing one problem or the other.

But, apart from the above mentioned issues, there is a menace to the present generation and society in the region. The latest problem which is engulfing north eastern India is the increasing number of drug addicts, and spreading of the Human Immuno deficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) at an alarming rate. Of the seven states, Manipur is the worst-affected with atleast 4276 HIV positive cases reported upto 30 April 1996. Barring Arunachal Pradesh, HIV cases were reported from other states' in the region—Assam (1500), Mizoram (65), Meghalaya (57), Nagaland (261) and Tripura (13), upto 30 April 1996. This is spread mainly through sharing of infected needles or syringes among the drug addicts.

It is a recent problem. Hardly anyone expected, a few years ago, that the region would be plagued by HIV/AIDS. Addiction to narcotic drugs among the youth is also recent but it soon became a serious problem in Manipur affecting a majority of the families directly or indirectly.

North eastern India particularly Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram have become smuggling routes of heroin from the 'Golden Triangle' and other areas in Myanmar. And, narcotic drugs including heroin are easily available in the region.

It is distressing to note that marijuana (ganja) and other narcotic drugs are smuggled out of Manipur to the north eastern regions and other parts of the country with the help of some security personnel. As Manipur borders Myanmar, the state has become a hotbed for smuggling various items ranging from electronic gadgets and precious forest produce to narcotic drugs particularly heroin. It is also well-known for producing good quality marijuana.

An official report, made available to the author, said smuggling of narcotic drugs was being carried out by a chain of people who had 'good contacts' with some security personnel. The report points out that a vehicle carrying atleast one lakh rupees would leave Imphal a day before the departure of the truck loaded with contraband ganja. 'It gives the number of truck with other details' to all those who may block the vehicle along Imphal-Jiribam-Silchar (national highway No. 53). The report further points out that the money was distributed among those personnel who would help the smooth passage of the truck(s) loaded with ganja. The truck would reach Silchar from where the ganja can be transported to different parts of the country including Bihar where Manipuri ganja is in great demand. If truckloads of ganja could be smuggled out, what is the difficulty in smuggling out a few kilograms of heroin from the state to other parts of the country, or to other parts of the globe?

There are several reported cases of seizing truckloads of ganja. On 12 August 1995, two truckloads of ganja worth several lakhs of rupees from Manipur were seized at Didarganj in Bihar. The trucks were 'guarded' by the CRPF personnel. On 24 July 1995, one truckload of ganja guarded by some other personnel was also seized from the same area in Bihar. In both cases, the ganja originated in Manipur was seized by the central excise department personnel.* In other cases, some Manipur Rifles jawans 'accompanied' vehicles loaded with ganja, and one such vehicle was seized in June 1993 at Tadubi area in the State's Senapati district. A question which has not been answered so far is: can Manipur Rifles, CRPF or other personnel accompany truckloads of contraband ganja without the order of their superior officers? In some cases, the personnel were 'on duty'. Some Manipur Rifles jawans were arrested for carrying ganja on 28 June 1993. But the

* See appendix.

FIR was lodged in July 1993, and investigation started in October 1993. An assembly committee, formed to look into one ganja smuggling case, completed its investigation but the final report was never made public. As mentioned earlier, it does not seem to be difficult to smuggle out heroin. What action has been taken against personnel or persons involved in the smuggling is not known. It is absurd to think that smuggling at the border can be carried out all the time without the knowledge of the personnel who were supposed to check these illegal activities.

Is Manipuri society degenerating or rotten? How far are we aware of the happenings in our surroundings? Corruption is rampant in public life. There are unwritten 'rates' for transfer or posting of some government employees, or for appointments to some government posts. The 'rates' varied according to the kind of post applied for, or the place of posting sought. It has become a fashion that those persons who could influence the powers-that-be by bribing or spending a huge amount of money are considered 'powerful and influential' in the present society. There is a feeling among a section of the people that life would be difficult without a government job. There were reports of selling lands or other household goods by poor persons to bribe 'influential persons' to get government jobs. Who is to blame? The candidate who paid the money or the person who took the amount? The unwritten rate for a class III post on regular basis is allegedly close to Rs 1 lakh. But it must be pointed out that this does not apply to all appointments. Moreover, as is the case, it remains only an allegation.

Unfortunately, Manipur has not been able to produce any leader worth mentioning, and one who could put all resources into effective use to achieve all-round development in this tiny state. What is relevant is how many people join politics to 'serve the poor people'. Or how many of the people's representatives are sincere or honest

in serving the state or the people who elected them could be gauged by looking at the recent 'political history' of the state. Do the 'leaders' have time to think about various social problems confronting the state? It is unfortunate to note that some of the 'leaders' do not think of Manipur as a whole but only for the area they hail from. There is no industry or factory worth the name. The cement factory at Hundung in Ukhrul district and Manipur spinning mills at Loitangkunou were doing well in the beginning but problems cropped up at these two factories because of, maybe, mismanagement.

There is always a rush for government jobs. There were more than 2 lakh educated unemployed upto June 1996, it can be noted with utter dismay that a candidate had to spend more than Rs. 20,000 for getting a class IV post in the government. Sources said the 'rate' was going up day by day. There were reports of tampering with marks obtained by some candidates who had appeared for the written examinations for recruitment to posts of Manipur civil service and Manipur police service. The examinations were conducted by the Manipur Public Service Commission (MPSC). The 'scandal' surface when a candidate filed a writ petition at the Imphal Bench of Guwahati High Court, alleging tampering with marks by MPSC officials. In February and March 1996, the Court directed the registrar of the Court to call in written papers of some candidates, and it was found that 'marks were tampered with'. The Court then called for all the answer scripts of the candidates and withheld the declaration of results. A court case was continuing. Some top functionaries of the MPSC resigned from their posts owning moral responsibility, though some 'lower level' officials were allegedly involved in the 'scandal'. If selected, and tampering with marks of some candidates went unnoticed, these candidates would have become officials of Manipur government. Anybody can imagine what they would do.

Various problems confronting Manipur have severely affected the social and economic life. Hardly a day passed without reports of a civilian, extremist or security personnel being killed in 1990s. Business activities were greatly affected due to frequent strikes or other forms of agitations in 1996. There was no life after sunset as people preferred to remain indoors soon after sunset. Common people are virtually sandwiched between the security personnel and armed insurgents operating in the region. Several innocent civilians are killed in extremist-related incidents. In early 1996, the killings of Amina Devi in the Nambol area in Bishenpur district, Netaji Singh at Kakwa near Imphal and Prabhahini Devi at Kwakeithel area in Imphal rocked the state in April and May. The three were victims of security forces who opened fire under the pretext of tracking down armed insurgents in the region. Inquiries were conducted into the incidents but only the concerned families were the ultimate losers.

Even insurgents operating in the region appear to be losing the sympathy of the common people. While there are 'genuine revolutionaries', many criminals and anti-social elements started extorting money from the general population in the name of underground organisations. Of course, the underground activists also collected either monthly subscription or a 'regular subscription from the people or government employees'. But those imposters who extorted money in the name of 'revolutionary organisations' had 'distanced' the underground members from the majority of the general population. When the insurgency movement reached its peak in the late seventies and early eighties, sections of the population thought that at least they would be able to 'cleanse' this 'putrid' society although there were reservation about their secessionist movement. And, that was only a part of post-Statehood history of trouble-torn Manipur which became a full-fledged state in 1972.

Manipuris are fond of celebrating many festivals in a year. Some are religious, and some are not. Although it cannot be criticised, many people are not aware of the fact that a time has come to restrict the celebration of all these festivals and devote themselves to work for a prosperous Manipur.

The number of dropouts was also increasing as frequent closure of educational institutions owing to intermittent strikes and agitations affected academic life.

Amidst all these problems, drug addiction and HIV infection was rapidly spreading among the youth. Drug abuse is defined as 'self administration of a drug for non-medical reasons, in quantities and frequencies which may impair an individual's ability to function effectively and which may result in social, physical or emotional harm'. "It also means that when anyone uses illegal drugs on their own (although they are not sick or ill) it may ultimately lead to destruction of their lives and society. They can be termed as drug abusers'. Drug abuse has had a negative impact on both social and economic life in the region. The problems arising out of drug abuse by many youth has affected several families in the state.

Even after the drug lord, Khun Sa's surprise capitulation to authorities in Myanmar in January 1996, reports indicate that production of heroin in the 'Golden Triangle' remains largely unaffected. And the drug problems are likely to continue in India's north eastern region unless some drastic steps are taken to contain the smuggling of narcotic drugs at the Indo-Myanmar border. An interesting point is, that all those drug peddlers or traffickers who were arrested red-handed are treated unequally. A 'notorious' trafficker who was sent to jail 'escaped' from prison while some of the traffickers were let off on bail although the provisions of the law state otherwise.* There is no reason why the smuggling of

*See appendix for the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985.

narcotic drugs cannot be curtailed if there is cooperation and coordination between the various agencies operating in the region.

A time has come for all to combat this problem as drug addiction and HIV/AIDS have posed a menace to the present generation. The routes through which narcotic drugs are smuggled are known to anti-narcotics agencies. Intelligence sources 'identified' some of the drug traffickers, and a decision had been taken to jointly check smuggling activities by officials and security agencies of India and Myanmar. Also, there should be vigorous efforts to educate the common people to prevent the further spread of HIV/AIDS to the general population.

A point which should be mentioned is that an addict generally consumes a few milligrams costing about Rs. 100 per day. If there are 40,000 addicts, at least Rs. 40 lakhs would be spent on drugs (heroin) per day. And in one year, the amount would be about Rs. 146 crores. This seriously affects economic life in the region.

All these issues require to be tackled with a political will to stamp out these social evils before the situation gets out of hand. Time will tell who are sincere and honest in combating these evils. As of now, the present situation predicts a bleak future in the region particularly in Manipur.