

High on atmospherics: dealing with Punjab's drug problem

During the campaign for the Punjab Assembly elections last year, Amarinder Singh, then the Congress's chief ministerial candidate, had [pledged to eradicate the State's drug problem](#) within four weeks of coming to power. Given the complexity of the issue, hardly anyone took his pledge seriously but it did convey his concern. After coming to power, Capt. Singh took little time to set up a Special Task Force (STF) to tackle the problem. The STF claimed to have arrested about 15,000 drug peddlers. It also claimed that the supply line of drugs had been choked.

Cascading problems

However, with the tightening of supply chains, many turned to cheaper and spurious drugs. [The last one month witnessed a spurt in deaths](#) due to overdose or usage of spurious drugs. Although the government maintains that there were only two such incidents, the local media reported over 25 deaths during the period. The subsequent outcry has triggered knee-jerk reactions by the State government.

The Punjab Cabinet has asked the Centre to amend the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985 to include the death penalty for even first-time offenders. It followed this up with a declaration that all 3.4 lakh government employees would have to undergo a dope test.

The recommendation of the [death penalty for first-time offenders](#) in NDPS cases is a dangerous overreaction. Currently there are about 15,000 convicts and undertrials in jails. Most have been booked for carrying minuscule quantities of drugs or banned substances. Besides, the courts have already described as unconstitutional an amendment introduced in 2001 providing death penalty for repeat offenders under the NDPS Act. The Act was amended in 2014 to remove the provision.

Even before the ink dried on the proposal sent to the Centre, the State government came out with the absurd announcement that all its [employees would be put through a dope test](#). This degenerated into a farce when demands were put forth to the Cabinet, including the Chief Minister, through a dope test.

For one, the test cannot establish whether a person is an addict or not. The test can only confirm the presence of narcotics in samples. For instance, a regular user of heroin may test negative if he or she has abstained for three-four days. In any case, there has never been any allegation that a significant number of government employees are drug addicts.

The government is clearly aiming at the wrong target. It is well-known that the vast majority of drug addicts are unemployed youth. It is this segment of youth who need to be targeted for proactive and preventive measures. This can be done by involving volunteers and elders from localities and villages. Families and teachers need to be put through counselling to identify potential victims and to watch for early signs of trouble. Such action requires an understanding of the situation, sincerity and patience.

Need for a survey

Shockingly, for a State that is well-known for substance abuse, there is no empirical study on the extent of the problem. The previous Akali Dal-led government remained in denial, claiming that Punjab's youth were being "defamed". Now in the Opposition, the party is blaming the Congress government for its failure to contain the problem. Some surveys have been conducted with small sample sizes. What is needed is a extensive survey and a well-thought-out strategy to tackle the

problem.

The problem also lies in the poor handling of drug-related cases by police and prosecution agencies. This was brought to the notice of Capt. Singh by a High Court judge last week when he was appearing in an election-related case. The judge said she would take the opportunity of the presence of the Chief Minister in the court to point out that challans were being presented in drug cases even when crucial forensic reports were pending, and added that false drug cases were on the rise. An embarrassed Chief Minister said he would personally look into the issue.

Punjab has gone through several periods of crisis, including militancy during the 1980s and 1990s when thousands of lives were lost, and is currently in danger of losing too many youngsters to drugs. It requires sensitive handling rather than knee-jerk reactions which can be counterproductive.

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