

## High on rhetoric: on Punjab's drug menace

It has taken Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh over a year and a half to launch his much-anticipated war on drugs. This he did on July 4 by ordering [mandatory drug tests for all government employees](#), including the police. While this is welcome, even if belated, it is a very small and insubstantial measure towards curbing the pervasive drug menace. For someone who promised to [wipe out drugs from the State](#) within a month of being elected, the conduct of annual drug tests on some 3.25 lakh employees is a piece of tokenism. More steps are needed; less missteps, too. The decision of the Punjab Cabinet to recommend the [death penalty to drug-peddlers](#) is an example of the latter. Capital punishment is abhorrent. Given that there is evidence that suggests it is also no guarantee of deterring crime, this is more of an empty signal. What is required is a comprehensive war on drugs fought on several fronts, including interventions in the community to spread awareness and foster a culture against the use of drugs. The challenges faced by the State are huge. Estimates vary but by some accounts as many as two-thirds of all households in Punjab have a drug addict in their midst. Punjab's prisons are overcrowded with drug-users and peddlers, and its streets and farms witness the easy availability of narcotics and opiates. Last year the government arrested 18,977 peddlers and treated some two lakh addicts. The sheer extent of the problem suggests it is more than just a few profiteers that have been responsible for causing this menace or helping to sustain it. Something of this scale required a wide network, a well-oiled and smoothly run machinery that has the secret support and collaboration of at least a few of those who work in government.

### High on atmospherics: dealing with Punjab's drug problem

Given the geography, the drugs, whether it is opium or heroin, make an easy and assisted entrance into Punjab from the Golden Crescent (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan), and synthetic drugs are thought to come in via Himachal Pradesh. That means those guarding Punjab's 553-km border with Pakistan must take serious steps to plug the inflow. The Central security forces are obviously beyond the control of Amarinder Singh. Therefore, security-planners in New Delhi have to make sure that the border is properly barred to the flow of narcotic substances. This is a national problem as a substantial portion of the drugs that land in Punjab make their way to the rest of the country. Given the links between drugs and terror, this poses a national security threat. Then there are the politicians. The previous Akali Dal-BJP alliance had also promised to drain Punjab's vast drug swamp. The political class has a critical role to play in winning the war on drugs. It is not enough that politicians merely line up to have themselves tested for drugs to win political brownie points. They need to put the State and the nation above self-serving political ends and agree that this battle must be fought in concrete ways, going beyond photo-ops and sound-bites.

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