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Drug Trafficking and Narco-Terrorism in Assam

***Bipin Kumar^a**

^a Assistant Professor, Defence and Strategic Studies, S.M.M. Town P.G. College Ballia 277001, India

ABSTRACT

Assam lies in proximity to India's northeastern corridor and has lately escalated into a hotspot for drug trafficking as well as narco-terrorism activities. It shares its borders with the infamous Golden Triangle—essentially an area among the world's largest regions producing illicit drugs. This paper provides an analysis of how easy infiltration due to porous borders, challenging terrains, and socio-political instability substantially increased synthetic opioid and heroin influxes toward Assam through neighboring states such as Manipur and Nagaland. Axes of collusion developing steadily more between insurgent groups, criminal gangs, and the drug traffickers are discussed with emphasis placed on how narco-funding ensures sustainability of militancy camouflaged under ethno-nationalist struggle fronts. Security Implications: From destabilizing the border over time through health crises related particularly among youth in this region. It discusses government interventions, legal frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms while identifying the gaps of cross-border cooperation as well as the gaps of rehabilitation and socio-economic alternatives. By integrating security, health, legal, and community-driven approaches holistically, this article thereby calls for a coordinated national and regional response to address both drug trafficking and narco-terrorism that now twin threats in Assam.

Keywords: Narco-Terrorism in Assam, Golden Triangle Drug Trade, Insurgency and Drug Nexus, Porous Indo-Myanmar Border, Synthetic Drugs and Opioids, ULFA and Militant Financing, Public Health Crisis in Northeast India, Cross-Border Trafficking Routes, NDPS Act Enforcement, Socio-Economic Vulnerability

1. Introduction

The northeastern region, particularly Assam forms a buffer between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Through its porous borders with Myanmar—part of the Golden Triangle (Myanmar Laos Thailand), one of the world's largest hubs of opium as well as synthetic drug production—Assam has become a route for narcotics that find their way into India. Decades old insurgency movements have amalgamated with a state of weak governance and social vulnerability to build an extremely dangerous nexus between drug trafficking and narco terrorism that actually poses critical threats to Regional Security, Public Health and Socio Economic Stability in Assam (VIF India, 2024; Divyashree Jha, 2025).

2. Understanding the Golden Triangle

The rocky borderlands that separate Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar are known as the "Golden Triangle" and have been a significant opium production region since the 1950s (Kamaraj IAS Academy, 2023; Singh & Nunes, 2013). In the Shan and Kachin states of Myanmar, covert labs have produced an increasing number of synthetic drugs, including methamphetamine (often in pill form as "Yaba" or in crystal form as "ice"). (VIF India, 2024; DefenceXP, 2023). Despite political unrest, Myanmar continued to be Southeast Asia's largest producer of opium by 2021, and seizures of synthetic drugs showed a massive scale of production (ABC News, 2021; CENTRE for Joint Warfare Studies, 2023).

3. Assam & Northeast India: Spillover Dynamics

a. Geographic Channels

Through Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, India and Myanmar share a 1,600-kilometer border. Assam is the entry point for additional inland trafficking into the Brahmaputra valley and central India (ORF, 2024; Jha, 2025). Because of the challenging terrain and porous Free Movement Regime zones, routes like Moreh in Manipur and nearby corridors have made it easier for opiates and synthetic drugs to enter the country, frequently going unnoticed (CENTRE for Joint Warfare Studies, 2023; The International Prism, 2023).

b. Emerging Local Production

Although the majority of drugs were once smuggled in refined form, there has been a noticeable change in recent years. Locally refined crude heroin variants, known as "Salt and Chilli" or "Thum Morok," are now produced in Northeast India, particularly in Assam, because of their low cost of refinement and accessibility (Jha, 2025).

4. The Nexus: Insurgents, Crime Syndicates & Narco-Terrorism

a. Insurgent Funding through Drug Trade

It is claimed that a number of insurgent organizations, most notably ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom), NSCN, NDFB, and others, use illegal profits and drug trafficking routes to finance weapons, maintain camps, and hire cadres (Jha, 2025; VIF India, 2024). Insurgent groups increasingly looked to transregional smuggling networks as alternate revenue streams as a result of waning public support and pressure from security operations (such as Operation Bajrang and All Clear) (Wikipedia ULFA; VIF India, 2024).

b. Narco-terrorism Defined

The intersection of terrorist and insurgent organizations using the drug trade to fund ideological warfare is known as "narco terrorism" (TargetUPSC, 2024; Civildaily, 2024). Insurgent groups in northeastern India take advantage of the region's topography and porous borders to traffic drugs, which they use to finance their violent campaigns and separatist goals (TargetUPSC, 2024; Jha, 2025).

5. Security Implications

a. National and Regional Security

India is a conduit for a variety of illegal flows, including weapons, drugs, and even terrorists, due to its advantageous location between the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent (ORF, 2024; The International Prism, 2023). Internal and border security are at risk because drug-transporting smuggling routes are also used for terrorist movements and weapon infiltration (The International Prism, 2023; VIF India, 2024).

b. Public Health and Social Impact

In Assam and the surrounding states, drug abuse is a serious public health concern. As a result of the abundance of inexpensive synthetic and locally refined opioids, Mizoram (~7%), Nagaland (~6.9%), and Arunachal Pradesh (~5.7%) have notably high opioid consumption rates (The International Prism, 2023; VIF India, 2024). Increased HIV/AIDS prevalence, financial dependence, family structure breakdown, and youth radicalization are some of the social repercussions (Jha, 2025).

c. Governance and Corruption

Traffickers and dishonest officials collaborate more when there are porous borders and inadequate local institutions. Drug networks can function freely in remote areas due to a lack of institutional capacity (DefenceXP, 2023; VIF India, 2024).

6. Case Studies & Examples

Seizures in Moreh

In December 2021, law enforcement officials—including the Assam Rifles—uncovered a massive cache of illegal drugs worth nearly ₹500 crore hidden in a warehouse near Moreh, a small border town in Manipur. This major bust didn't just expose a single smuggling attempt—it offered a chilling glimpse into the scale at which narcotics are pouring across the Myanmar border and filtering through to states like Assam (The International Prism, 2023). 6.2 Local Arrests Tied to Militant Groups. Reports increasingly document arrests of youths affiliated with NSCN, ULFA, and Meitei-Kuki insurgents in drug-related offenses—showing direct involvement of insurgent networks in narcotics (Jha, 2025; VIF India, 2024).

7. Policy Response & Counter-Measures

a. Legislative and Enforcement Measures

The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and other agencies are empowered by the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, to intercept and prosecute drug operations. The NCB faces severe penalties, including minimum 10-year terms (Kamaraj IAS Academy, 2023). Additionally, India has bilateral drug control agreements with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and other important neighbors (Kamaraj IAS Academy, 2023).

b. Security Operations

Counter-insurgency operations—Operation Bajrang (1990) and Operation All Clear in Bhutan (2003)—disrupted militant camps but drug-financed insurgency regrouped via shifting supply lines into India's northeast (Wikipedia ULFA; Wikipedia Insurgency in Northeast India; VIF India, 2024).

c. Community and Health Interventions

Programs such as Army's Operation Sadbhavana include addiction counselling, awareness camps, and socio-economic rehabilitation in affected areas (Kamaraj IAS Academy, 2023). Civil society in Manipur has called for declaring the entire region a "Narco-terrorist emergency zone" to catalyse coordinated action (Jha, 2025).

d. Regional Collaboration

Effective action against cross-border drug flows requires stronger coordination with Myanmar and Laos to disrupt production zones and trafficking routes. Joint intelligence sharing and extradition treaties are critical (DefenceXP, 2023; ORF, 2024).

e. Socio-Economic Development

Addressing the root socio-economic drivers—poverty, unemployment, lack of alternate livelihoods—is essential. Without viable alternatives, youth continue to be drawn into the drug economy (VIF India, 2024; Jha, 2025).

8. Challenges & Gaps

Despite ongoing efforts by security agencies and policymakers, the fight against drug trafficking and narco-terrorism in Assam faces several deeply rooted challenges. These aren't just logistical or administrative hurdles—they are systemic, deeply embedded in the region's geography, politics, and public health realities.

a. Geographic Complexity

The landscape of Northeast India, particularly around Assam and its neighboring states, is one of the most challenging in the country. Towering mountains, dense tropical forests, and winding riverine terrains make the region naturally difficult to monitor. The porous and poorly guarded international border with Myanmar—stretched across multiple northeastern states—acts as an open invitation for traffickers. With hundreds of unofficial trails and remote passes, smuggling networks exploit the terrain to move drugs without detection. For security forces, maintaining round-the-clock surveillance in such conditions is not just tough—it's nearly impossible without advanced technology and consistent manpower.

b. Insurgency Dynamics and Militant Financing

Even as peace talks and ceasefire agreements have brought many insurgent groups to the negotiation table, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Some factions of these militant outfits continue to operate covertly, using drug money to fund their networks. These groups have adapted over the years—shifting from ideologically driven armed rebellion to organized crime, including narcotics trafficking. The line between political insurgency and criminal enterprise has blurred, making it harder to dismantle their influence. Moreover, the lure of easy money through drug trade attracts new recruits, especially from economically marginalized communities.

c. Coordination Deficits Across Agencies and Borders

One of the major administrative hurdles lies in the fragmented law enforcement mechanisms. With multiple agencies—state police, paramilitary forces, Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), customs, and intelligence units—operating with overlapping jurisdictions, coordination often falls short. Additionally, the lack of seamless cooperation between northeastern states—and with neighboring countries like Myanmar—creates loopholes that traffickers exploit. Intelligence is often not shared in real-time, and jurisdictional ambiguities delay or dilute enforcement actions. Without a robust inter-agency and inter-governmental framework, even the most well-intentioned efforts lose momentum.

d. Strained Public Health Infrastructure

Beyond security, the drug crisis has quietly snowballed into a public health emergency, especially among Assam's youth and tribal communities. Rehabilitation centers are few and far between, often lacking the trained professionals, resources, or capacity to handle the growing number of individuals battling substance addiction. Mental health services, already underdeveloped in much of the region, are nearly non-existent in rural and border areas—leaving families helpless and victims isolated. The stigma around addiction further prevents people from seeking help. Without strengthening the healthcare response, the drug crisis will continue to claim lives in silence—even if seizures and arrests dominate the headlines.

9. Way Forward: A Holistic Strategy

Addressing the twin challenges of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism in Assam requires more than just strong borders and police crackdowns. The complexity of the crisis—rooted in geography, insurgency, addiction, and poverty—demands a comprehensive and human-centered approach. Below are key strategies that, when implemented together, can pave the way for sustainable peace and recovery in the region.

a. Integrated Security-Health Governance

Traditionally, counter-insurgency and anti-narcotics operations have been seen through a military or law enforcement lens. However, in Assam and the broader Northeast, these efforts must go hand-in-hand with public health initiatives. That means embedding addiction treatment, mental health support, and rehabilitation programs within broader security strategies. For example, when security forces conduct operations in high-risk zones, parallel efforts

should ensure that affected communities are offered counseling, social reintegration, and livelihood options. This "guns and healing" approach ensures that while the supply chain is disrupted, the demand side—those battling addiction—is not ignored.

b. Cross-Border Task Forces with Myanmar

Drugs do not respect borders, and neither should counter-narcotics strategies. Assam's drug crisis is deeply tied to the influx of narcotics from Myanmar's lawless borderlands, making regional cooperation essential. A joint India-Myanmar Task Force—comprising law enforcement, customs, and intelligence agencies—should be established to share real-time data on drug labs, trafficking networks, and transit routes. These collaborations must be institutionalized through treaties and working groups, rather than being limited to one-off meetings. Only through synchronized efforts can the upstream production and downstream smuggling be curtailed effectively.

c. Border Surveillance Using Modern Technology

Porous and unguarded stretches along the Indo-Myanmar border act as open doors for smugglers. While human patrols remain important, technology can vastly improve oversight. Deploying drones, thermal imaging cameras, CCTV towers, and biometric monitoring systems at key infiltration points can create a digital fence across vulnerable corridors. Integration of AI-driven surveillance tools can further enhance predictive policing—identifying patterns and suspicious movements even in remote terrains. Technology, when paired with well-trained human intelligence, becomes a force multiplier.

d. Demand Reduction through Awareness and Rehabilitation

Seizing drugs is only half the battle. The demand for drugs within Assam—especially among youth, displaced communities, and unemployed populations—continues to rise. To reverse this trend, the government and civil society must invest in long-term demand reduction. This includes launching grassroots awareness campaigns in schools and colleges, opening more rehabilitation and de-addiction centers, and offering mental health counseling across rural and urban districts. Breaking the cycle of addiction saves lives and reduces future demand—weakening the economic base of drug syndicates.

e. Alternative Livelihood and Economic Development

In several border regions of Northeast India, the illicit drug economy has become the only source of income for many impoverished families. Eradicating the drug trade without offering viable livelihood alternatives risks pushing communities further into desperation. Programs promoting crop substitution (such as turmeric, ginger, or bamboo instead of poppy), vocational training, local entrepreneurship, and handloom or agro-based industries can empower individuals economically and give them a stake in peace and stability. These initiatives should be tailored to local cultural strengths and backed by government subsidies and market support.

f. Legal Reforms and Institutional Strengthening

India's Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act provides a strong legal framework, but implementation often suffers from delays, corruption, and procedural loopholes. Fast-tracking narcotics-related cases through special courts, regularly updating enforcement protocols, and setting up anti-corruption watchdogs can enhance the legal response. Further, training sessions for prosecutors, judges, and police officers in narcotics law and forensic evidence can increase conviction rates and deterrence. Justice must not only be done but be seen as swift, fair, and consistent.

g. Community Participation and Grassroots Involvement

No policy can succeed without the backing and participation of the very people it aims to protect. Local communities, particularly youth clubs, NGOs, women's self-help groups, and survivors of addiction, must be made active partners in the fight against drug trafficking. These groups can provide insights, lead prevention campaigns, and monitor early signs of drug activity in their localities. Empowering them through funding, training, and policy consultation builds trust and ensures that strategies are grounded in local realities—not just dictated from administrative offices.

10. Conclusion

Assam's proximity to the Golden Triangle, coupled with socio-political instability, insurgency linkages, and porous borders, has transformed the state into a corridor for drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. This complex convergence threatens not only internal security but public health, social cohesion, and governance across the northeastern region. A multi-dimensional response—blending security enforcement, legal rigor, socio-economic development, and regional diplomacy—is indispensable to mitigate this menace. Ultimately, confronting the narco-terrorism threat in Assam requires moving beyond siloed action to sustained, integrated engagement at local, regional, and national levels.

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