

Facets of Cross-Border Drug Trafficking in Manipur–Myanmar Borderland

Dr Ingudam Yaipharemba Singh[®]

Abstract

This article examines the arrests and seizures along the land route leading to the Moreh border in Manipur, as well as along outbound routes, which indicate the presence of trafficking activities in the state. It argues that the complexity of trafficking extends beyond its diversity and rapidly evolving trends, as the scale of illegal trade likely far exceeds what is known from open or even restricted sources. This article highlights the increasing sophistication in drug processing and transportation, operational security, product marketing, and the use of technology to evade detection at checkpoints. It further situates these developments within the broader context of Northeast India's porous border with Myanmar, which has long facilitated drug trafficking, organised crime, arms smuggling, illegal immigration, and insurgency. By using the narco-economy as a primary lens, this article provides a comprehensive overview of the manifestations of drug trafficking, small arms proliferation, and the enabling environments in which such criminal networks operate.

Introduction

Manipur has become a transit hub as well as a destination for heroin and chemical drugs produced in the Golden Triangle (Death Triangle). Various psychotropic and pharmaceutical preparations and precursor chemicals produced are also trafficked through mainland India. The two-way illegal flow of these drugs

[®]Dr Ingudam Yaipharemba Singh is an Assistant Professor (Grade II) and Head (In-charge) in the Department of National Security Studies, Manipur University. He holds a PhD and a Master's Degree in Defence and Strategic Studies from the Department of Defence and National Security Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

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and chemicals not only violates India's borders but also poses a significant threat to national security. The nexus between drug traffickers, organised criminal networks, and narco-terrorists has created a force powerful enough to cause instability in the country. Money generated through the drug trade has been used to fund various insurgent movements in Manipur. Drug trafficking facilitates other organised criminal enterprises, such as gun running, which use the same networks and routes to smuggle weapons and contraband into the porous border. Even today, insurgency groups use undocumented hilly routes to source weapons and explosives across porous borders.

Narcotics remain a menace that calls for a joint operation between India and Myanmar. It is well known that drug trafficking, insurgent activity, and arms proliferation have a symbiotic relationship. The Indo-Myanmar border region has become an illegal arms market.

Interviews with Convicted Prisoners

The author conducted a series of face-to-face interviews with the convicted male and female prisoners in the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS Act), serving their sentences in Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa and Imphal, to unearth the dynamics of the drug trafficking business network in and out of Manipur. A special permission was obtained from the Home Department, Government of Manipur, through the Inspector General of Police (Prisons), to meet the prisoners from the two jails.¹

The first prisoner, a male aged 52, from Bungmual village, Churachandpur, was convicted under the NDPS Act of Rigorous Imprisonment (RI) for 16 years. During the personal interview, he narrated being caught with 500 gms of pure heroin in 2001. Currently serving his sentence at Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, he further stated that the drug was obtained from a female friend and was due to be transferred to Imphal from Churachandpur with a commission of INR 10,000-20,000. He acted as a carrier and was caught by the National Accreditation Body, Manipur Police, while transporting the drug in a passenger bus.² The narration proved likely linkages of the drug business from Burma through Behiang, Churachandpur. Being a carrier, the prisoner claimed that he had little idea of the business.

Though in small quantities, drugs are prevalent in Churachandpur. For large quantities, it is not easy to ascertain. He added that in 2001, the cost of heroin per kg was INR 03 lakhs. Additionally, WY (Ya ba) tablets, a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine, are mainly supplied through Moreh, reaching Imphal, and then trafficked to other states. Those involved in the business break the consignment into pieces and distribute it to peddlers for transportation.³



Figure 1: 'Visitor In' Stamp for Jail

Source: Personal Collection, 09 Nov 2024

Another 65-year-old male prisoner, who belonged to Molnom village, Ukhrul, stated in a personal interview that he had worked as a passenger driver on the Molnom–Sanakeithel–Imphal route.⁴ He was caught with approximately 03 kgs of heroin in his Tata Xenon vehicle at Saparmeina, Kanglatongbi, on 20 Oct 2022 and was convicted under the NDPS Act to 10 years of RI. He received

the drug from his friend in Ukhrul and was smuggling it to Imphal. For the task, the prisoner was promised INR 01 lakh, which he supposedly planned to spend on his family. Currently, he is serving his sentence at Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa.⁵

The third male prisoner was also convicted under the NDPS Act for 10 years of RI. This 64-year-old person from P Kamdou Veng, Churachandpur, has been serving his sentence at Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, since 2015. In a personal interview, he recounted being caught red-handed at a friend's place in Moirang on 31 Oct 2015. Both friends were planning to sell 03 kgs of opium for INR 60,000⁶ to get a commission worth INR 10,000. The opium was scored from Tuibong Kamdou Veng, Churachandpur; the person who supplied the opium later disappeared. The prisoner added that poppy cultivation is easily visible along the Churachandpur–Chandel hill routes.⁷

The author also interviewed two non-Manipuri male prisoners from the same jail, aged 52 and 48, natives of Imphal West and from Cachar. Both were convicted under the NDPS Act for 10 years of RI. The duo were painters and were caught by Customs in May 2016. They were charged for possessing 5,000 WY Tablets worth INR 50 lakhs.⁸ Both the prisoners established a connection with a Muslim individual from Cachar, staying in Imphal, at the time.⁹

The next interviewee was a male individual at Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, who was convicted under the NDPS Act for 10 years' RI. The 37-year-old was a native of Kwakta, and was staying at Keirang on rent when he was caught with 3,500 quantities of Spasmo-Proxyvon (SP) and three boxes of Nitrazepam 10 mg (N-10) tablets. During his interview, he revealed that one box of SP tablets costs INR 600, while a box of N-10 is priced at INR 700. The prisoner was also an addict and used to earn his livelihood by selling second-hand materials at Churachandpur. He was caught in 2015 at Nagamapal, Imphal.¹⁰

During his one-to-one interactions, the author met another male prisoner, who was convicted under the NDPS Act and is serving sentenced to RI for 15 years at Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa.¹¹ The 59-year-old individual from Nambol was a driver by profession and used to drive Tata Sumo from Moreh to Nambol. He was caught with 01 kg of heroin and a small testing sample.

The police apprehended him in the last week of Sep 2004. During his interaction, he confirmed a contribution worth INR 50 thousand to his team for purchasing the drug from a Muslim couple living at Moreh Forest Gate.¹² His team purchases drugs from Moreh and transfers them to Imphal.

The author also interviewed a female convict. The 39-year-old woman, convicted under the NDPS Act, is serving a 20-year sentence.¹³ She was caught in Jun 2013 at a Cambodian Airport while trafficking 3.5 kgs of Methamphetamines from India. She obtained the drug from a friend and was on her way to transfer it to the Cambodian counterparts. After being caught, she spent three years and six months in a Cambodian jail, and was later deported to Manipur Central Jail, Imphal, in 2017. She was promised INR 5 lakhs to do the job, which she undertook owing to financial problems.¹⁴

Despite variations in the narratives of the convicted prisoners, two facts remain clear: First, they acted as carriers or transporters, and second, they undertook the trafficking primarily for substantial monetary gain or financial reward. Money appears to be the principal motivator in such illegal trade, while the higher-level organisers or bosses largely remain beyond the reach of law enforcement.

Small Arms Proliferations

Violence is also an outgrowth of the illicit drug issue that affects both sides of the border. Organised crime groups have relied on violence as an essential tool of their trade. Small arms proliferation is a by-product of drug trafficking. Drug cartels launder the proceeds of crime in legitimate businesses, favouring transportation that can be used to facilitate drug and arms smuggling activities. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has been involved in gun running and proliferation of small arms. Initially, it received support from Chinese communists. However, small arms were purchased from the Thai black markets along the Burma–Thailand border over time. Burmese ethnic rebels have established strong connections with the Thai black market for small arms proliferation. Subsequently, a new phase of gun running emerged, with the local production of M-series assault rifles in areas of Burma, controlled by ethnic rebels and facilitated by the acquisition of Chinese machines and metallurgy.

In the Thai black market, an AK-47 costs roughly INR 02 to 03 lakhs, depending on its quality. The arms were purchased in Thailand via Mae Sot and then transported to Burma. The Tahan market in Kalemyo serves as the ground zero for weapons trade and distribution. This is where even the Burmese military intelligence fails to counter the enterprises. From Kalemyo, the arms are diverted towards Chin state and Tamu. From the Tahan market, there are precisely 24 check posts to Tamu, out of which only one is under the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) while others are all divided under the various ethnic arms groups. Transporting the arms to Kalemyo requires a network of gun runners and incurred high transport costs. Small quantities, typically four pieces, are transported from Tamu by local Burmese ethnic porters on foot, travelling through dense forest at night to avoid detection and reach the Manipur border. It takes one night of trekking to get to the Manipur border. Each porter is paid roughly INR 04 lakhs in Burmese Kyat.¹⁵ This method of gun running is used for small consignments, but it facilitates the proliferation of small arms across the border for use in Manipur and other areas. Sea routes are used to reach Chittagong (Bangladesh) via Burmese maritime routes from Thailand's weapon markets for larger consignments. Then, the shipment travels by road from Chittagong to various parts of northeast India for various insurgent groups. However, due to its size, it attracts the attention of law enforcement agencies, and the risk of being captured is very high.¹⁶

In the Chin state of Myanmar, the Chin-Kuki tribes are further classified into subsidiary groups, with Tedim, Falam, and Haka as the main ones. Tedim is the Paite clan in Manipur. It is the most prominent group in gun running and small arms proliferation at the border.¹⁷

Gun running in Myanmar is carried out to sell the weapons outside the country to neighbouring troubled regions. This acts as a source of income for the ethnic groups. The proliferation is carried out under the control and responsibility of the Myanmar military officers in the area. Many advanced small arms and explosives are caught on the Indian side, mainly in the Manipur and Mizoram areas bordering Myanmar.

The drug trade took root in Manipur around 1985. By the 1990s, the Kuki National Organisation and Kuki National Army (KNA) armed movement began in Manipur. In 1992, *Ganja* (cannabis) was cultivated on a large scale, while poppy cultivation was initially done in the southern hill range of Manipur, including areas controlled by the Naga and Kuki. This also marks the period of the Naga-Kuki ethnic conflict. Then, in 1998, during the Kuki-Paite conflict, the Paite taught a lesson to the Kuki to build up their arms and start training for defence. 2005 saw the withdrawal of valley-based insurgent groups from Sajik Tampak, informal ceasefires between Kuki groups and the central government, and the Tripartite talks (2008) or the Suspension of Operations (SoO), with both the Central and State governments for the Kuki armed groups. The period from 2005 to 2008 was the transitional period for the Kuki armed groups, which actively indulged in black marketing. This is when the illegal business could only be conducted with the Kuki involvement in Moreh. Molcham to New Somtal was free of unlawful business during this period, with no checking being done. From 2008 to 2022, there has been a substantial rise of the Kuki groups in the southern part of Manipur.¹⁸ With the withdrawal of Valley-Based Insurgent Groups (VBIGs), mainly from Sajik Tampak in 2005, the Chin-Kuki started indulging in unlawful activities extensively, getting a freehand along the southern hill ranges and part of Manipur. Earlier, VBIGs had a prolific presence in these areas.

As a result of the Myanmar military coup on 01 Feb 2021, KIA started to provide training and most small arms and ammunitions, including M-series assault rifles, Heckler and Koch rifles, Lathode guns, and Snipers used by the People's Defence Force (PDF). These account for 50 to 55 per cent of arms share, while the Karen National Union provides 15 to 20 per cent of the weapon share for the PDF.¹⁹ The area- and ethnic-wise PDFs in Myanmar fight against the Myanmar military junta, while, across the border, these PDFs morph into Chin-Kuki in Manipur with cross-border intrusions of personnel or weapons, which substantially fuel cross-border criminal acts.

A significant drug trafficking route connects Tonzang (Chin State), Myanmar (Burma), to Sajik Tampak in Chandel (Manipur). Tonzang is controlled by the Chin Defence Force (CDF). The CDF- Tonzang (T) is allied with the Chin National Army (CNA).

They avoid Tedim Road to commute; however, local roads and jungle tracks are accessible to reach Moreh (controlled by KNA), Chandel, and Tengnoupal. These routes converge at Singheu, at the Churachandpur-Chandel border. This serves as the main route connecting Churachandpur and Chandel across the Imphal River. Previously, it was Sugnu.

Singheu has become the alternative route due to the Manipur conflict. The drugs are routed to Churachandpur, which then heads to Kangpokpi through newly constructed illegal German and Tiger roads. The roads are controlled by the Kuki National Front-Military Council, led by Hemlal Haokip (Commander-in-Chief), also known as 'German', and the Kuki National Front-President, led by Thangboi Kipgen (Commander-in-Chief), also known as 'Tiger'. The drugs then head to Silchar (through Kangpokpi-Tamenglong-Noney Road) and Dimapur, and the rest of the country for further distribution. In Singheu, a bridge (Singheu Bridge) across the Manipur River connects Chandel to Churachandpur.

Currently, Sajik Tampak (Manipur) serves as the operational base of United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) Chief SS Haokip (also known as Soson Haokip), whose involvement in the drug trade is notorious and well known. The UKLF is a SoO group connected with KNA–Burma (KNA-B) and the Thadou Defense Army of Myanmar.

The trade involves bringing in drugs from Myanmar. The area encompassing the international border at Sajik Tampak is controlled by the Thadou Defense Army and Kuki KNA-B. Both have connections with the CDF-T, which is also an ally of the CNA. When the CNA, along with the CDF–Hualngo, clashed with the Chin National Defense Force, the KNA-B came to its aid. The CNA is involved in trafficking the majority of the drugs seized in Mizoram, and their involvement is rapidly increasing.

District	No. of cases	Person Arrested	Heroin powder	Brown sugar	Opium	WY	SP	Cough syrup	N-10	Ganja	Ice crystal	Pseudo-Ephedrine
Imphal West	231	347	19.96 kgs	27.09 kgs	324.35 kgs	64.28 kgs	19.07 kgs	25,008 bottles	16,000 tabs	143.537 kgs	5 kgs	NA
Imphal East	395	493	24.68 kgs	595.096 kgs	56.88 kgs	58.31 kgs	25.74 kgs	27,543 bottles	21,857 tabs	2153.42 kgs	NA	NA
Thoubal	324	528	12.1 kgs	2,160.58 kgs	51.27 kgs	458.53 kgs	20.97 kgs	22,752 bottles	5,635 tabs	4.20 kgs	NA	33.65 kgs
Bishnupur	159	230	21.88 kgs	83.17 kgs	240.81 kgs	9.84 kgs	7.96 kgs	443 bottles	2,199 tabs	NA	NA	NA
Kakching	158	261	46.36 kgs	2.98 kgs	124.18 kgs	114.10 kgs	1.35 kgs	214 bottles	NA	NA	15.18 kgs	NA
Jiribam	55	81	0.74 kgs	8.77 kgs	NA	36.62 kgs	17.07 kg	9,752 bottles	11,000 tabs	1,455.89 kgs	NA	NA
Chura-chandpur	170	182	17.11 kgs	26.47 kgs	297.73 kgs	17.22 kgs	0.237 kgs	230 bottles	68 tabs	81 kgs	NA	NA
Pherzawl	02	05	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	107 kgs	NA	NA
Noney	13	20	5.73 kgs	NA	01 kg	1.29 kgs	6.21 kgs	NA	26,660 tabs	193 kgs	NA	NA
Tamenglong	08	06	NA	0.901 kg	NA	4.540 kg	0.210 kgs	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Kangpokpi	97	72	30.38 kgs	9.12 kgs	60.36 kgs	11.27 kgs	NA	NA	NA	1,289.44 kgs	NA	NA
Senapati	69	88	7.00 kgs	5.96 kgs	9.04 kgs	13.89 kgs	NA	NA	NA	373.25 kgs	15 kgs	NA
Ukhrlul	78	31	0.008 kgs	0.528 kgs	113.29 kgs	NA	NA	NA	NA	2,349 kgs	NA	NA
Kamjong	19	14	NA	88.06 kgs	NA	0.034 kgs	NA	NA	NA	1,200 kgs	NA	NA
Tengnoupal	308	259	12.56 kgs	225.80 kgs	32.25 kgs	705.32 kgs	NA	194 bottles	NA	0.49 kgs	34.39 kgs	118 kgs
Chandel	74	46	23.58 kgs	19.44 kgs	70.06 kgs	75.00 kgs	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
NAB	343	449	82.79 kgs	523.34 kgs	425.42 kgs	421.64 kgs	13,206 kgs	13,240 bottles	10 tablets	422.55 kgs	25.50 kgs	64.72 kgs
Total:	2,503	3,112	304.92 kgs	3777.34 kgs	1,806.69 kgs	1,991.94 kgs	111.99 kgs	99,369 bottles	83,429 tabs	9,773.56 kgs	95.08 kgs	216.37 kgs

Table 1: Seizure and Arrest under NDPS Act from 2017 to 2024 (till 10/12/2024)

Source: Manipur Government²⁰

Government data provides a comprehensive overview of seizures and arrests under the NDPS Act from 2017 to 2024 across the districts of Manipur, including the hills and valley regions. In addition to the number of cases and individuals apprehended, the report includes detailed information about the quantities of various narcotics, spanning from heroin to pharmaceutical drugs, seized in the different districts.

Conclusion

Manipur is turning from bad to worse, with increasing trafficking activity despite capture and continuous security checks in and out of the state. Drug trafficking is increasingly associated with cross-border small arms smuggling. It is apprehensive that the amount and quantity are increasing as more traffickers are being arrested and new techniques are being adopted to transport the contraband. It would not be far enough to count Manipur as a part of the infamous 'Golden Triangle' (Death Triangle). The carnage it carries across the borderland towards Northeast India will be very dangerous and can create a liability. What is more apprehensive is that in addition to the trafficking activity, even micro-manufacturing units are starting to spring up in both hills and valley districts. Poppy cultivation is rampant in the hill districts, dominated by the Kuki community, equally signifying the state as not only a route for trafficking but also a production centre. If not checked, this organised crime with small arms proliferation will hamper India's ambitious Act East Policy towards Southeast Asia, which passes through Manipur-Moreh to Myanmar.

Most drug traffickers are employed in the transportation industry. Transporters are among the most frequently arrested convicts in Manipur. It is a significant threat to state security, and an attempt should be made to address drug trafficking issues through the coordination and development of a Manipur-Myanmar counternarcotics strategy. The state has faced security issues due to internal geopolitical conditions in neighbouring Myanmar. The more security issues in the country, the more fallout in neighbouring Manipur and Mizoram. The state is receiving thousands of illegal Burmese refugees due to the 2021 military coup and subsequent military actions. There is an apprehension that the Kuki-Chin militant groups in Manipur generate the narco-money to rehabilitate themselves inside the state and to oversee

the integration of illegal immigrants into the indigenous population, specifically in the Kuki majority areas. The cause for concern is that the increasing statistics of drug trafficking and poppy cultivation using the funds generated from the illegal activities further promote the illicit collective integration of the immigrants from Myanmar post-2021 military coup towards Manipur.

Endnotes

¹ Author's interview access authorised by the Home Department, Government of Manipur through the Inspector General of Police (Prisons), Manipur, Nov 2024.

² Male Prisoner 1, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, 09 Nov 2024.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Male Prisoner 2, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, 09 Nov 2024.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Male Prisoner 3, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, 09 Nov 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Male Prisoners 4 and 5, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, 09 Nov 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Male Prisoner 6, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, 09 Nov 2024.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Male Prisoner 7, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Sajiwa, 09 Nov 2024.

¹³ Female Prisoner 1, personal interview, Manipur Central Jail, Imphal, 09 Nov 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Anonymous Respondent 1, personal communication, 06 Oct 2024.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Anonymous Respondent 2, personal communication, 13 Oct 2024.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Personal Data Collection 2024, Superintendent of Police, Narcotics and Affairs of Border, Manipur Government, 10 Dec 2024.