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Terror strike in India underlines a frightful picture

BY [GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN](#) on [JANUARY 5, 2016](#) in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [SOUTH ASIA](#), [INDIA](#)

Now that the terror strike at the large and important Pathankot's air force base in the western Indian state of Punjab has ended — with seven men of the Indian security forces dead and five extremists from Pakistan's militant group, Jaish-e-Mohammed, killed (the body of the sixth is yet to be found) — India needs to answer some awkward questions.

Much like the 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane to Kandahar in the then Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, when administrative bungling in New Delhi led to the aircraft taking off from Amritsar (Punjab) on Indian soil, India has paid heavily this time as well in Pathankot. One of the three extremists freed from Indian jails in exchange for the plane's passengers, Maulana Masood Azhar, founder of Jaish-e-Mohammed, is now in Pakistan, a free man, but listed as the most wanted terrorist by India — also responsible for the 2001 attack on the country's parliament in New Delhi that brought the two nuclear armed neighbours to the brink of a major war.



Indian army soldiers conduct a search operation in a forest area outside the Pathankot air force base

Cut to Pathankot in 2016, valuable time appears to have been lost before Indian security forces got into the act — and this left seven of them dead. And, this despite a clear intelligence warning of the impending attack in Punjab.

The state should have been all the more prepared, having seen a terror strike as recently as last July in a police station at Dinanagar — barely 20 km from the India-Pakistan border. This ought to have kept the security antenna up.

Also, India knows only too well that every time a peace effort is made by New Delhi and Islamabad, there are forces ready to demolish it. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's statesman-like gesture in dropping in in Pakistan on December 25 to greet the nation's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, could not have but provoked two significant sections. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and some groups in the army are completely opposed to any peace overtures with New Delhi — although the civilian government in Islamabad and the people are extremely keen to see the two neighbours (sharing a similar culture, but who were divided by the 1947 partition) co-exist peacefully.

Given all this, the Indian administration should have been more than battle-ready to take on the

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Pakistani radicals at Pathankot.

What is more, the four terrorists first hijacked a car and killed its driver before seizing the vehicle of a superintendent of police and kidnapping the officer, his cook and jeweller friend. They were freed later, and the cop is said to have walked to a village and telephoned his bosses — who apparently did not pay much credence to what the superintendent said. To top it all, the cook was abused and tortured by policemen when he corroborated the superintendent's version. How unprofessional!

Far more disturbing than all this is the massive problem of drug abuse in Punjab — which borders the none-too-friendly Pakistan — but the state government and different political parties have brushed aside this menace.

Everybody knows that most of the drugs come from Afghanistan, and are smuggled through Pakistan and India before they hit the shores of Europe and North America. It is also well known that drug addiction rises alarmingly along this smuggling route. This has happened throughout the world, and Punjab is no exception.

And here are some facts. One report has this: "Punjab accounted for almost half of all cases registered in India under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS) in 2013; 67% of rural households in Punjab have one drug or alcohol addict. Punjab also topped the list of highest drug seizures during the 2014 polls, according to the Indian Election Commission...Most worryingly, Shashi Kant, a retired Indian Police Service officer, has claimed in a petition before the Punjab and Haryana high court that major political parties are hand-in-glove with drug smugglers and that Punjab is currently witnessing the era of "Narco Politics". Nay narco-terrorism!

It does not take any great analytical skill to conclude that terrorism is being facilitated — at least to some degree — by Punjab's drug addiction. We all know that every addict is forced to play courier — a fact that makes a region like Punjab afflicted by a narcotics epidemic most vulnerable to Pakistan-bred terror.

It may not take much of an effort for a Pakistani extremist with drugs to sneak into India through the largely porous border to seduce an addict and convert him into a sleeper-cell. With Punjab's once economic prosperity on a downward swing and growing unemployment, young men are inclined to stray.

But the Indian administration is so dismissive about all these dangers that it seems appalling. A mere couple of weeks ago, Punjab's deputy chief minister, Sukhbir Singh Badal, reportedly said that his state was the most "peaceful" in the country and there was no "threat of terrorism".

It is time, and high time, that India sheds its complacency and gets real.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and The Seoul Times.

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