

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

War on drugs prepared

Tough new laws figure in efforts to remove India from Dope, Inc.'s world-operations map.

A tough new anti-drug law introduced and passed in August, the Narcotics and Psychotropic Drugs Bill, now only awaits presidential approval to go into effect. Replacing the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1970, under which drug pushing was not a serious offense, with maximum two-year penalty, the new law mandates a scale of penalties from 10 years imprisonment and \$10,000 fine to a \$30,000 fine and 30 years imprisonment.

The law also gives greater powers to Customs and Revenue Intelligence authorities, and reportedly eliminates the jurisdictional conflict between the central government and the states—thus sealing off loopholes exploited by the traffickers.

One such loophole is the fact that acetic anhydride, a chemical used to convert morphine-base into white heroin powder, banned in all neighboring countries, is easily available in India. An amendment to the Essential Commodities Act will mandate regulation of the chemical's production and sale.

"At first we were ringside observers; now we are in the ring," is the way one anti-drug official here put it to the bi-weekly *India Today*, referring to India's move from a transit point for West-bound heroin to a producer and consumer.

Transshipment continues to flourish, to be sure. It is estimated that in 1984 alone, three tons of Pakistani heroin, with a market value of about \$3 billion, passed through India. In addition, acetic anhydride is sent over to refineries in Burma and the heroin product returned for transshipment.

But at a recent national seminar in Delhi, Additional Commissioner of Police Gautam Kaul revealed that there are at least 100,000 addicts, mostly youth, in the capital alone.

Kaul quoted grim figures: Whereas in 1981, only 1 case of heroin dealing was registered and 10 grams of the powder seized, by 1983, 73 cases were registered and 20 kg seized. In 1984, registered cases jumped to 252, with 115 kg seized, and in 1985, at current rates, police anticipate at least 1,150 cases, involving 250 kg. Bombay and other parts of the country present a similar picture.

Reports also indicate that the problem is no longer confined to the elite classes, but is widespread among middle class and ordinary laborers and their children. In Bombay, it is estimated that there are more than 120,000 addicts of "brown sugar"—a cheap, adulterated form of heroin.

But India is now also a producer of heroin. Since the British days, India has produced medicinal morphine, with large areas of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh devoted to poppy cultivation under a federally controlled program through which the opium is transferred to government-run morphine factories. The recent discovery of three clandestine heroin processing laboratories—in Lucknow, Varanasi, and Garoth—has ripped the cover off a racket to divert opium to the private markets.

Over the summer, one lab was busted with the help of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The highly sophisticated laboratory

was producing heroin of 92% purity. The lab had been set up in the middle of the poppy growing belt with the help of two refining specialists from Varanasi and Ghazipur, where the government has its refining facilities. One of the owner's early associates was the brother of an instructor for the Central Bureau of Narcotics, the agency in charge of the federal poppy program!

The new law is tough, but many here, including Additional Commissioner of Police Kaul, believe that nothing less than the death penalty for trafficking is adequate. The big problem will be enforcement. The anti-narcotics section of India's Central Bureau of Investigation has a staff of exactly nine officers. And, according to Additional Commissioner Kaul, 25% of the police in Punjab themselves suffer from some kind of drug addiction. By and large, local police have almost no experience dealing with drug-related crime, and both Customs and Revenue Intelligence are short staffed.

While a proposal to set up a new agency is on the table, two multi-agency task forces have been set up in Delhi and Bombay. In addition, a multi-agency task forces have been set up in Delhi and Bombay. In addition, a Central Economics Intelligence Bureau has been set up to deal with various economic offenses, including drug trafficking. The government has also sought joint action with both Burma and Pakistan.

Manpower training and equipment remain serious bottlenecks. The U.S. DEA and the State Department Office of International Narcotics Matters (INM) have made a number of proposals for joint action, training, and provision of equipment, including fast jeeps, wireless radios, helicopters, and so forth.