

Unravelling Agra's murky drug trade | **India Today Insight**

The Uttar Pradesh police has, in the past few years, cracked down on the various gangs pushing pharmaceutical opioids in the state and its neighbours

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Recovered narcotics in custody of Uttar Pradesh police, March 9, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh (Rajwant Rawat)



On the morning of March 9, Rajeev Krishna, additional director general (ADG), Agra Zone, was preparing to go to office as usual when a phone call charged his day up significantly. The call was from an informer with the location of a drug trade happening in Mathura. The officer immediately dispatched Akhilesh Kumar Jain, assistant drug commissioner of the Agra Division, and Naresh Mohan Deepak, drug inspector of Agra, to Mathura. The Mathura police officers were also alerted. Within an hour and a half, the officers reached the location in the Govind Nagar police station area. 450 cartons of Phensedyl cough syrup were found in a transporter's warehouse at Saraswati Kund on the Mathura-Delhi bypass link road. Each carton contained 100 bottles of 100 ml. Deepak says, "Codeine phosphate found in Phensedyl cough syrup is used by people as intoxicants. It reaches other states from Agra and Mathura and is then sold in black." A 100 ml bottle of Phensedyl is available for Rs 169, but it has been sold to addicts at the rate of Rs 500 to 1,000 per bottle in black.

The illegal trade of cough syrups has also been found to be active in the Sikandra area of Agra. Uttar Pradesh's special task force (STF) in August last year had caught around 40,000 bottles of Phensedyl in a truck loaded with chickens in Azamgarh district. The truck was on its way to Siliguri from Sikandra.

Agra's role in the illegal trade of pharmaceutical opioids and counterfeit drugs was revealed in July 2020 when Sandeep Goel, SSP of Barnala district in Punjab, busted an inter-state drug cartel operating in the district. The name "Agra Gang" came up in Punjab Police's interrogation. After that commander of the gang, Vicky Arora, was arrested by the Punjab Police. The Agra Police and the District Drug Administration Department became active on the input from the Punjab Police. Since then, the illegal trade of pharmaceuticals and counterfeit drugs in Agra has begun to unravel. The Favara area of Agra is a pharma business centre with over 2,500 pharmaceutical wholesale shops and warehouses. In the past nine months, action has been taken against more than a dozen people related to illegal drug trade in this area. A Drug Administration official says, "25 per cent of businessmen in Agra have become millionaires by doing illegal business of narcotics drugs." According to drug inspector Deepak, the Agra Gang was supplying intoxicants and fake drugs in 11 states of the country, including Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

Krishna explains: "Due to the famous Institute of Mental Health and Hospital in Agra, there is a lot of consumption of sleeping medicines, anti-depressants and pain killers here. In the guise of this, drug mafia are doing illegal business of narcotic drugs in Agra by creating a proxy demand for these drugs."

According to a report related to the trade of illicit drugs in Agra, the actual sale of pain and sleeping medicines from the drug market is worth Rs 25 lakh per day. "It is amazing that only Tromadol and Codeine syrup worth about Rs 50 lakh are sold in Agra through fake bills. The remaining high demand drugs include Spasco Proxyvan, Nitrazepam, Alprazolam, Clonazepam and Phensedyl.

Deepak explains that pain-relieving medicine tromadol, sleeping tablet alprazolam are used for intoxication. There is no combination of these two medicines. Capsules named "High Dose Tromadol" were seized from the locations of another group, called the Jaipuria gang in Agra. According to Dilip Malhotra, director of an Agra-based travel agency, "Agra is a large tourist centre in the country and a large number of foreign tourists come here, many of whom are addicted to drugs. On the demand of these tourists, drug smugglers provide drugs. Apart from this, good connectivity with the border states of UP by road has also created a conducive environment for smuggling of drugs." Ashu Sharma, president of the Agra District Chemists Association, who is fighting against the illegal trade of drugs in Agra, says, "The illegal drug trade in Agra is worth more than Rs 2,000 crore rupees annually. The thing is that the drug administration department of Uttar Pradesh had no idea about this trade and it was only when authorities from other states cracked down on the drug smugglers here that the UP police took action." Deepak, though, dismissed such allegation and said that the UP police has been able to bring a difference in the law-and-order situation related to drug activity in Agra because of their strict action. Three big gangs of drug smugglers have been caught in Agra in the past three months. Twenty have been arrested from whom medicines worth about Rs 10 crore have been recovered. However, considering the scale of the problem in Agra, this action seems hardly enough to combat the problem.

Key players

The Vicky Arora Gang: This gang mainly used to sell tablets, capsules and syrups in Punjab and Haryana. In July last year, Punjab Police arrested Vicky Arora and several members of his gang.

Pramod Jaipuria Gang: The Agra Gang and the Pramod Jaipuria Gang were, initially, partners, but the former broke away at some point. The Pramod Jaipuria Gang illegally carried narcotics, abortion kits and sample drugs used for female foeticide in many states, including Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh. Gang leader Pramod Jaipuria has been lodged in a Delhi Jail since July 2019. The son-in-law of Pramod Jaipuria, who runs the gang, is absconding.

Pankaj Gupta Gang: Pankaj Gupta used to be the chief strategist of Jaipuria gang, but broke out on his own after the arrest of Pramod Jaipuria. This gang was increasingly working in the states adjacent to Agra and UP. He was arrested on February 15 from New Agra police station area.

Sardar Gang: Sardar Harpreet Singh from Kanpur was working in collusion with the Pankaj Gupta Gang in Agra. After the arrest of the members of Pankaj Gupta's gang, the police got information about Singh's operation in many states, including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, during an interrogation. Their target was youth and students.

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