By Sidharth Mishra

One of the most intriguing reactions to the recent terror attack on the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot came from Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab Sukhbir Singh Badal. The junior Badal, who is also the state's home minister, demanded that more Border Security Force (BSF) troops be deployed along the Punjab border in light of repeated terror attacks. Badal's statement raised eyebrows for its timing. It was as if the Punjab minister was pre-empting any criticism that his government would face following the assault. The Punjab government is under attack for allowing the drug trade to flourish in the state. Almost agreeing to the existence of such a trade, Badal is reported to have told a news channel that Punjab was only the transit point and not the centre of the drug trade. The availability of drugs, he argued, was far higher in states like Goa and cities like Delhi and Mumbai. I n an implicit acceptance that his administration and police had failed to check the drug trade in the state, Badal

even told the channel, "In Jammu and Kashmir there is the heavy deployment of the army which is fighting militants all the time. In Rajasthan, there are sand dunes in the border areas and there is no habitation. While in Punjab, there are villages on both sides very close to the border and also heavy vegetation on both sides. This makes it easier for drugs to be smuggled in."

However, many senior cops from the state disagree. According to former Director General of Prisons, Shashi Kant, "Despite heavy BSF presence at the border, there is some gap of about 85 km in riverine area, which is located mostly to the west of Gurdaspur and Pathankot. For heavy consignment of drugs, militants usually prefer to use fishing boats and couriers, which of course operates under official patronage," the cop is reported to have said.

The blue beacon atop the vehicle of Gurdaspur SP Salwinder Singh had helped the terrorists, who hijacked the vehicle, get past several police checkpoints. It is not the first instance of the misuse of government machinery. Way back in 2013, Shiromani Akali Dal leader Maninder

Singh Aulakh admitted that he had used state government vehicles to run a drug syndicate.

On November 12, 2013, the Punjab Police arrested Arjuna awardee wrestler-turned-drug peddler Jagdish Singh Bhola on charges of orchestrating the multi-crore rupees drug racket in the state. Soon after Bhola's arrest, Aulakh was nabbed and it was during his questioning by the Punjab police that he revealed the use of state government vehicles for drug smuggling operations.

Shashi Kant, the then head of Intelligence of Punjab Police was quoted by Millennium Post report as saying, "The intelligence department had prepared a four-page report and given it to Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal in 2007. That report contained the names of some highly influential politicians, Punjab police officials and security personnel. That report never saw the light of day, let alone any action."

Thus, it's abundantly clear that the Badals and the Centre did little to crack down on drug syndicates in the past three years. If the Modi government had prevailed on its alliance partner in the state to put its house in order, the country would have been saved from the embarrassment which the Pathankot attack has caused.

What is holding back the Badal government and the Centre from going all-guns-blazing against the drug smugglers? Following his arrest, drug lord Bhola had named Sukhbir Badal's brother-in-law Bikram Majithia, the powerful revenue minister in the Punjab Government, as one of those involved in the drug trade. At that time, Punjab's minister for jails, tourism and cultural affairs Sarwan Singh Phillaur had to resign after his son Damanvir Singh's name came up during the investigation carried out by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) into the drug racket. There are reports that the ED account had also named Majithia.

The Akalis, on the other hand, claim that they are the one who brought the menace of drug trade under control by carrying out huge recoveries of the banned substances and registering a large number of cases. They even claim that drug lords like Bhola were allowed to go scot-free during the Congress regime when Captain Amrinder Singh was Chief Minister.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA), which is probing the matter, too suspects that drug smugglers operating in Punjab with the connivance of state officials helped the terrorists sneak into the country. "It is highly possible that the negligence of Punjab officials and a nexus between drug smugglers and terrorists may have allowed this horror to take place," a senior NIA official was quoted in a news report.

Then what is holding back the Narendra Modi government from cracking down on drug

smugglers? The public perception is that BJP's cordial relations with Akalis will never allow a crackdown, which is hurting the saffron party's image. To make his peace initiative with Pakistan a success, the Prime Minister has to ensure that his own house is in order.

First Gurdaspur and now Pathankot clearly show that the Badal government in Punjab has failed to rise to the challenge posed by drug smugglers, for whatever reason. It would also be politically expedient for the BJP to drop Akalis as partner and demand action against those in its ranks involved in drug smuggling.

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