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EFFICACY OF THE NDPS ACT IN CONTROLLING DRUG TRAFFICKING IN INDIA.

Lakshmanan M, Student
Ms. M. Swathi, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
Vels Institute of Science Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, India.

ABSTRACT:

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act) stands as the cornerstone of India's legislative response to drug trafficking — a menace that has deepened in scope, sophistication, and social cost since the Act's enactment. Prompted by India's obligations under three United Nations drug control conventions and the urgent need to replace a patchwork of colonial-era statutes, the NDPS Act established a comprehensive regime of prohibition, enforcement, and punishment, characterised by mandatory minimum sentences, reverse burdens of proof, stringent bail conditions, and wide powers of search and seizure. This article critically examines whether the Act has been efficacious in achieving its primary objective — the control and suppression of drug trafficking in India. Drawing on an analysis of the Act's legislative framework, enforcement data, landmark judicial pronouncements, comparative international experience, and identified reform needs, the article finds that the NDPS Act has created a substantial enforcement infrastructure but has not succeeded in decisively controlling drug trafficking. The study reveals structural deficiencies in the Act — including the disproportionate impact of its punitive provisions on marginalised communities, high acquittal rates, inadequate rehabilitation provisions, and institutional weaknesses in enforcement — that significantly limit its effectiveness. The article argues for a rebalanced approach integrating proportionate sentencing, strengthened rehabilitation infrastructure, and improved institutional capacity, while maintaining robust criminal enforcement against organised drug trafficking networks.

Keywords: *NDPS Act 1985, Drug Trafficking India, Narcotics Control Bureau, Judicial Interpretation, Drug Policy Reform, Mandatory Minimum Sentences, Section 37 Bail, Reverse Burden of Proof.*

INTRODUCTION:

Drug trafficking represents one of the most formidable and enduring challenges confronting the Indian state. Situated geographically between the world's two principal illicit drug-producing regions — the Golden Crescent comprising Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan to the northwest, and the Golden Triangle comprising Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand

to the northeast — India occupies a position of acute vulnerability. The country functions simultaneously as a transit corridor for narcotics destined for international markets and as a growing consumer market in its own right. Escalating rates of drug abuse across demographic categories, the corruption of enforcement agencies by trafficking profits, and the growing sophistication of trafficking networks have made drug control a matter of pressing national concern.

The legislative response to this challenge is embodied in the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (hereinafter the 'NDPS Act' or 'the Act'). Enacted to replace a fragmented collection of pre-independence statutes — including the Opium Act, 1857, the Dangerous Drugs Act, 1930, and the Drugs Act, 1940 — the NDPS Act was designed as a comprehensive, consolidated, and deliberately stringent instrument of drug control. Its Statement of Objects and Reasons described a dual mandate: to give domestic legal effect to India's obligations under three United Nations drug control conventions, and to address the rapidly escalating drug menace through a regime of meaningful deterrence.

The Act's architects made a calculated legislative choice to depart from conventional criminal law principles in significant respects. Mandatory minimum sentences removed judicial discretion in sentencing for serious offences. Reverse burdens of proof departed from the presumption of innocence. Stringent bail conditions curtailed the right to personal liberty. Wide powers of search, seizure, and arrest were conferred on an expanded category of enforcement officers. These features, taken together, reflect a philosophy that the drug trafficking threat was serious enough to warrant special legal measures — a philosophy that has been both defended on grounds of deterrence and challenged on grounds of human rights.[1]

More than three decades of enforcement under the NDPS Act have generated an extensive record — of seizures and arrests, of judicial decisions and legislative amendments, of institutional successes and documented failures. Yet a fundamental question remains incompletely answered: has the NDPS Act actually been efficacious in controlling drug trafficking in India? This article seeks to address that question through a systematic examination of the Act's legislative framework, enforcement mechanisms, judicial interpretation, empirical record, and comparative standing. The analysis reveals a complex and ultimately sobering picture — one in which a well-designed legal framework has generated substantial enforcement activity without achieving its stated objective of decisively suppressing the drug trade.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK: THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONTROL

2.1 Historical Background and Genesis:

India's engagement with drug regulation predates independence by more than a century, though the colonial approach was characterised by fundamental ambiguity. The British administration both regulated and profited from the opium trade — most notably through the lucrative trade with China — creating a legislative landscape that was more revenue-oriented than genuinely prohibitionist. The Opium Acts of 1857 and 1878, followed by the Dangerous Drugs Act, 1930, represented incremental steps toward regulation but collectively fell short of a coherent national drug control framework.[2]

By the late 1970s, several developments converged to create an urgent need for comprehensive legislative reform. The Soviet-Afghan War dislodged massive quantities of Afghan heroin into regional trafficking networks, dramatically increasing the flow of narcotics through and into India. Domestic drug abuse — particularly heroin in Punjab — rose sharply. India's ratification of the three United Nations drug control conventions created specific international

[1]Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, Statement of Objects and Reasons.

[2]R.K. Bag, The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, Kamal Law House, Kolkata, p. 47.

obligations that the existing legislative framework could not adequately discharge. In this context, the NDPS Act emerged as a necessary and long-overdue response.

2.2 Key Structural Features of the Act:

The NDPS Act is organised across six chapters and seventy-six sections, supplemented by schedules listing controlled substances and their quantity thresholds. Its key structural features reflect the deterrence philosophy that animated its design. Section 8 establishes the core prohibition, making it unlawful for any person to cultivate, produce, manufacture, possess, sell, purchase, transport, import, or export narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances except for medical or scientific purposes in the manner provided by the Act.[3]

The sentencing framework, substantially revised by the NDPS (Amendment) Act, 2001, adopts a tripartite quantity-based structure. Offences involving small quantities attract a maximum of six months imprisonment and a fine of ten thousand rupees. Intermediate quantities attract sentences ranging from six months to ten years. Commercial quantities attract mandatory minimum sentences of ten years extendable to twenty years, with mandatory fines of not less than one lakh rupees. This graduated framework, while an improvement over the earlier binary structure, remains characterised by mandatory minimums that foreclose judicial discretion in serious cases.

The Act's provisions on arrest, search, and seizure — contained in Chapter V — are among its most operationally significant features. Section 42 empowers specified officers to enter, search, seize, and arrest without a warrant where there is reason to believe that a search warrant cannot be obtained without affording opportunity for concealment of evidence. Section 50 confers on persons about to be searched the right to require that the search be conducted before a Gazetted Officer or Magistrate — a procedural safeguard that has been the subject of extensive judicial interpretation.

2.3 The Presumption Provisions and Bail Restrictions:

Among the Act's most constitutionally contested features are its presumption provisions and bail restrictions. Sections 35 and 54 create rebuttable presumptions of culpable mental state and possession respectively, departing from the conventional allocation of the burden of proof. These provisions reflect the legislature's recognition of the evidentiary challenges of proving mens rea in drug cases, but they have attracted sustained criticism for their potential to produce wrongful convictions where accused persons lack the resources to effectively rebut the presumption.[4]

Section 37 of the Act establishes stringent conditions for bail in serious NDPS cases. Unlike the standard bail provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure, Section 37 requires the court to be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing that the accused is not guilty before bail can be granted. This provision effectively reverses the ordinary presumption, requiring the accused to demonstrate likely innocence as a precondition to pre-trial liberty. In practice, this has resulted in large numbers of NDPS accused spending extended periods in pre-trial detention — a situation that raises acute human rights concerns, particularly where trials are significantly delayed.

ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

3.1 The Narcotics Control Bureau

Section 4 of the NDPS Act establishes the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) as the apex drug enforcement agency at the national level, with the mandate to coordinate drug law enforcement across states and central agencies, implement

[3]NDPS (Amendment) Act, 2001; NDPS (Amendment) Act, 2014.

[4]Siddharth Pillai, 'Bail and the NDPS Act: A Constitutional Analysis', National Law University Journal, Vol. 12 (2019), p. 88.

India's obligations under international conventions, and liaise with international drug control organisations. The NCB operates through a network of zonal, sub-zonal, and special intelligence bureau offices across the country, functioning as both an operational enforcement body and an intelligence-gathering institution.[5]

In operational terms, the NCB has achieved significant successes — conducting major drug seizures, dismantling certain trafficking networks, and coordinating complex multi-agency operations. Its annual reports document impressive raw statistics in terms of quantities seized and cases registered. However, the Bureau has also faced persistent criticism regarding institutional capacity, investigation quality, and susceptibility to the corruption that pervades drug enforcement globally. High-profile cases in recent years involving allegations of evidence fabrication and abuse of power have drawn particular public and judicial scrutiny.

3.2 State Enforcement and Coordination Challenges

The practical burden of NDPS enforcement rests primarily with state police forces, which vary enormously in capacity, training, and institutional culture. The multi-agency structure of drug enforcement in India — involving the NCB, state police, customs, the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Border Security Force, and other agencies — creates jurisdictional complexity that trafficking networks exploit. Coordination mechanisms exist in principle but function imperfectly in practice, creating gaps that sophisticated traffickers navigate with relative ease.

A structural problem in NDPS enforcement is the incentive architecture within which enforcement agencies operate. This pattern is well-documented in enforcement data: the majority of NDPS arrests and prosecutions involve low-level carriers, petty dealers, and persons found in possession of relatively modest quantities, rather than the organised traffickers who are the Act's nominal primary target.[6]

3.3 Seizure Data: Enforcement Activity Without Control

Drug seizure statistics are the most commonly cited indicator of NDPS enforcement performance. India's annual seizure data shows significant quantities of narcotics confiscated each year — heroin and opium from the Golden Crescent route through Punjab, methamphetamine from the Golden Triangle through the northeast, cannabis across multiple regions, and increasingly pharmaceutical opioids diverted from the licit supply chain. Rising seizure volumes over successive years are regularly presented as evidence of enforcement effectiveness.[7]

However, seizure data must be interpreted with considerable caution. An increase in seizures may indicate enhanced enforcement effectiveness, a growing overall drug trade, or both. More fundamentally, seizures represent only a fraction of total trafficking volume — criminological studies suggest that law enforcement agencies typically intercept somewhere between ten and twenty percent of trafficking flows, meaning that even substantial seizure volumes may have limited impact on the overall availability and price of drugs in the illicit market. The absence of systematic empirical research on drug market economics in India — including the impact of enforcement on street prices, purity levels, and trafficking network structure — makes it difficult to translate seizure data into meaningful conclusions about the Act's impact on drug trafficking as a social phenomenon.

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[5]Narcotics Control Bureau, Annual Report 2022–23, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

[6]Madhurima Dhanuka, 'Drug Policy in India: A Civil Society Perspective', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 49 No. 18 (2014).

[7]UNODC, World Drug Report 2023, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION: SAFEGUARDS AND TENSIONS:

4.1 The Supreme Court's Constitutional Balancing Act

The judiciary has been a critical actor in shaping the NDPS Act's practical operation, engaging in a sustained process of constitutional interpretation that has both reinforced the Act's enforcement framework and imposed essential limitations on its more constitutionally problematic features. The Supreme Court's NDPS jurisprudence reflects a carefully calibrated tension between deference to Parliament's legislative choices about drug enforcement and the Court's commitment to protecting the constitutional rights of accused persons.

The Court's general approach has been to uphold the Act's constitutionality while imposing strict procedural requirements on enforcement — a combination that has simultaneously legitimised the Act's special provisions and placed meaningful constraints on their application. The result is a body of jurisprudence that is both substantial and nuanced, reflecting the complexity of the legal and social terrain on which drug enforcement operates.

4.2 Baldev Singh and the Primacy of Procedural Safeguards

The Constitution Bench decision in *State of Punjab v. Baldev Singh* (1999) is the single most significant judicial interpretation of the NDPS Act's enforcement provisions. The Court was called upon to determine the consequence of non-compliance with Section 50's requirement that an officer, before searching a person, must inform him of his right to be searched in the presence of a Gazetted Officer or Magistrate. The Court held unequivocally that Section 50 is a mandatory provision and that failure to comply with its requirements vitiates the search and renders the evidence obtained inadmissible.[8]

The provisions of Section 50 of the NDPS Act impose a mandatory obligation on the officer who is authorised to search a person to inform him of his right to be taken before the nearest Gazetted Officer or Magistrate for being searched. Failure to so inform the person to be searched would render the search illegal and vitiate the prosecution case.

The practical consequences of this ruling were far-reaching, resulting in the overturning of numerous convictions on procedural grounds. The Court's subsequent clarification in *State (NCT of Delhi) v. Narender* that Section 50 applies only to personal searches and not to searches of vehicles or premises partially addressed concerns about the ruling's breadth, but the fundamental principle — that procedural safeguards in the NDPS Act must be strictly observed — has remained a cornerstone of NDPS jurisprudence.[9]

4.3 The Bail Jurisprudence: Liberty Versus Stringency

The Supreme Court's interpretation of Section 37 has consistently emphasised the high threshold required for bail in serious NDPS cases, holding that the twin conditions of Section 37 must be rigorously applied. In *Directorate of Revenue v. Mohammad Nisar Holia* (2008), the Court stressed that courts must be satisfied that the accused is not guilty before releasing him on bail, and that the legislative intent behind Section 37 was to ensure that persons charged with serious drug trafficking offences are not easily released.[10]

At the same time, the Court has recognised that the constitutional right to personal liberty under Article 21 cannot be entirely subordinated to Section 37, and that indefinite pre-trial detention is inconsistent with constitutional principles. This tension has produced a nuanced jurisprudence in which courts must carefully balance the Act's stringent bail

[8]State of Punjab v. Baldev Singh (1999) 6 SCC 172.
[9]State (NCT of Delhi) v. Narender, AIR 2006 SC 2930.
[10]Directorate of Revenue v. Mohammad Nisar Holia (2008) 2 SCC 370.

conditions against the accused's constitutional rights — a balance that is not always easy to strike, particularly where trials are significantly delayed.

4.4 Rehabilitation and Section 64A

Section 64A of the NDPS Act, which provides immunity from prosecution for persons who voluntarily seek treatment for drug dependence, reflects a recognition that addiction is a medical condition requiring treatment rather than punishment. The Supreme Court has interpreted this provision liberally, emphasising in *E. Micheal Raj v. Intelligence Officer, NCB* the importance of distinguishing between drug users and drug traffickers and of offering a rehabilitative pathway for the former.[11]

However, the Court's liberal interpretation of Section 64A cannot substitute for the institutional infrastructure that effective rehabilitation requires. The absence of an adequate network of treatment facilities, properly trained healthcare personnel, and evidence-based harm reduction services means that the rehabilitative aspiration of Section 64A remains largely unrealised in practice. Judicial interpretation can point the way; only legislative and executive action can provide the resources to make it meaningful.

HUMAN RIGHTS DIMENSIONS:

5.1 The Disproportionate Impact on Marginalised Communities:

A consistent and deeply troubling pattern in NDPS enforcement is the disproportionate impact of the Act's punitive provisions on marginalised and economically vulnerable populations. Research and civil society documentation have established that the large majority of persons arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned under the NDPS Act are not major drug traffickers but rather low-level couriers, street-level dealers, and persons found in possession of relatively small quantities of controlled substances — often from economically disadvantaged backgrounds with limited access to legal representation.[12]

This pattern reflects a structural reality of drug enforcement: it is inherently easier for law enforcement agencies to arrest and prosecute visible, accessible, street-level participants in the drug trade than to penetrate the insulated upper echelons of well-organised trafficking networks. The NDPS Act's mandatory minimum provisions ensure that these low-level participants face severe sentences despite their marginal role in drug trafficking, while the organisational leadership of trafficking operations — whose role in the trade is far more harmful but whose distance from direct enforcement contact is greater — faces a lower risk of prosecution and punishment.

5.2 Pre-Trial Detention and the Right to Liberty:

The NDPS Act's stringent bail conditions, combined with the pervasive delays in the Indian criminal justice system, have produced a significant population of NDPS undertrials — persons accused of NDPS offences who have been denied bail and are awaiting trial, often for extended periods. The paradox of this situation is acute: accused persons who are ultimately acquitted may have spent years in custody, experiencing de facto punishment without conviction. The constitutional guarantee of the presumption of innocence is effectively reversed in practice, even though it remains nominally intact.

The human cost of extended pre-trial detention in NDPS cases is severe. Loss of employment, family disruption, social stigma, and exposure to the prison environment — which includes significant contact with more hardened criminals

[11] E. Micheal Raj v. Intelligence Officer, Narcotics Control Bureau (2008) 5 SCC 161.

— create lasting harms that are not remediated by acquittal. The proportionality of the Act's bail regime must be assessed not only in terms of its formal legal structure but in terms of these tangible human consequences.

5.3 Acquittals and the Quality of Justice:

High acquittal rates in NDPS cases — documented by judicial pronouncements and academic studies — represent a dual failure of justice. They indicate failures in the quality and integrity of investigation and prosecution, often arising from procedural non-compliance, problems with chain of custody for drug samples, and the non-appearance of witnesses. But they also represent a profound injustice to accused persons who have suffered the consequences of arrest, detention, and prosecution before being found not guilty.[13]

The reform implication is clear: the quality of investigation and prosecution in NDPS cases must be substantially improved. This requires better training for enforcement officers, investment in forensic infrastructure, improved case management systems, and stronger accountability mechanisms for prosecutorial decisions. Without improvements in investigation and prosecution quality, even the best-designed legislative framework will fail to deliver justice.

REFORM PERSPECTIVES:

6.1 Proportionality in Sentencing

The most pressing structural reform needed in the NDPS Act concerns the mandatory minimum sentencing regime. While maintaining the option of severe sentences for major trafficking offences is entirely justified, the absolute removal of judicial discretion has produced disproportionate outcomes in numerous cases and has not demonstrably enhanced deterrence beyond what proportionate but serious sentencing would achieve. Legislative reform should consider introducing a structured discretion model — maintaining mandatory minimum thresholds while allowing judicial departure in defined exceptional circumstances — that preserves the Act's deterrent force while restoring the proportionality that justice requires.

6.2 Reforming the Bail Provisions

The bail provisions of Section 37 require reform to better reflect the constitutional imperative of the right to personal liberty under Article 21. A reformed bail framework might link the stringency of bail conditions more closely to the specific circumstances of each case — the quantum of the alleged offence, the strength of the prosecution's evidence, the accused's personal circumstances, and the risk of flight or interference with evidence — rather than applying the twin conditions uniformly to all offences above a certain penalty threshold. This would allow courts to exercise principled discretion in individual cases while maintaining meaningful safeguards against the release of genuinely dangerous accused persons.

6.3 Strengthening Rehabilitation Infrastructure

The NDPS Act's rehabilitation provisions — particularly Section 64A's immunity for persons who voluntarily seek treatment — represent a conceptually sound but practically inadequate response to drug dependence. Realising their potential requires substantial investment: an expanded network of accessible, quality treatment facilities; the integration of evidence-based harm reduction services including opioid substitution therapy; systematic training of healthcare professionals in addiction medicine; and a formal diversion pathway that channels drug-dependent offenders toward treatment rather than incarceration. This is not merely a humane policy choice but an economically rational one — treatment costs a fraction of incarceration and delivers significantly better outcomes.

[13]Bhagwan Dass v. State (NCT of Delhi) (2011) 6 SCC 396.

6.4 Institutional Reform

Improving the NDPS Act's efficacy requires not only legislative change but also institutional reform. The NCB and state drug enforcement agencies need strengthened forensic capacity, improved investigation training, better information and intelligence systems, and robust internal accountability mechanisms. Corruption — which represents perhaps the single most significant threat to the integrity of drug enforcement — demands sustained attention through independent oversight, whistleblower protection, and meaningful consequences for corrupt officers. The quality of prosecution in NDPS cases must improve, with better case management, more rigorous evidential standards, and more effective witness protection mechanisms.

CONCLUSION*:*

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 was born of genuine urgency — the escalating drug trafficking threat at India's borders and the manifestly inadequate legal framework that confronted it. Its architects crafted a comprehensive, ambitious, and deliberately stringent instrument, animated by the deterrence philosophy that dominated drug control discourse globally in the mid-1980s. Over four decades of implementation, the Act has generated substantial enforcement activity, established an important institutional infrastructure, and provided the courts with the framework for a significant and evolving body of drug law jurisprudence.

Yet the fundamental question that this article has sought to answer — whether the NDPS Act has been efficacious in controlling drug trafficking in India — must be answered with a qualified negative, or at best with deep uncertainty. The drug trade in India is more sophisticated, more pervasive, and more deeply entrenched today than it was when the Act was enacted. The Act's enforcement has generated more prosecutions of low-level offenders than disruptions of major trafficking networks. Its punitive provisions have produced serious human rights concerns without demonstrating commensurate benefits in trafficking control. And its rehabilitation provisions have remained aspirational in the absence of adequate institutional support.

This does not mean the Act has been without effect. In the absence of enforcement, the situation would almost certainly be considerably worse. The Act has enabled the disruption of significant trafficking operations and the prosecution of thousands of offenders. Its limitations should be understood as calls for reform, not for abandonment.

The reform path indicated by this analysis is clear in its broad direction, even if its details require careful deliberation. The Act needs to be rebalanced: away from the disproportionate incarceration of the most vulnerable and marginal participants in the drug trade, and toward more effective targeting of the organised trafficking networks that cause the greatest social harm. Away from the neglect of drug dependence as a public health issue, and toward a properly resourced rehabilitation and harm reduction infrastructure.

The NDPS Act remains the appropriate legal foundation for India's response to drug trafficking. But the 1985 statute, even as amended, reflects the limitations of its era. A contemporary India — facing a more complex, adaptive, and transnational drug trafficking challenge — needs a drug control framework that is simultaneously firm in its enforcement against organised crime, humane in its response to addiction, proportionate in its punishment of offenders, and supported by the institutional capacity to deliver on its ambitions. Achieving that framework is the central task facing Indian drug law reformers, and the analysis in this article has sought to illuminate the path toward it.

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Lakshmanan M

VELS School of Law, Chennai.

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