

## JIHADI DRUG TRAIL

As India has waged a war on drugs in J&K, the revelation that the Narcotics Control Bureau has seized the first-ever consignment of Captagon, the so-called "Jihadi Drug", worth Rs 182 crore, had raised alarm. The report of the seizure was shared by none other than the Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Captagon is the common name linked to Fenethylline, a synthetic stimulant developed in the 1960s. With its use by terrorist gang leaders on its young recruits it has earned the sobriquet of the "jihadi drug." The drug is often linked with extremist and conflict-zone networks operating in parts of West Asia. The drug makes its user remain awake for long, suppress fear and fatigue, increase aggression and risk-taking behaviour. The terrorists use it during prolonged encounters with the security forces to deal with stress and fear. Though the arrested people are being interrogated and details coming out may not be shared with public for security of the mission but it is clear that India is being used as a transit route for the trafficking of Captagon. The 32 kg drug consignment was unearthed from a south in South Delhi. A Syrian national who had entered India legally but overstayed his VISA was the handler. He was planning to transport the drug to Saudi Arabia. Was portion of the drug meant for India too? The network of drug peddlers is huge and is using India as a market as well as transit route. The recovery has given sleepless nights to the NCRB and other regulatory authorities and also given clue to the ways the drug peddlers operate. This will surely help us in uprooting the drug and substance network in India and especially Jammu and Kashmir which is facing a huge problem due to drug addiction among the youth. Also, as this operation was a follow up of the information shared by a foreign agency, the global cooperation in drug supply is surely going to help India as well.

Balbir Punj

This column continues my earlier piece, "Predatory Jihadis on the Move: 'Secularists' Continue Denial Mode" (April 16). There, I had argued that sections of India's self-appointed secular intelligentsia have, for decades, functioned less as neutral guardians of constitutionalism and more as apologists for organised religious conversion networks, coercive mobilisation, and ideological radicalism. The Nashik TCS sexual exploitation and conversion controversy has once again exposed that uncomfortable reality.

The reactions to my previous article, both in private correspondence and on social media, only strengthened my conviction that a large section of our society instinctively recognises the pattern. Yet an entrenched ecosystem continues to minimise, rationalise, or suppress any scrutiny of conversion-linked networks. The issue, therefore, is not whether such tendencies exist, but how they continue to operate so effectively within contemporary India while retaining moral legitimacy in elite discourse.

The broader subcontinental experience offers important context. Wherever exclusivist Islamist politics has acquired overwhelming social or political dominance, pluralism has steadily weakened. Pre-Islamic cultures, minority traditions, and indigenous civilisational memories have either been marginalised or erased. In such societies, ideological assertion is open and unapologetic; there is little requirement for the language of secular camouflage. The demographic contrast across the subcontinent remains striking. At the time of Partition, Muslims in residual India constituted under ten per cent of the population; today the figure stands near fifteen per cent. Meanwhile, non-Muslim minorities—Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists—in neighbouring Islamic states have witnessed severe decline. In Pakistan, Hindus-Sikhs together accounted for nearly fifteen per cent of the population at independence; today they are reduced to a negligible minority. In Bangladesh, the Hindu-Buddhist population has steadily contracted over the decades. These are not merely statistical developments. They are indicators of bigger civilisational change.

Lahore offers a poignant illustration. Traditionally associated with Lav, the son of Lord Rama, the city once represented a vibrant confluence of Hindu, Sikh, and Jain heritage. Syed Muhammad Latif's nineteenth-century work 'Lahore' documents numerous temples and shrines that once flourished there. During my visit to Pakistan in 2003, I searched for remnants of that civilisational landscape. What survived was largely neglect, silence, and decay. Even the ancient Lav Temple within Lahore Fort appeared abandoned to memory rather than preserved as heritage.

Afghanistan presents an even harsher lesson. Once a flourishing centre of Hindu-Buddhist learning and later sanctified by the travels of Guru Nanak, it housed thriving Hindu-Sikh communities until the late twentieth century. Decades of extremism, sectarian violence, and Taliban rule virtually extinguished that presence. Civilisations do not disappear overnight; they erode gradually when ideological intolerance acquires institutional sanction. Kashmir remains India's most painful internal example. The land of Rishi Kashyap, once renowned for Shaivite-Buddhist

scholarship, underwent profound transformation after the fourteenth century.

Kalhana's Rajatarangini portrays a society rooted in intellectual plurality, yet subsequent centuries of Islamisation steadily altered its demographic and cultural character. Under Hindu Dogra rule (1846-1947), pluralism witnessed a brief revival. However, during the twentieth century, under the communal politics of Sheikh Abdullah, the irony was that forces of Islamist consolidation grew steadily stronger in the name of secularism, even as the marginalisation of Kashmiri Pandits deepened. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the fragility of that coexistence stood brutally exposed through the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. Amid terror, targeted killings, and an atmosphere of fear, hundreds of thousands of Pandits were forced to become refugees within their own country. For many Muslims of the subcontinent during the tumultuous years of Partition, religious allegiance often appeared to supersede territorial nationalism. In this context, the observations recorded by Dr. Karan Singh in his autobiography 'Heir Apparent' assume considerable

significance. Recalling the Pakistan-backed invasion of Jammu and Kashmir in October 1947, he noted that a substantial section of Muslim personnel within the State Forces, influenced by religious affinity, gradually drifted away from loyalty to the Maharaja and awaited an opportunity to defect. His observations reflected the tragic communal contagion unleashed by Partition across the subcontinent.

India, however, differs fundamentally from its neighbours because its timeless civilisational plural ethos, the constitutional structure still imposes restraints upon overt sectarianism. Consequently, coercive mobilisation often assumes subtler forms. In Islamic Pakistan, reports of abductions and forced conversions of Hindu-Christian-Sikh girls' surface regularly. Such acts cannot be institutionalised so openly in residual India. Instead, allegations increasingly centre on covert grooming, emotional manipulation, conversion-linked pressure and 'Love-Jihad'.

The recent controversy surrounding the world's second-largest IT services brand TCS unit in Nashik has been cited as one such instance. Recent years have also witnessed re-

peated clashes during Hindu religious processions, particularly during Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti celebrations. Earlier this year, Hindu youth Tarun Kumar was allegedly lynched in Delhi's Uttam Nagar following a dispute during Holi festivities. Such incidents deepen public anxiety and widen the distance between elite commentary and lived social experience. Judicial interventions have occasionally attempted to restore balance.

In 2021, the Madras High Court rejected arguments seeking to prevent Hindu processions through Muslim-majority localities, warning that such reasoning would damage the secular fabric of the nation and encourage fragmentation. Yet this is scarcely a recent phenomenon. More than seven decades ago, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in his seminal work 'Pakistan or the Partition of India', identified three recurring flashpoints underlying Hindu-Muslim tensions: cow slaughter, music before mosques, and religious conversions. At this juncture, an important distinction must be maintained: the actions of individuals or groups cannot and should not be attributed to an entire community.

## Cannes 2026 and the Future of Cinema

Chaitanya K Prasad

Every year, Cannes arrives dressed like a spectacle but behaves like a question. It has the red carpets, the cameras, the yachts, the gowns, the carefully practised indifference of people who know they are being watched. But beneath all that choreography, Cannes is rarely just about glamour. At its best, it is where cinema pauses, looks at itself in the mirror, and asks: What are we becoming?

In 2026, that question feels sharper than usual. This year's Cannes does not feel like a festival trying to prove that cinema is still powerful. It feels like a festival trying to understand what power even means when the moving image has escaped the theatre, slipped into phones, fractured into reels, entered virtual worlds, and now stands face to face with artificial intelligence. The old grammar of cinema is still present: directors, juries, premieres, applause, but something in the air feels unsettled. Not broken. Just restless.

And that restlessness may be the most exciting thing about Cannes 2026. For a long time, Cannes has carried the aura of certainty. It knew what counted as cinema. It knew who the masters were. It knew what kind of film deserved silence, reverence and a ten-minute standing ovation. But this year feels less certain, and therefore more alive. The absence of obvious, overpowering studio giants has created a strange freedom. The festival seems less dominated by cinematic empires and more open to the stubborn, fragile, risky films that still believe in the intelligence of an audience. That matters.

Because cinema, especially now, is under pressure to become everything except cinema. It is expected to be content, campaign, franchise, algorithm, intellectual property, meme, marketable asset and global product. Cannes 2026 feels like a resistance to that flattening. Not a rejection of the future, but a refusal to let the future be decided only by platforms, data and speed. What is fresh this year is not merely the presence of new technology. It is the discomfort around it.

Artificial intelligence is no longer sitting politely outside the gates of cinema. It is here, close enough to provoke anxiety, curiosity and negotiation. The interesting thing



is that Cannes is not treating this as a simple villain story. It is not saying technology will destroy art, nor is it blindly celebrating every innovation as progress. Instead, the festival seems to be staging a more difficult conversation: can cinema absorb new tools without surrendering its soul? That is the real drama of Cannes 2026.

The future of cinema may not be a clean battle between humans and machines. It may be messier, stranger and more intimate. AI may write, restore, enhance, simulate, predict, recreate and disturb. Immersive formats may alter the way we experience a story. Virtual production may change where films are made and who gets access to scale. But the heart of cinema will still depend on something that cannot be automated so easily: a human being trying to make sense of another human being.

For India, Cannes 2026 is interesting in a quieter but deeper way. India's presence this year is not only about visibility. It is about memory. It is about returning to the world not merely with stars and spectacle, but with cinema that carries history, politics, language and regional truth. The restoration of the 1986 Malayalam classic, Amma Ariyan, by John Abraham, is one of the most meaningful Indian moments at Cannes this year precisely because it does not chase the obvious idea of glamour.

It brings another India to the Croisette. It brings the India of people's cinema, political cinema, regional cinema, cinema made with urgency rather than polish. Amma

Ariyan returning in restored form is not just an archival achievement. It is a reminder that Indian cinema has always had underground rivers running beneath its mainstream ocean. And perhaps the world is only now learning how vast those rivers are. This is what India must understand about Cannes: participation cannot be measured only in how many famous faces walked the carpet. That is the least interesting metric. Indian cinema is not one thing. It is not Bollywood alone. It is Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Assamese, Manipuri, Kannada, Telugu, Punjabi, Hindi, independent, commercial, documentary, experimental, devotional, angry, absurd, intimate and epic. It is a civilisation arguing with itself through images.

When India arrives at Cannes through a restored Malayalam classic, it sends a subtle but powerful message: our cinematic identity is not new, and it is not waiting for validation. It has depth. It has memories. It is a rebellion. It has forms that the world has not fully studied yet.

At the same time, Cannes 2026 should also make India uncomfortable in a productive way. A country that produces such an astonishing volume and variety of cinema should not be content with symbolic presence. We should be asking harder questions. Why are more Indian films not consistently breaking into the most competitive global festival spaces? Are we investing enough in script development, subtitling, restoration, festival strategy, international sales, co-pro-

duction literacy and long-term nurturing of independent voices? Are we still treating global recognition as a miracle when it should be built as an ecosystem? India does not lack stories. India does not lack talent. India does not lack visual imagination. What it often lacks is the patient machinery that carries a film from local brilliance to global discovery.

That is why Cannes 2026 matters for India beyond the red carpet. It reminds us that cinema diplomacy is not only about showcasing national pride. It is about building pathways. The most exciting India-at-Cannes story of the future will not be that an Indian film looked international. It will be that a deeply Indian film made the international audience adjust its own gaze. That is the shift India should aim for. Cannes itself seems to be moving into a new phase. It is still elegant, still hierarchical, still slightly theatrical in its seriousness. But it is also being forced to become more porous. It must engage with new technologies, new markets, new geographies and new kinds of creators. It must continue to protect the sanctity of cinema while admitting that cinema's borders are changing.

That contradiction is what makes Cannes 2026 fascinating. It is nostalgic and futuristic at the same time. It celebrates restored films while debating artificial intelligence. It honours auteurs while hosting conversations about immersive media. It clings to the theatre while acknowledging that the screen has multiplied beyond control. In that sense, Cannes 2026 is not a festival of certainty. It is a festival of transition. For India, the moment is ripe. Not because Cannes has suddenly discovered us, but because we are finally beginning to understand that our cinema does not need to arrive wearing borrowed language. It can arrive with its own weather. Its own chaos. Its own politics. Its own silences. Its own songs. Its own ghosts.

Maybe that is what Cannes 2026 is really telling us. The future of cinema will not belong only to those with the biggest budgets or the most advanced tools. It will belong to those who can still make images feel necessary. And India, if it learns to trust the full range of its own cinematic inheritance, has more than enough necessity to offer.

## HYPERTENSION: INDIA'S BIGGEST PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

Manoj Vasant Murhekar | P Ganesh kumar

We have the drugs. We have the programme. We have the proof. What India lacks is the political will to measure hypertension properly, manage it consistently, and make control of blood pressure a public health priority. Imagine a disease that kills more Indians every year than tuberculosis, HIV and malaria combined. A disease whose treatment can cost less than a cup of chai each month. A disease for which medicines are already available free in government hospitals. Yet only a fraction of those living with it have it under control.

That disease is hypertension.

India is home to nearly 220 million people with high blood pressure. Cardiovascular diseases - heart attacks, strokes, and related conditions - already claim more than 2.5 million Indian lives every year, and hypertension is their single biggest driver. The tragedy is not that we do not know how to prevent these deaths. It is that we are failing to do what is already proven to work.

Unlike cancer or many chronic illnesses, hypertension is neither complicated nor expensive to manage. A simple, off-patent medicine such as amlodipine, available for as little as one rupee a day, can control blood pressure in the majority of patients. Studies show that improving hypertension treatment and adherence rates would not only



save lives but also reduce long-term healthcare costs by preventing expensive hospitalisations for heart attacks, strokes, and kidney disease. Globally, improving blood pressure control is considered one of the most powerful adult health interventions available today. Reaching even 50% population-level control could prevent millions of deaths and cardiovascular events over the coming decades. For India, the gains could be transformative.

The India Hypertension Control Initiative (IHCI), launched in 2018, has already demonstrated that large-scale blood pressure control is possible through public health systems. Expanding from 26 districts to more than 150 districts across 26 states, the programme has shown that decentralised, protocol-driven care can significantly improve outcomes. The most important lesson from IHCI is simple: hypertension control works best when care

is taken closer to people's homes. Health and Wellness Centres, or Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, improved blood pressure control rates while reducing missed follow-up visits. What India needs now is not another pilot project but a national commitment built around a few non-negotiable principles. First, every state must adopt a simple, standardised treatment protocol. Clear protocols help health workers escalate treatment quickly and consistently. Second, uninterrupted drug supply is essential. Drug stockouts break trust, interrupt adherence, and directly increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

Third, every health facility must have validated blood pressure machines and properly trained staff. Fourth, India must embrace task-sharing. Doctors alone cannot manage 220 million patients. Nurses, pharmacists, health workers, and frontline staff must all share responsibility for screening, follow-up, counselling, and medicine refills. Finally, India needs a simple digital monitoring system that measures what matters: blood pressure control rates. Every preventable death from uncontrolled blood pressure is ultimately a failure of medicine, but of governance.

Dr Manoj Vasant Murhekar is Director and Dr. P. Ganeshkumar is Scientist & Head, Division of Noncommunicable Diseases ICMR National Institute of Epidemiology; Views presented are personal.

## Why Conversion Cases Like TCS Nashik Persist?

Balbir Punj

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