Mains Analysis: Operation Trident – India catches the couriers; can it reach the kingpins and their money?

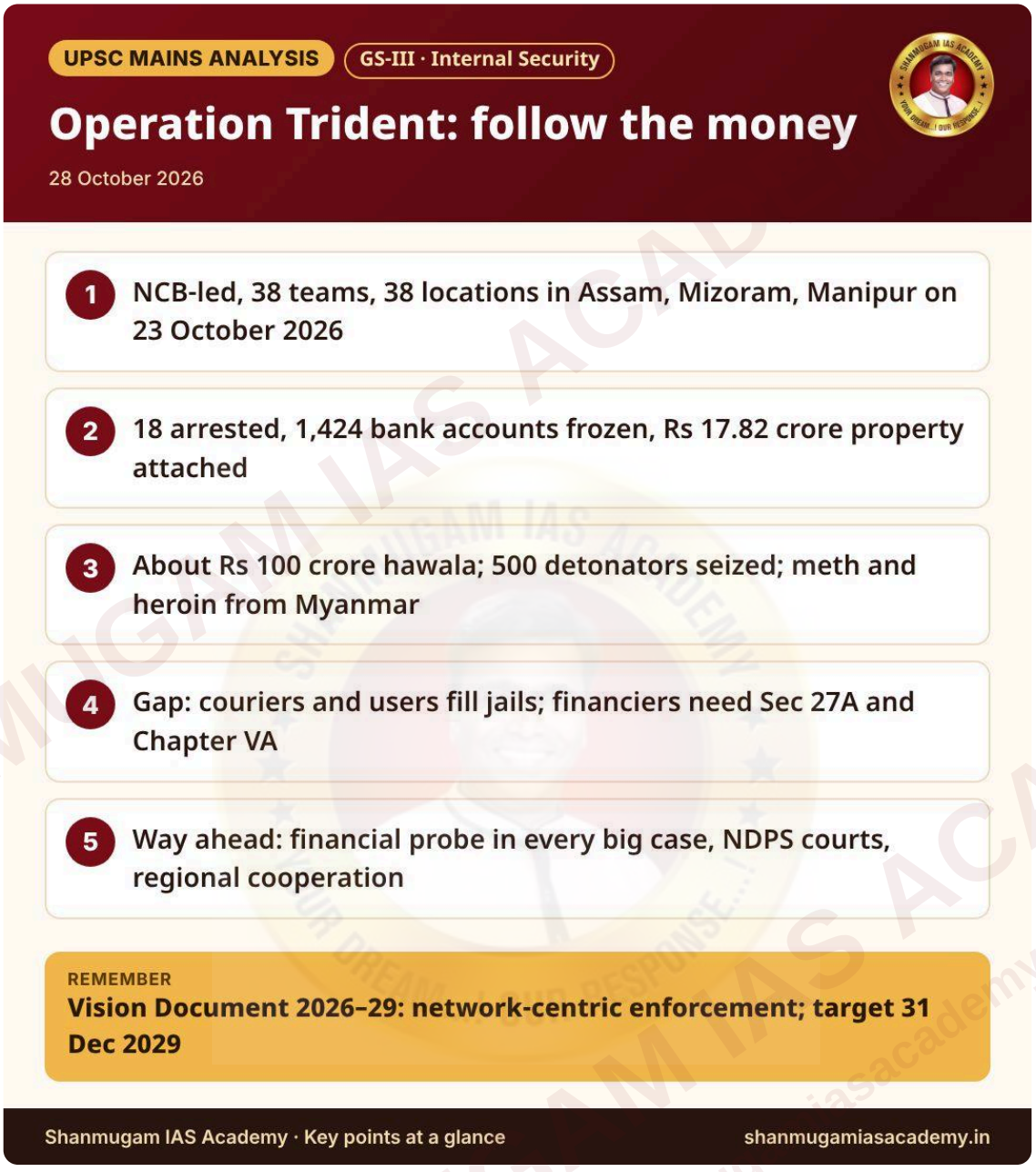
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Context

In the early hours of **23 October 2026**, the **Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB)** led **"Operation Trident"**: 38 multi-agency teams – with the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Mizoram Police, other central agencies and the police of three States – struck 38 locations at the same time in **Assam, Mizoram and Manipur**. According to the Government, **18 persons were arrested**, **1,424 bank accounts were frozen**, properties worth **Rs 17.82 crore were attached**, about **Rs 100 crore of hawala transactions** were uncovered, and **500 detonators** and Rs 12 lakh cash were seized. The target was a transnational syndicate moving **methamphetamine and heroin** from Myanmar through the Mizoram–Manipur–Assam–Tripura corridor into mainland India and Bangladesh. Earlier phases of the same probe had already led to the arrest of the alleged Myanmar-based kingpin (in Delhi), its main hawala operator (August 2024) and its Assam logistics head (November 2025). The official release gives no figure for drugs seized in this round – it aimed at the money and the network. That is the core debate: India catches carriers and peddlers easily, while the financiers – the "big sharks" – mostly stay out of reach.

GS mapping: GS-III – Linkages of organised crime with terrorism; money laundering and its prevention; security challenges in border areas; role of external state and non-state actors. Also useful for Essay (drug abuse among youth).



Background: the legal and institutional toolkit

- **NDPS Act, 1985:** punishment depends on quantity. **Small quantity** – rigorous imprisonment up to 1 year, or fine up to Rs 10,000, or both; **between small and commercial** – up to 10 years and fine up to Rs 1 lakh; **commercial quantity** – 10 to 20 years and fine of Rs 1–2 lakh. **Section 64A** gives immunity to an addict caught with a small quantity who volunteers for de-addiction.
- **Section 27A:** financing illicit traffic, or harbouring traffickers, is punished with 10–20 years and fine of Rs 1–2 lakh (more with reasons). A 2014 amendment broke its cross-reference, and it was repaired only by the **NDPS (Amendment) Act, 2021** (with effect from 1 May 2014) – a sign of how rarely the financing provision was used.

- **Chapter VA (from Section 68A, inserted in 1989):** tracing, freezing (Section 68F) and **forfeiture of property** of traffickers, including property held through relatives and associates; the person must prove the property was lawfully acquired.
- **PITNDPS Act, 1988:** preventive detention of habitual traffickers. The **Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002** lets the ED pursue drug proceeds.
- **Institutions:** NCB (constituted 1986, under the Home Ministry); **NCORD** (Narco-Coordination Centre, 2016) for Centre–State coordination; **MANAS** national narcotics helpline **1933** (launched 18 July 2024) for anonymous tips and de-addiction advice.
- **Demand side: Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan** (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, launched 15 August 2020) had reached over **35 crore people** by 22 October 2026, including about 13.94 crore youth.
- **Policy direction:** the **Vision Document on Narcotics Control 2026–2029**, released at the 10th NCORD apex meeting (26 June 2026), calls for "network-centric" enforcement; the Union Home Minister has set **31 December 2029** as the target to end the drug trade.

Why couriers get caught and kingpins do not

Level of the chain	What enforcement usually does	What reaches them
Users and street peddlers	Most arrests and FIRs	Section 64A treatment route is little used; many end up in jail
Carriers / couriers	Seizure + arrest at check-posts, airports, coasts	Commercial-quantity cases give long sentences, but the network survives
Organisers and logistics	Need phone, travel and digital analysis	Backward and forward linkage probes; PITNDPS detention
Financiers and kingpins	Need financial investigation, foreign cooperation	Section 27A, Chapter VA forfeiture, PMLA, Interpol notices, extradition

- **Evidence problem:** the NDPS case is built on recovery of the drug. The carrier is caught "in possession"; the financier is linked only by money trails and phone records, which need skilled investigators and time.
- **Numbers that reward volume:** success is still measured in kilograms seized and persons arrested. NCB alone seized about **1.33 lakh kg** of drugs (worth about Rs 1,980 crore) and arrested **994 traffickers** in 447 cases in 2025.
- **Users counted as offenders:** in Kerala, the State with the most NDPS cases, over 90% of NDPS cases and arrests in 2022 and 2023 were for personal consumption, not trafficking (NCRB data, as reported). Police effort goes to the bottom of the chain.
- **Conviction gap:** NCB reports a conviction rate of about **two-thirds** in its own cases in 2025 (up from about 60% in 2024); in 2025 it secured convictions of 265 offenders in 131 cases. But NCB handles a

small share of all NDPS cases; most are State police cases, where trials are slow and financial charges are rare.

The changing map of trafficking

- **Golden Triangle** (Myanmar–Laos–Thailand) feeds the North-East by land – Operation Trident's route; the porous border and conflict in Myanmar make it hard to police. The **Golden Crescent** (Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran) reaches India across the Punjab border, now also by drones, and by sea along the western coast.
- **Maritime routes:** in November 2024 the Indian Coast Guard seized about **6,016 kg of methamphetamine** from a Myanmar fishing boat in the Andaman Sea – its biggest haul ever; the NIA later searched premises in Chennai and Madurai in the same case (August 2026).
- **Darknet and crypto:** in June–July 2025 NCB's "Operation MELON" broke "Ketamelon", a Kochi-based darknet vendor network that sold LSD and ketamine for cryptocurrency.
- **Narco-terror overlap:** 500 detonators in a drug-hawala network on the Myanmar border show how drug money, arms and insurgency can travel on the same route.

The Tamil Nadu angle

- **Coast as a transit point:** in October 2026 the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) seized **137 kg of crystal methamphetamine** (worth over Rs 100 crore) on the Nagapattinam coast, suspected to be bound for **Sri Lanka**; four persons were arrested. Ganja bound for Sri Lanka is also seized repeatedly on the Ramanathapuram coast across the Palk Strait.
- **State response:** Tamil Nadu Police's **"Drive Against Drugs"** campaign, financial investigations that freeze traffickers' property and bank accounts, a State-level NCORD with Customs, DRI, Coast Guard and NCB, and awareness drives among students.

Challenges

- **Skill gap:** few police stations have trained financial investigators, forensic accountants or crypto-tracing tools.
- **Slow trials and weak prosecution:** few special courts, delays in chemical analysis reports, procedural lapses in search and seizure (Sections 42, 50) that let accused walk free.
- **Kingpins abroad:** extradition and mutual legal assistance with Myanmar and other source countries are slow; conflict in Myanmar weakens cooperation.

Way forward

1. **Make every big seizure a financial case:** a mandatory parallel financial probe (Section 27A, Chapter VA, PMLA) in every commercial-quantity case, with ED and FIU-IND data shared in real time.
2. **Change the scorecard:** measure success by networks dismantled, kingpins convicted and assets forfeited, not only kilograms seized.

3. **Specialised capacity:** State anti-narcotics task forces with financial, cyber and crypto units; dedicated NDPS courts and forensic labs to cut trial delay.
4. **Borders, coasts and partners:** technology on the Myanmar border, counter-drone systems in Punjab, joint coastal patrols and intelligence-sharing with Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bangladesh; FATF-standard tracing of virtual assets.
5. **Treat users as patients:** use Section 64A and Nasha Mukt Bharat to divert users to de-addiction; turn their information into intelligence on suppliers through MANAS 1933.

> **Conclusion:** Operation Trident is significant less for what it seized than for what it targeted – bank accounts, hawala routes and property. If this network-centric approach becomes routine rather than a headline, India can move from catching the replaceable courier to breaking the business model of the trade, while treating the user as a patient.

Mains practice question

Q. "Drug enforcement in India is effective against carriers but weak against kingpins and financiers." Critically examine this statement in the light of recent operations, and suggest measures to dismantle drug trafficking networks. *(15 marks, 250 words)*

Answer framework: Introduction – Operation Trident (23 October 2026) · Body – (a) why couriers get caught: possession-based evidence, volume scorecards, users treated as offenders; (b) tools against kingpins: Section 27A, Chapter VA, PITNDPS, PMLA; (c) new routes: sea, drones, darknet, crypto; Tamil Nadu coast · Way forward – financial probes, new scorecard, courts, regional cooperation · Conclusion – faculty-view line.

Prelims pointers

- NDPS Act, 1985; NCB constituted in 1986; PITNDPS Act, 1988; Chapter VA (forfeiture of property) inserted in 1989.
- MANAS (Madak Padarth Nishedh Asuchna Kendra) helpline 1933 – launched 18 July 2024.
- Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan – Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, launched 15 August 2020.
- Golden Triangle: Myanmar, Laos, Thailand. Golden Crescent: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran.

Asked before in UPSC Mains (PYQ)

Official question-paper wording, with how this analysis helps you answer it.

GS-III 2018 15 marks

"India's proximity to two of the world's biggest illicit opium-growing states has enhanced her internal security concerns. Explain the linkages between drug trafficking and other illicit activities such as gunrunning, money laundering and human trafficking. What counter-measures should be taken to prevent the same?"

How this helps: Operation Trident is a live example: a Golden Triangle route, hawala money worth about Rs 100 crore and 500 detonators in one network.

GS-III 2024 10 marks

"Explain how narco-terrorism has emerged as a serious threat across the country. Suggest suitable measures to counter narco-terrorism."

How this helps: Use the detonator seizure in a drug-hawala network on the Myanmar border and the "follow the money" measures (Section 27A, Chapter VA, ED).

GS-III 2021 10 marks

"Discuss how emerging technologies and globalisation contribute to money laundering. Elaborate measures to tackle the problem of money laundering both at national and international levels."

How this helps: Hawala, frozen bank accounts, darknet markets and crypto (NCB's Operation MELON against the "Ketamelon" vendor) show how drug money moves and how to trace it.

Faculty view – looking ahead (Shanmugam IAS Academy)

The real test of drug policy is not the size of the seizure but whether the network survives it. A courier is replaced the next day; a frozen account, a forfeited house or a convicted financier is not. That is the logic of **"network-centric enforcement"** – investigating the whole chain from source to user, with the money trail at its centre, and treating the user as a patient, not as a statistic.

- **A shift to note:** Operation Trident reported arrests, frozen accounts and attached property – and no drug-seizure figure. Write "from seizure-centric to network-centric", not just "a big drug bust".
- **What to watch next:** (1) how many of the 1,424 frozen accounts end in forfeiture and convictions under Section 27A, (2) whether NCB annual reports start publishing networks dismantled and assets forfeited, (3) cooperation with Myanmar and Sri Lanka on maritime and border routes, (4) progress towards the 2029 target.
- **Ready-made conclusion line:** "Seizures make headlines, but only forfeiture and conviction of financiers break the trade – India must follow the money, not just the mule."

Sources: PIB/NCB release on Operation Trident, 25 October 2026; NCB year-end figures for 2025 (January 2026) and conviction release (April 2026); NCB release on the 10th NCORD apex meeting (June 2026); NDPS Act, 1985 and NDPS (Amendment) Act, 2021; Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment data on Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan (October 2026); All India Radio on MANAS (July 2024); DRI and Coast Guard cases as reported. Original analysis by Shanmugam IAS Academy.

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