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Drugs used to woo Indian voters

ELECTION MENACE

DRUGS USED TO WOO INDIAN VOTERS

Addicts look forward to polls season as narcotics will be sent to their homes for free

GURDASPUR (India)

OPIUM addict Rajendar usually has to beg, steal or borrow to get his fix but at election season in Punjab, a packet is delivered to his home in a bid to win his vote.

"Like all addicts, I love elections and wish we had them every month," the 38-year-old said.

"It's the easiest time to get hold of what you need and everyone gets what they want. Normally, we have to go out and find a dealer, but at election time, it gets delivered to your home for free."

Rajendar, a farm worker who is

married with two children, is one of tens of thousands of addicts in Punjab who have earned the state a reputation as India's drug capital.

While inducing voters with household appliances, alcohol or cash is widespread in some parts of the country, electoral officials said candidates in the province wooed addicts with free drugs.

Punjab is one of five states holding elections in the next few weeks, with the first round beginning yesterday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and opposition leader Rahul Gandhi have addressed rallies in major towns and cities across the state, trying to sway voters with their oratory.

But, as a former chief election commissioner said, the appeal to voters in villages was often at a baser level.

"In 2012, when we conducted the Punjab state elections, we suspected the use of drugs during polls and found drugs were, in fact, a serious issue," S.Y. Quraishi, chief commissioner from 2010-12, said.

"In a month, we recovered around 55kg of heroin, around 430kg of pop-



Drug addicts getting their fix in an abandoned building in Jalandhar, Punjab, recently. They are more than happy to promise their vote to a particular candidate in exchange for free drugs. AFP PIC

py husk (the raw ingredient of opium) and found almost every psychotropic substance in circulation."

The results of a government-commissioned survey in 2015 estimated there could be as many as 320,000 "opioid dependent individuals" in the state, which has a population of 27 million. Heroin was the most commonly-used drug, followed by opium, which is legally grown under government licence for medical use.

In the four weeks since the date of this year's polls was announced at the beginning of last month, the commission said more than 2.63 tonnes of drugs, including heroin and opium, had been seized.

That compares with a figure of 2.03 tonnes in Uttar Pradesh, which has a population of 205 million, and is also holding state elections.

Drugs have become a hot-button election issue, with opposition parties blaming the current state administration — an ally of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party — of looking

the other way at the crisis.

Candidates promise new laws or heavier sentences for drug offences, their tough-talking pledges warmly cheered at rallies.

But Romesh Mahajan, project director of an addiction rehabilitation centre, said campaigners for parties or independent candidates preyed on villages by offering them the same drugs they pledge to eradicate.

He said the problem was acute before the date was set for polls, which is when the commission's monitors will start trying to enforce a code of conduct with flying visits.

Some voters, particularly women, are identified as wanting money and are subsequently handed cash. Others, however, are identified as wanting their various addictions fed.

Rajendar, who attends Mahajan's clinic but asked that his surname not be used, said addicts were more than happy to promise their vote to a particular candidate, regardless of policies. **AFP**