

Nature of Drug Abuse in Punjab: Analysing “Myths and Realities”

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ABSTRACT

Drug abuse is posing major challenges to public health, mental well-being, law and order situation as well as socio-economic stability in the state of Punjab. It has become an important poll plank in Assembly as well as Lok Sabha elections. Given the extent and magnitude of the crisis it is imminent to study the nature of the problem and the possible solutions. A holistic and humanistic approach is required to understand and combat widespread drug abuse among the youth.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, Addiction, Synthetic drugs, Environmental Intervention, Rehabilitation

Asian Pac. J. Health Sci., (2021); DOI: 10.21276/apjhs.2021.8.2.22

The gravity of problem of drug abuse in Punjab is lost in between the opposing claims of myth and reality behind the issue. In an affidavit submitted to Punjab and Haryana High court it was stated by the government of Punjab way back in 2009, that “the vibrancy of Punjab is virtually a myth”. The affidavit affirmed that “Punjab is in the grip of drug hurricane which weakens the morale, physique and character of its youth” and that the “vibrant Punjab that had ushered in the green revolution is today living in dazed stupor as 67 percent of the rural households in the state have at least one drug addict” and also that “drug addiction has become a stigma that belies claims of prosperity in the state”. Once these details were highlighted in a public speech by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, his remarks ruffled feathers in political circles. After entering into the political arena the issue of drug abuse has been caught in the crossfire of allegations and counter allegations between ruling and opposition parties, both blaming each other for non-performance on this front as well as playing dirty politics. He remarked that seven of 10 Punjabi youth were hooked on drugs. The details of the affidavit was based on a 2006 study conducted by Dr Ranvinder Singh Sandhu, a professor of sociology at Amritsar’s Guru Nanak Dev University. Though the affidavit quoted Dr Sandhu’s study for stating that drug addiction in Punjab was 70 per cent but it made a blunder by not mentioning that the study had been done on a sample size of just 600 drug addicts. Despite the controversy over figures, the affidavit did not anyway missed to describe the impact of drug hurricane in the state. According to the study, 67 percent of the rural households in the state have at least one drug addict. Drug addiction has indeed become a stigma that has negated the image of the state as a prosperous state. According to the same affidavit as mentioned above 7 out of 10 college going students abuse one drug or the other whereas three out of 10 girls have abused one drug or the other and 66 per cent of the school-going students abuse gutkha or tobacco. No doubt, the problem of drug abuse has become an important poll issue.

Globally, alcohol was regarded to be the 7th leading risk factor for deaths and disability adjusted life years (DALYs) in 2016 that has caused 2.2 per cent and 6.8 per cent of age standardized female and male deaths, respectively. As far as India is concerned WHO has stated that 2.1 per cent persons in India above 15 yr have alcohol dependence.^[1] Substance use disorders have far reaching

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How to cite this article: Kaur M. Nature of Drug Abuse in Punjab: Analysing “Myths and Realities.” *Asian Pac. J. Health Sci.*, 2021;8(2):114-116.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

Received: 21/02/2021 **Revised:** 15/03/2021 **Accepted:** 07/04/2021

consequences for individual, family and community as a whole. In Punjab these have caused major public health concerns that needs to be addressed through appropriate interventions. As far as Punjab is concerned, it is stated that opiates, their derivatives and synthetic opiate drugs are the most preferred drugs in almost 70 per cent of the addicts whereas 16 % of the addicts consumed hard drugs. As the government has acted to interrupt the supply chain of synthetic drugs like heroin the drug dependents have resorted to pain killers and other medicines for their daily dose. Punjab government’s forensic lab officials said that the drug addicts were using morphine powder in place of synthetic drugs like heroin was impaired. Drug peddlers started selling morphine powder as a substitute of heroin, which is available at pharmacies. Besides pharmaceutical drugs such as Tramadol (opioid-based painkiller) and Buprenorphine (used for treatment of drug addiction), the most commonly consumed drugs are heroin, opium and “bhukki” (poppy straw). Controlled drugs like norgesic and an anti-allergic called pheniramine maleate are also consumed by the abusers by injections. Surprisingly, these drugs cannot be bought over the counter but are easily available in villages. Those with money prefer to inject heroin. However, the problem is so severe that “many sell their blood to procure daily dose of deadly drugs, even beg in streets to satisfy their addiction”.^[2]

Between February 2017 and July 2019, a study conducted by Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), revealed that three out of four addicts in the northern states get hooked to drugs before the age of 20 years. Rate of addiction is quite high among the people belonging to rural areas, particularly amongst farming and labourer households. However, problem

is also acute in urban areas. The same study suggested that between 60% and 75% of drug users are from general castes as agrarian distress and unemployment is quite high among these sections. It was found that there is a direct link between literacy and addiction as 97% of the addicts are either illiterate or have not gone to college. Regarding major reasons for the widespread drug abuse it was highlighted that the "Peer pressure, unemployment, consumption of intoxicants by elders in the family, easy availability of drugs, distribution of intoxicants by political parties during elections and patronage by political parties are responsible for drug addiction and abuse".^[3]

Lead author of the report, Prof. Ranjit Singh Ghuman of CRRID said that the problem in Punjab is much more serious than in other north Indian states. He explained that "the state is a transit route because of its proximity to the global "Golden Crescent" drug route (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran) and has become a consumer base due to easy availability of drugs". As mentioned earlier, drugs have been a menace in Punjab for past many years, however, it became a major poll issue in the 2014 Lok Sabha and 2017 state assembly elections. Earlier, a study conducted by the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, in 2017 had exposed that about 3 million Punjabis were dependent on heroin, opium, cannabis or some other kind of substance. As there is an alarming increase in the number of drug addicts in the states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh in the past three to four years, the chief ministers of seven northern states participated in a joint conference on combating the menace of drugs and agreed to share intelligence as well as decided to establish regional drug dependence treatment centre in the tricity with the Central government aid.^[4]

Government has aimed not only to nail down the peddlers and the offenders of the laws but has resorted to environmental intervention to check the glorification of drugs and drug abuse in Punjabi songs. Through such a law action will be taken against artistes promoting drugs (in songs). The Culture and Tourism Minister also appealed to the artistes "not to promote drugs in their songs and films or glorify gun culture" as they are considered role models by the young generation.^[5]

Punjab has recorded a high burden of substance use disorders. According to National Family Health Survey, the weighted prevalence of alcohol use disorders was 7.90 per cent and of other (illicit) substance use disorders was 2.48 per cent. The prevalence of tobacco use disorder was 5.50 per cent. Among 7.9 per cent persons with alcohol use disorders, the prevalence of alcohol dependence was 4.8 per cent and harmful use was 3.1 per cent. The prevalence of any substance use disorders was much higher in Punjab as compared to the combined prevalence in all 12 States that were surveyed.^[6] At the same time, it was found that prevalence of other (illicit) substance use disorders was highest in Punjab. The more threatening aspect is that the persons belonging to 30-39 yr, who constitute the most productive age group are the worst affected. There are many surveys that have consistently pointed towards the threatening proportions of the drug abuse in the state. The apathetic attitude of the governments towards the social problems of the people, be it unemployment, agrarian crisis or callous attitude towards socio-economic development, easy availability and access to drugs has compounded the health crisis generated by drug abuse. These issues have pushed the youth in the drug quagmire. Policies needs to be framed on the basis of these hard facts and should be implemented in letter and spirit while rising above politics of allegations and counter allegations.

Leadership needs to take positive concrete and holistic steps to eradicate this scourge or it can lead to disruption of normal life in the state. Punjab is heading towards a crisis of enormous magnitude whereby people are losing their loved ones to the drug menace. Even when the abusers have quit drugs, they are falling prey to relapse due to easy availability of it. Drug Addiction is indeed annihilating a whole generation of youth and devastating thousands of families across the state. Border districts are worst affected. Villages along borders are rankled due to the "bad name" because of the widespread drug abuse. As the drug traffickers had changed their overland route and that of all the narcotics drugs transited through India, around 40 percent were going through Punjab. "Punjab alone accounted for roughly over one-fifth of the total recoveries of heroin in the country. The traffickers are using porous areas on the Punjab border, trains and buses for smuggling afghan heroin coming via Pakistan which is moved for distribution within and outside the country," affidavit stated.^[7] According to the newspaper reports though there are Border Security Force (BSF) outposts set-up all along the international border, but there are huge areas which are not under surveillance that facilitates cross-border smuggling of drugs. In villages like Bidhi Chand Chhina and Naushahra—two of the many Indian villages located just meters away from the international border with Pakistan—the smuggling and availability of drugs like heroin is an open secret. As per official records, since 2014 and until January 2019, the Punjab Police has arrested close to 37,000 people for drug abuse under the Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act.^[8]

It is high time that Punjab policy-makers, law enforcers and public health officials follow International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy (2019), which include a comprehensive catalogue of human rights standards. For instance, it needs to be assessed that how and to what degree imprisonment for drug offences affects the nature and extent of the drug problem. Practically speaking, a 'zero tolerance and deterrence' approach has not proved effective, world over. In 2001, Portugal became the first country to decriminalise the possession and consumption of all illegal substances, including heroin and cocaine. Though the drug use was not legalised, but the purchase or possession of small quantities was left to public health intervention. Clearly, a person caught with a personal supply is given a warning, or has to pay a small fine, or is told to appear before a local 'Dissuasion Commission' hearing in an informal meeting. In the meeting he is informed about treatment, harm reduction and available support services. Consequently, number of drug-related HIV infections have come down to 95 per cent and the numbers of heroin users have also come down from 1 lakh to 25,000. At the same time the results of a survey conducted by AIIMS in 2018 reveal that Punjab had one of the highest prevalence of substance abuse across drug categories. In this regard the Punjab and Haryana High Court has directed the state government to establish rehabilitation centres in each prison of the state in order to check the drug menace. It needs to be emphasised that the strategy to deal with the drug menace should not be based only on supply reduction, but also on demand and harm reduction.

In Punjab about 70 per cent of the undertrials are booked under the NDPS Act. Most of these cases are related to possession offences. A study done by Vidhi Centre for legal policy (2018) stated that strict liability provisions have led to high convictions under the NDPS Act in Punjab. Moreover, it is found that around three-fourths of those sentenced under the Act are lower-level actors such as couriers and mules. These are quickly replaced and

does not make any positive difference to public safety. Moreover, they are rarely sent for treatment in rehabilitation centres despite the provisions that the courts and the prosecution can send those caught with small amounts for treatment in rehabilitation centres. There is a need to sensitise them about this provision. Further, police department should be sensitised to identify and differentiate between a drug user-turned-peddler and drug dealers, who are professional criminals. They need to acquire good investigation skills and enforcement mechanism. The management of prisons also becomes challenging with the drug problem. Prisoners try to get drugs inside. They explore every possible way to get an access to it. In routine tablets, opium, smack etc. are recovered from inmates. Hence addressing the availability of drugs in prisons requires constant vigilance and prompt action by the jail authorities. There are others who start taking drugs in prison. Mental health assessment is important to identify such at-risk prisoners. Moreover, the prison environment should be reformed in a way that they should be fully prepared for life after release so that they could cope up with the stressors and triggers that they would face once they are back from jail.^[9]

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