
DRUG ABUSE IN INDIA- AN ANALYSIS OF THE REALITY

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ABSTRACT

India is currently facing an unprecedented problem of drug abuse. The number of users and the quantity of substance in the market has been constantly on the rise. Drugs have been in use in India from time immemorial. But today the proportions of its use have changed drastically. Nowadays, drugs are available in the market in varying quantities and prices. It is alarming to note that a large number of youths are resorting to drugs to get relief from stress. What is even more concerning is the close nexus between drugs and crime. Crime rates in India have gone up significantly over the last decade and many studies show that drug abuse have contributed immensely towards criminal activities. Illicit drug trafficking is prevalent across all states in India. In fact, illicit drug trafficking is one of the major sources of terror funding. 'Narco terrorism' is the new phenomenon that is threatening the security of the country. While surveys have been conducted to collect data on the drug situation in the country, they have not been accurate due to large scale underreporting. In this article, an effort is being made to analyse the prevailing drug situation in the country. The fact that despite there being many laws to combat drug trade and use, but still there is only an increase in its use, that too at a rapid pace, is something to be concerned.

Keywords: Drug abuse, Illicit Drug trafficking, Narco terrorism, Darknet, Substance Use

Introduction

On 20th April 2021, the Indian Navy seized narcotic drugs worth Rs. 3000 crore from a Sri Lankan fishing vessel in the Arabian Sea off the Kerala coast¹. While news regarding seizure of drugs is not uncommon nowadays, this one reflects the magnitude of drug abuse prevalent in India. These numbers might shock any common citizen but in reality it represents only a small picture of the ever growing problem of drug abuse in India. What might be even more shocking is that they were suspected to be part of syndicates involved in terrorism. In the past decade especially in the last few years, India has seen alarming rise in the growth of drug abuse. According to the data from the National Crime Records Bureau and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment the number of drug users has been exponentially on the rise year after year. A large number of youths, in fact a significant proportion of them being teenagers are getting influenced by this racket. Apart from the drastic consequences they produce on the physical and mental health due to consumption, drug mafias are in fact turning out to be syndicates of crime. Majority of the criminals are also found to be active drug users. There have also been numerous incidents of film stars from various industries getting involved in cases of drug abuse. From being a mere feel good substance, drugs have grown in stature and glamour and today the so called 'drug industry' is even capable of controlling the economy of a country. These harsh realities point towards a devastating future and if not kept in control, the consequences can be adverse.

What is drug abuse or substance use?

Drug abuse, also known as substance use is the consumption of drugs in amounts or by methods which is harmful to the individual or others. Substances can include legal or illegal drugs as well as other substances that are not drugs at all. It is a form of substance related disorder. An exact definition of drug abuse is not available and it can vary with context. For instance the public health sector visualises it more as an evil to the society in the larger perspective. The critical issue in drug abuse lies not in its consumption but in its addiction.

¹The New Indian Express, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2021/apr/20/rs-3000-crore-worth-heroin-seized-off-kerala-coast-2292146.html> (Last visited 20th April 2021)

The magnetic power of drugs which interferes with the ability of the consumer to resist to its intake is the real threatening factor.

Many people are still unaware of how others get addicted to drugs. Addiction is a chronic disease characterised by drug seeking and use that is compulsive, or difficult to control despite harmful consequences. Most drugs affect the brain's reward circuit causing euphoria and rapidly increasing the production of the chemical messenger dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter which provides pleasure. A normally functioning reward system motivates a person to do activities that will provide pleasure like spending time with loved ones, reading etc. Surges in dopamine causes people to resort to unhealthy activities and also motivates them to do it again and again for pleasure. As a person continues to use drugs, the brain adapts by reducing the ability of cells in the reward circuit to respond to it. This reduces the high (or the sense of mental satisfaction) that the person feels compared to the high that he received in the initial intake- an effect known as tolerance. To derive the same high they consume more drugs. Over time the quantity of intake increases rapidly and people lose their ability to derive pleasure from normal day to day activities. Even if they wish to resist the intake of drugs they cannot do so because of withdrawal symptoms like severe body pain and mental depression.

Why do people use drugs?

Despite knowing the drastic effects of consuming drugs a large number of people still resort to drugs for pleasure. It is quite alarming that despite the laws being made more stringent and large number of persons going behind the bars there has been no let-up in the flow of new entrants to this racket. Some persons are trapped into this chain especially those from wealthy backgrounds. They are initially provided with free packets and once they get fully addicted the agents would demand money. In this way many persons are 'recruited'. Some of the reasons for voluntary intake of drugs can be listed as under:

1. To fit in: There is a common perception among many people that activities like consummation of alcohol, drugs would earn them more respect and increase their social values. Such activities are often viewed as those of the high class. Hence to fit themselves in the social setup, people resort to intake of drugs.
2. To relieve from stress: People experience stress from various walks of life like family, work pressure, academics (in case of students) etc. To relieve themselves from all kinds of stress, they find shelter in drugs.

3. For experimenting: There are certain persons who wish to experience everything in life whether good or bad. They might also receive suggestions from friends who could have become already addicted.

These persons think drugs might be the real solution to their problems but very soon realise that drugs are the real problem.

Drug abuse in India

India has a long history of substance use. From time immemorial, alcohol consumption has been prevalent in India especially among the upper class. They were symbols of superiority and value in the society in the earlier days. But today, the dimensions of drug use has have gone to a much higher level and cocaine, heroin, cannabis and opioids form the so called category of 'high class' drugs.

For a long time, there was no concrete data regarding substance use in India. The National Survey on Extent Pattern and trends of substance Use commissioned by the Ministry of social Justice and Empowerment and conducted in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2004 is the first of its kind which collected data from the household on the substance use in India and the magnitude of its consumption. The study reported that the prevalence of use of current Alcohol was 21%, Cannabis 3% and Opiates 0.7% among men aged 12-60 years. This data has been immensely useful and has been the foundation of many drug policies framed in India. However, this data suffered from certain limitations. Data was collected only from males and there were no estimates of the extent of substance use among the females. The sampling frame permitted findings only at the national level. Therefore the state wise variations on the pattern of drug use remained unknown. Only one methodology of household survey was employed to estimate the prevalence of all substances (legal, illegal, illicit and acceptable). Hence there was a high probability of under-reporting. To overcome these limitations and to have a concrete idea about the prevailing drug situation in the country the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, commissioned the National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance use in India in 2016. The primary objective of this survey was to provide national and state level estimates of the proportion and the absolute number of people who use various substances as well as those suffering from substance use disorders in India. The survey was conducted for the following category of substances: Alcohol, Cannabis (Bhang and Ganja/Charas), Opioids (Opium, Heroin

and Pharmaceutical Opioids), Cocaine, Amphetamine type Stimulants (ATS), Sedatives, Inhalants and Hallucinogens.

The survey clearly indicated that a large number of persons consume psychoactive substances in India though there are variations in prevalence across different states. Alcohol is the most consumed substance in India followed by Cannabis and Opioids. Cocaine, ATS and Hallucinogens were found to be used by a small proportion of the country's population. The results also showed that not all substance users used them in a problematic or pathological manner. Indeed only a minority of users met the threshold for characterising the pattern of their use as 'harmful use' or 'dependence'. The use is characterised as 'dependent' if the person is unable to survive without the consumption of substance.

Alcohol is used in every part of the country. Alcohol is not an exclusive male phenomenon. Though its prevalence among women is substantially lower than men, women of almost all the States use alcohol. While 27.3% of men use alcohol, the corresponding figure for women is only 1.6%. Also one in five men and one in sixteen women suffer from alcohol dependence. Alcohol use is also prevalent among children of the age group of 10-17².

In India cannabis is used as bhang, which is legally available in many states, and ganja and charas which are illegal as per the international drug conventions as well as the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985. About 2.8% of Indians aged 10-75 years are current users of any cannabis product. More number of persons uses Bhang as compared to Ganja. About 0.25% of the population use cannabis in a dependent manner².

The prevalence of current use of opioid was 2.06%. Heroin is the most commonly used opioid followed by pharmaceutical opioids and opium. A substantial proportion of the persons using opioids are using it in a dependent or harmful pattern. In case of sedatives, about 1.08% of the population were found to be current users of sedatives². Sedatives are pharmaceutical products which share the common property of being hypnotics and possessing dependence liability.

Inhalants are chemical products which share the common characteristic of being used by inhalational route and possessing psychoactive properties. Prevalence of inhalant use among adult population is 0.58% while among children and adolescents it is 1.17%. This is the only

²Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, Magnitude of Substance use in India, 2019, http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/Magnitude_Substance_Use_India_REPORT.pdf

drug category wherein the prevalence is higher among children and adolescents as compared to adults. Cocaine and ATS is used by a very small population of the country³.

Use of drugs through injecting route is a significant public health concern because of the associated risk of spread of infections like HIV and Hepatitis C and B. Findings show that there are an estimated 8.5 lakh people who inject drugs (PWID) in India. Other than the union territories of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, Injecting drug use was reported in all the States of the country. Opioids were the most preferred drug for injection. Among opioids, Heroin was the most predominant³.

These figures might suggest that only a fraction of the population has become drug users over these years. While it is true with regard to legal and acceptable drugs, when it comes to illegal and prohibited drugs, these figures are highly underrated and come nowhere near the real picture.

Illicit drug use

This data do not reflect the quantity of illicit drugs that prevail in the society and that which makes India one of the central hubs of illicit drug trafficking in the world. Illicit drug use and trafficking is highly prevalent among the youth in the country. According to the 2018 annual report by the United Nations backed International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), India is one of the major hubs for illicit drug trade. The drug categories vary from the age old cannabis to newer synthetic opioids like tramadol and designer drugs like methamphetamine. India alone accounted for 6 per cent of the world's cannabis herb (Ganja) seizures in 2016 (nearly 300 tonnes) and reported even higher quantities in 2017 (333 tonnes) – 20 per cent increase compared to 2016, the report by the UN office of drugs and crime said⁴. The report further says that the global trend of purchasing drugs over the internet, particularly over the 'darknet' trading platforms using crypto currencies has already spread across South Asia including India. A darknet is an overlay network within the internet that can only be accessed with specific software, configurations or authorisation and often uses a unique customised communication protocol. A darknet market is a commercial website that operates via darknets. They function primarily as black markets selling or brokering transactions

³Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, Magnitude of Substance use in India, 2019, http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/Magnitude_Substance_Use_India_REPORT.pdf

⁴DownToEarth, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/-india-is-one-of-the-major-hubs-for-illicit-drug-trade--63470> (Last visited March 06 2019)

involving drugs, cyber arms, counterfeit currency, steroids and other illicit goods as well as the sale of legal products. The report quotes a recent study of global internet facilitated illicit drug trade, which identified some online vendors of drugs over the darknet who appear to be operating from South Asia. More specifically, the study identified more than 1,000 drug listings from India published across 50 online crypto market platforms. South Asia also remains a target for traffickers smuggling illicitly produced opiates from Afghanistan to Europe and North America along the alternate part of the Southern route, which runs through Pakistan and via the Gulf countries, continues to East Africa and on to the destination countries.

The Golden Triangle is the area where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet at the confluence of the Ruak and the Mekong rivers. The name is coined by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency of US) and commonly refers to an area that overlaps the mountains of the three adjacent countries. The Golden Crescent is the area located at the crossroads of the central, south and western Asia. This space overlaps the three nations, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, whose mountainous peripheries define the crescent. These form Asia's two principal areas of illicit opium production. It has been one of the world's largest opium producing areas since the 1950's. Given India's proximity to these two drug giants, the country is highly vulnerable to the trafficking of narcotics. The bumper harvests of opium in Afghanistan for the last few years have given rise to increased supply of heroin in all the BIMSTEC countries. This issue was discussed at the two day conference on combating drug trafficking for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), held in 2020. Another major issue is the large number of methamphetamine manufacturing facilities that are prevalent in some of the BIMSTE countries. Another area of concern is the drug trafficking through sea route. While Bay of Bengal facilitates trade worth billions of dollars, the drug traffickers also use this vast network to their advantage. The emergence of darknet represents one of the ugly facets of use of technology for drug trafficking. The combination of darknet and courier/postal deliveries have made drug trafficking more anonymous in nature. These facts show the real picture of drug trafficking in the country. Drug trafficking has in fact reached highly advanced levels and the country needs to step up and re-organise its mechanisms in order to combat this ever growing menace.

Drug abuse and crime

Drug abuse and crime share a very dangerous relationship. Frequent intake of drugs would enable a person to shed the inhibition and fear of law to commit crimes. It would train their

minds to get more acquainted to crime. On the other hand getting involved in crimes would facilitate easy availability of drugs. Many people resort to criminal activities to pay for drugs. Reports have shown that, drug abuse and addiction has led to increase crime rate all over the world.

The nexus between drug traffickers, organised criminal networks and terrorists has created a force powerful enough to cause instability in the country. Money generated through drug trade has been used to fund various insurgent and terrorist movements. For instance, it has been estimated that money generated from the illegal sale of narcotics accounted for 15 per cent of the finances of militant groups in Jammu and Kashmir. Besides, criminal syndicates engaged in drug trafficking like the D-Company have themselves resorted to terrorist acts in the past. Further, drug trafficking facilitates other organised criminal enterprises such human trafficking and gun running, all of which use the same networks and routes to smuggle people, arms and contraband. For example, the explosives used in the 1993 Mumbai terrorist attacks were smuggled into India using the same routes through which drugs and other contraband items were trafficked. Even today, terrorist groups use these routes to source weapons and explosives across the border.

Terrorism and drug trafficking have in fact become very ‘intimate’ which has led to the coining of a new term ‘narco terrorism’. Today drug trafficking has become the most important source of terror funding. A large number of youngsters are also recruited to various terrorist organisations through these links. According to a very recent news report published on 1st July 2021, North Eastern India and Bangladesh are facing a new threat from narco terrorism as drug smugglers have changed their route for shipping in the popular narcotic, yaba, and involved Islamic student organisations, according to a report prepared by security and intelligence organisations⁵. Yaba is a combination of caffeine and crystal meth, in tablet form, which is extremely among party drug users in the subcontinent. Sources said that while the market of yaba remained Bangladesh for now, yaba and other drugs such as brown sugar are now being retailed in North India besides being transhipped to mainland India in ever increasing numbers. The smuggling of Codeine Based Cough Syrup (CBCS)

⁵The New Indian Express, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/jul/01/india-bangladesh-facing-new-narco-terrorism-threat-with-new-drug-smuggling-routes-report-2324058.html> (Last visited July 1, 2021)

has also increased manifold in recent months and one financier is believed running a major syndicate out of Siliguri in North Bengal. The above facts represent only a quantum of what is actually happening in reality. They are a huge concern on the national security. What is more concerning is that many of the channels of drug trade are still unknown and it is an ever expanding chain.

Substance use among juveniles

Substance use among juveniles of the age group of 10-18 has been ever on the rise. Nowadays students experience a lot of pressure from families, academics, and even their colleagues. Some would thrive under the pressure but a majority of them who are unable to withstand seek shelter in drugs. Lack of proper parenting is also a cause for more and more number of students resorting to drugs. The current digital life have worsened relations in the sense that people are more happy spending time in front of a screen rather than communicating and spending time with family or friends. Digital communication is all what everyone prefers. In such circumstances, when a person suddenly jumps into a problem, he would feel himself lost and all alone in the world. And when unable to find a proper solution, he would resort to drugs. In case of juveniles also substance use and involvement in criminal behaviour are interrelated. In a study conducted in 2016 on the substance use among juveniles, it was found that majority of the juvenile offenders were addicted to drugs. Greater the involvement in substance use, more severe was the involvement in delinquency. A large number of juveniles are even committing heinous crimes. The situation is getting worse day by day and it is high time we find a proper solution to this issue.

Conclusion

Drug abuse is perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by our country today, if not the greatest. Not only because it is growing at an exponential rate, but also because it can affect every sector of the country. The Parliament has enacted various legislations to combat this menace but it would not be wrong to conclude that the opponents are always a step ahead in this field. The chain is ever getting elongated and it runs from BPL workers to high profile VIPs. It cannot be said that the prevalent laws are weak to handle this situation. Implementation is where we are lacking. This situation can be brought under control only by a collective effort from the authorities as well as the citizens. The citizens must do their duty of providing necessary information to the authorities and the officers must take required action without any hesitation. One must realise that from being a mere psychoactive product, drugs

have achieved unprecedented heights and today they have the capacity to control an entire nation. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to combat this issue. A threat to a nation is a threat to each of its citizens and it can be defeated only through a collective effort.