

HOW PUNJAB WILL LOSE A GENERATION TO DRUGS

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Drug business brings a turnover of over \$500 billion, only next to petroleum and arms trade. Over 190 million people all over consume drugs and the consequence of this falls directly on society, neighbourhood and families.

The drug addicts turning into dealers, number of on-going tip-offs where political patronage is provided and the soft power of law and order involvement, continues to make *chitta* a flourishing business hub in Punjab which is trickling down into the young Indian spine across the nation. Survey estimates suggest over 2 lakh opioid users in Punjab, but the numbers are far far more.

A TV series depicts how deep-seated the drug menace goes and how those addicted to the same, die slowly while they live.

Drug abuse in India is a silent public health problem with "iceberg phenomenon" like implications. What is visible to society and what is showcased through popular movies like *Udta Punjab* is only the tip of the iceberg. However, the formation of the iceberg is visible only to the selected stakeholders who wish to go deep to view the same.

The business of drug dealing moves from the poppy farmlands of Afghanistan to the fields of rural Punjab and also to the board rooms of Patiala, Ludhiana, Chandigarh and others. The stakeholders range from rich aggressive young boys and girls, unemployed folks in search of meaning and existence, bored home-makers who wish to make quick money and even the police who are often

under-staffed and under-paid, and of course local politicians who provide the go ahead.

Over 75% of the Punjab youth are hooked to drugs and going by estimates every third family has 1 addict and at least 30% of the jail inmates have been booked and arrested for illegal possession of drugs under the NDPS Act. Among them, suspected HIV prevalence continues to be high. We need to understand that prisons are not made with a therapeutic intent from a public health perspective, but rather with a constitutional intent to protect. With the rising number of arrests, this cannot be a long-term solution any more.

The Punjab government commissioned a report of the Special Group on drugs which laid out preventive guidelines for tackling the issue. Massive awareness campaign was recommended for the same with no visible matrix to measure the impact. Unless drug abuse campaign is rolled out like a polio drive, it will not meet the logical conclusion desired. As per the report, over 5 lakh Drug Abuse Prevention Officers (DAPO) exist. While the DAPOs have a sensitive task for execution, it becomes important to strengthen and evaluate from time to time. How effectively they have worked remains to be understood.

I would like to offer the following public health solutions to the Punjab government in scaling up visible governmental effort to address the drug menace and to witness the revolution from below and not on paper.

All Primary Health Centers of Punjab must have a mandatory public health epidemiologist (MPH Degree) to map the disease burden, come up with localized strategy for combating drug abuse and the reporting must directly be done to the OSD to the CMO and DGP Office with a copy to DC, DHO and the superintendent of police where they must give a report within 15 days of any issue being flagged.

Special Drug Abuse Mentoring Committee to be set up at school levels to aid the buddy programme with master-level qualified counsellors, they will also work together with the public health epidemiologist in finding greater solutions.

Incentives and skill development fellowships must be provided to those who show commitment to quit drugs and the government must encourage them and mainstream them in problem fixation and also creating better solutions and alternatives.

The Cabinet sub-committee on drugs should re-think on the wider scope to engage stakeholders beyond ministerial nature if they are serious in resurrecting a losing generation.

Bring a creative approach to combating drugs rather than coming out with a combative campaign approach.

Multi-pronged approach by involving informants, carrying out work-force training, service delivery, community participation must be scaled up. All home-makers who wish to volunteer must be made mentors at different schools and a common capacity building module created for them to guide the children during play-time and also to train them to identify possible children with deviant behaviour. Their training must involve social skills, resistance skills and parenting skills where the school teacher and the home-maker volunteers work in sync.

Families which co-operate and report the issue to the government must be incentivised by giving one family member a government job and if they co-operate to wipe out the menace from the locality with proven result, they would be entitled to promotions.

Daily IEC on the Punjab Government Social Media platform and mandatory post sharing by all ministers holding Cabinet ranks in the government which has a trickle-down effect reaching the users and targeted stakeholders.

Creating documentaries where people have been cured and much of this to be made, not with statistics but with real-life emotions to convey the message.

Having celebrity endorsement and faith-based leader endorsement where people are encouraged to quit drugs and posting videos on a weekly basis. The government must bring out a social protection policy for economic welfare of drug abuse victims who show signs of healing. This will be a major shot in the arm.

School children holding placards must pledge for 'No Drugs' and this must be shared on the chief minister's social media platforms and best messages must be rewarded with face time with the chief minister and police officials.

Mental health screening will be encouraging if started at all Primary Health Centers. This also means increased spending on GDP for the State budget.

NGO Grant in aid for IEC activities must be initiated and promoted with realistic impact in the community.

For ensuring that present children, and their children's children get a better tomorrow, we must start soon before it becomes a losing battle we may fight.

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