

Fighting Drug Menace: RSTV – The Big Picture

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Guests -

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Larger Background:

- The international day against drug abuse and illicit trafficking is observed annually on the 26th of June.
- The decision to mark the day was taken on 7th of December, 1987 through a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly in order to strengthen global action and cooperation to achieve its aim of making the international society free of drug abuse.
- This year's theme '**Health for Justice, Justice for Health**' emphasises that justice and health are "two sides of the same coin" when it comes to addressing the problems associated with drugs.
- In February 2019, AIIMS submitted its report "**Magnitude of Substance Use in India**" that was sponsored by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.
- The study found that around 5 crore Indians reported to have used cannabis and opioids at the time of the survey. About 60 lakh people are estimated to need help for their opioid use problems and nationally, it is estimated that there are about 8.5 lakh people who inject drugs.
- Of the total cases estimated by the report, more than half of them are contributed by states like Assam, Delhi, Haryana, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim and Uttar Pradesh.
- Punjab ranks consistently at the top or in the top five in many of the surveys conducted.
- This edition of the big picture will analyse how to tackle the drug menace.

What kind of a problem is drug abuse?

- It is important to understand whether drug abuse is a social problem, a behavioral problem, a psychological problem, or a combination of all of these factors.
- Students in a technical institution get into drugs because of various pressures such as studies, work, etc.
- In medical colleges and engineering colleges, for example, one often finds that students go out of their homes, and stay alone; coupled with this is the fact that they have to really study hard in order to cope up with all kinds of stressors around them. Almost as a consequence, they end up using drugs to alleviate their stress levels.
- Students also try out these substances on an experimental basis.
- Often, the economically weaker sections of society, who work very hard, resort to taking drugs to relax themselves. Thus, drugs are taken as a bliss enhancer or a stress buster.

Drugs as a law and order problem:

- Drugs are not only a law and order problem, but it is a social problem as well. It is a cocktail of many factors. The cause happens to be the drug cartels and crime syndicates. Also, the ISI is a large supplier of drugs. The states of Punjab, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, have some kind of an international border through which drug trafficking takes place.
- One has heard instances of Maggi noodles, Pan masala, and gutka being laced with drugs and opiates.

- There have also been incidents of rave parties. There have been many instances of rave parties in Gurgaon, Noida, etc. These rave parties are largely drug parties. The police seem to be turning a blind eye for obvious commercial reasons. Largely nefarious activities take place during these rave parties. This is a law and order problem and the police need to put up their antennae high and see as to who these people behind the rave parties are.
- These rave parties are organized and orchestrated by the drug syndicates who have deep rooted vested as well as financial interests.
- Men and women of questionable backgrounds are invited to these parties. Drugs are laid out and all varieties of drugs are given and then people are made addicts.
- If one just takes around 3 doses of a particular drug, one gets hooked for a lifetime. This is a very scary situation, and one does hope that the narcotics department and the police departments do something and take proactive measures to ensure that at least our youth are safeguarded.
- We are currently seeing a very scary situation in Punjab and Assam and one hopes that the story is contained and controlled and that it is not replicated anywhere in the country.

Is there research that shows whether a particular age group is susceptible?

- There is plenty of international research, However, to some extent it is futile to develop some kind of a drug personality. This is because consuming drugs is also a cultural issue. There are also drug sub-cultures which are prevalent within the country. These drug sub-cultures are a huge problem.
- Tobacco is a major problem, and it is usually children who start (as an experiment), as early as 8-9 years of age. Then gradually they progress to alcohol. After alcohol, they progress to cannabis.
- It is important to note that the legally available drugs are also a huge health problem. Tobacco is a big problem and it is usually a gateway drug. Children as early as 8-9 years experiment with this drug. After this, they progress to alcohol and then cannabis.
- There are very large parties with vested interests who claim that cannabis is totally harmless. In fact, even when people started taking tobacco and alcohol, they also felt that these were equally harmless and that it was only over a period of time, that they understood that they were extremely harmful. Thus, drug consumption is a function of availability, and a function of a certain willingness to experiment along with the glamour that is associated with drugs. These are all the factors that lure people into taking drugs until they get hooked on to it.
- It is important to note that the legal drugs as well as the highly habit-forming opiates, as well as the party drugs are beyond the reach of most of the lower socio-economic strata of society, but they do constitute an element of risk for the higher socio-economic groups, who have a lot of disposable income.

How are we tackling the issue?

- Tackling the drug menace is a hugely complex issue. As far as quitting drugs is concerned, what we need to understand is that it is a voluntary process. The Government's role comes in only at a later stage. The doctors come in at a later stage. The availability of rehab or rehabilitation centres across the country has been a big issue.
- There are a number of non-governmental organizations, operating in the social sector, in the name of 'drug de-addiction'- however, one has seen reports after reports that tell us that the state of addicts in these 'rehab' centres are pitiable. In these 'rehab' centres, addicts are not being given the kind of therapy that they need.
- The real message to people suffering from addiction is that it is well within their powers to quit addiction.
- Having said this, an important question arises: **How does one quit addiction?**
- It is by first admitting and recognizing that one has a problem and then making the right choices which helps one quit. One has grown up hearing stories of celebrities, actors, etc. who have gone through many addictions. India is only now witnessing celebrities coming out into the open and

admitting that they do have an addiction problem. Also, the addiction is at various levels. Alcohol is the most abused substance in India. Thus, even if one can control alcohol consumption, one would make great progress. Also, more and more children are now taking to alcohol consumption. The highest percentage of children who are addicted to alcohol are in Punjab, followed by West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. One is currently looking at this problem going out of hand. Therefore the law enforcement agencies would really have to crack down on this. Prohibition can also be an answer to this. Maybe these radical political decisions would someday need to be taken. This is because if people do not exercise self-control, the state has to step in.

The Age on Onset being a major Issue:

- The **National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre** which carried out a report recently says that 16 crore people approximately are dependent on alcohol and the onset age is as early as 10 years! This is a shocking statistic. Our society is changing very fast. There are economic and political changes taking place.
- In fact, the consumption pattern as well has changed so much. We have also seen a major change in the income levels as well.
- Children who are left at home owing to various pressures of parents having to leave home for work, start experimenting with such illegal substances. In the Gurgaon-Haryana region (where the statistics of substance abuse is high), one observes that land has been a major source of revenue for people- this has created a class of society with high levels of disposable income. With a lot of free time in their hands and high levels of income, people generally spend their time in experimenting. Also, unemployment is a huge problem.
- Students of today are also facing high levels of pressure from their parents and peer circles- they often resort to drugs as a way of overcoming stress. Thus, it is with this kind of mindset as well that people get into drugs. Sometimes, we see students from other states, and often rural backgrounds who try to cope up in a metropolitan city like Delhi; they often resort to drugs as a means of temporary relief.

How do we tackle and deal with the situation?

- India is one of the major hubs for illegal trading. We know the supply routes- for example, Punjab is a route from where drugs come into the rest of the country. We have the 'African Route' and the 'South-East Asian Route' as well which are used to bring drugs to the country.
- The drug menace has already overwhelmed many of our states.
- As a way forward, the following steps should be taken: Education, Counselling (This would include the non-shaming of the person who is addicted to substance abuse. Also, he/she is a victim of crime and not a criminal. In our society, there is a tendency to shame people who are addicted to narcotics.).
- Furthermore, the NDPS Act has very strict provisions. This includes confiscation of property. It also has strict punishment for cases where the accused is a repeat offender.
- Next it is the ISI agents and drug cartels, along with various other groups which supply drugs- this needs to be stopped urgently.
- These are the crime syndicates which need to be checked.
- Confiscations should not just be made of the bank accounts of the culprits, but also of their movable and immovable properties as is mandated by the NDPS Act. As far as prohibition is concerned, there are certain tough decisions which the nation has to take, and this falls in line with the Directive Principles of State Policy as well. So, prohibition is an important step which can be taken.

A Note on the The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Amendment) Bill, 2011:

- The Bill amends the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, which provides for control and regulation of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and the forfeiture of property

related to illicit traffic of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

- The Bill adds a new definition of “central government factories” and amends the definitions of “commercial quantity”, and “small quantity”. In the Act, “commercial quantity” is defined as any quantity of drugs or psychotropic substances above the specified amount and “small quantity” is any amount less than the specified amount.
- The Bill states that the specified amount can be in terms of pure drug content or otherwise. This is to clarify that the entire quantity of drug seized should be taken into account while determining the punishment, and not just the pure drug content.
- The Bill broadens the definition of “illegally acquired property” to include not just property derived from income out of an illegal act under this law but also the equivalent value of such property. It also includes any property acquired out of earnings whose source cannot be proved.
- The central government may permit and regulate the sale, purchase or consumption of poppy straw produced from plants from which no juice has been extracted through lancing. The state government may permit the same, except those produced from plants from which no juice has been extracted through lancing.
- The Act stipulates that any person who consumes drugs specified by the central government shall be penalized with rigorous imprisonment of up to six months or a fine of upto Rs 20,000 or both. For drugs not specified by the central government, the penalty is imprisonment of up to six months or fine upto Rs 10,000 or both. The Bill replaces this with the provision that any person who consumes drugs in contravention of this Act shall be penalized with imprisonment for up to six months or a fine upto Rs 10,000 or both.

How difficult is it for an addict to come out of addiction?

- If drug abuse goes on to a dependence pattern, which means that the person cannot live without drugs, and that the drug becomes a primacy for his/her living, then it is extremely difficult to stop.
- But, that is not to say that people haven't done it. It needs a multi-pronged approach, i.e. strong medical intervention as well as support from the family.
- A patient does need help from psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers (who are able to understand the family and the context in which the person lives which can help him/her to get out of addiction), specialized nurses (who also form a very important part of the rehabilitation team), physicians (this is because many of our drugs, especially legal drugs like tobacco and alcohol, cause huge physical issues). They affect every aspect of the body and every system of the body.
- Therefore, patients need inputs from the physicians as well.
- Apart from that the family needs to be involved at every stage to understand the difficulties as well. They should not only be in a position to stand with the patient, but stand against the patient as well wherever required.
- For example, if the person who is dependent on drugs insists on taking it, then some limits may have to be set on his behavioural patterns, and the finances and money available to him/her.
- Also some social sanctions as well as some social support is needed in the larger context. This is because, on many occasions, even if a person recovers, society still stigmatizes that person. In the case of women, it is much worse. For men as well, the stigma persists, and therefore, they may be denied opportunities for employment and for rehabilitation. Thus, one has to address the entire spectrum- right from the availability of the substance, to the acceptance and glamourization of the substance in the society, and then ultimately, to helping the person get out of the addiction (if there is abuse or dependence). In this context, the de-addiction centres are definitely necessary. Also, people are able to get out of their drug dependence if they are able to stay away from drugs for a long enough period of time.
- In a well functioning de-addiction centre, people can actually be helped towards getting out of addictions.

Concluding Remarks:

- We are a nation of plenty of laws. The NDPS Act itself is sufficient if law enforcement were to crack down on illegal drugs. We even have children procuring prescription drugs that are not meant to be procured by them.
- The law infrastructure in the country is extremely weak. Lastly, we need to understand that addiction should not be seen as a character flaw. People who are addicts should understand that they are just like other normal people, and that it is just like other normal ailments that any person could be struggling with.
- Substance abuse addictions are powerful addictions as they alter brain function, and cause powerful cravings that the goal of sobriety seems almost impossible.
- People who are suffering from addiction should look at the lives of those who have been through worse and have come out of it.
- There should also be fast track courts in all the major cities of India which can result in timely convictions.
- Furthermore, those policemen and officials from the narcotics department who seem to be complicit or incompetent should also have to be dealt with.
- In conclusion, the curriculum that is being taught to the students at school must include heavy components on drug addiction and de-addiction, and the fact that it is not a temporary problem, but something that can be a lifelong issue. Thus, students at impressionable ages need to know what drug addiction is all about and the ways of de-addiction.