Indian state in grip of a drug epidemic

September 28 2012, by Ammu Kannampilly

On a muggy evening in the north Indian city of Amritsar, Sunil Sharma prepares for another heroin hit in a decrepit, abandoned building.

Before inhaling the fumes of his brown paste heated on a piece of tinfoil, the 23-year-old explained he had tried heroin for the first time six months ago when his girlfriend left him to marry another man.

"I feel bad... why have I become like this? Why have I tied this noose around my neck?" he told AFP, slurring his words.

There are thousands like him across the state of Punjab, which leads the country in drug-related crime with a rate that is nearly ten times the national average, according to police records.

In an affidavit submitted in 2009 to the state high court, the local government estimated that 67 percent of all rural households in Punjab were home to at least one drug addict.

Located on a long-standing smuggling route that sees heroin transported from Afghanistan via neighbouring Pakistan and on to markets elsewhere in the region, Punjab is now increasingly a final destination for the contraband.

When local couriers involved in smuggling "came to know that drugs have a lot of profit then they began to indulge in local selling of these things," says S. Boopathi, assistant inspector general of the state police narcotics cell.

He said it was impossible to estimate the amount of drugs crossing Punjab, but added that "trade is huge".

Rajiv Walia, regional coordinator at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) told AFP that Punjab had "a serious problem because it borders trafficking routes and drug-producing regions."

— "You will do anything to support the habit" —

In the 1970s, Punjab was regarded as India's "bread basket", due to its fertile soil, prosperous farmer community and booming agricultural output.

Some, like former addict Navneet Singh, see the growing appetite for drugs as "a problem of abundance."

Singh, a successful restaurant owner who has been clean for 11 years, grew up in a wealthy family.

He believes that Punjab's relative affluence and its cultural norms, coupled with the easy access to drugs, make addiction a commonplace reality.

"Punjab has a very macho culture, very prone to showing off. It's a ready-made market for drugs," the 38-year-old told AFP.

"What does the Punjabi do when he gets rich? He buys an SUV, a gun and he gets high," he said.

"Then as time passes and you get addicted you will do anything to support the habit," he added.

Doctor J.P.S. Bhatia has witnessed the problem of addiction in Punjab

from close quarters.

When the psychiatrist set up his hospital in 1991, he would see one or two drug-related cases a week.

Today, out of the 130 patients he sees every day, some 70 to 80 percent are battling drug addiction, he tells AFP.

In response to the expanding scale of the problem, Bhatia set up a rehab centre for recovering addicts in 2003.

"I see cases where the son is into addiction, the father is into addiction...the whole family is sick," he says, comparing the state's situation to "a ticking time bomb".

Those who are too poor to afford heroin or cocaine take to swallowing or injecting cheap prescription drugs or consuming a locally-produced crude form of opium called "bhukki", a tea-like drink made from ground poppy husk.

— "I can't see a way out of my life" —

The Amritsar neighbourhood of Maqboolpura has lost so many young men to overdoses or drug-related illnesses, that it is locally known as "the village of widows".

Schoolmaster Ajit Singh has two cousins who are addicted to crude forms of heroin. Another cousin, whose morphine habit saw him leave home to beg on the streets, died at the age of 31.

According to Singh, who grew up in Maqboolpura, the working class community here began to dabble in the sale of opium in the 1960s, when they realised how lucrative the business could be.

"First, it was an easy way to make money. Then they developed a taste for the stuff," he said.

Today, he estimates that each house along the 13 narrow streets that make up this neighbourhood is home to at least one drug addict.

Unlike his older cousins, Singh managed to finish school and he became a teacher of political science and a local community worker.

He began by offering evening classes to local children whose fathers had fallen victim to addiction and went on to found a school for more than 600 pupils.

Local mother, Kiran Kaur whose two children attend the school, worries for her husband who has struggled to find work as a labourer since developing a prescription drug habit.

"I have asked him many times to quit but I don't think he can do it," the 32-year-old sighed.

As she waited for her children to finish class, she added: "I can't see a way out of my life, but things can be different for my children if they study hard."

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