

# WE NEED A JOINT STRATEGY IN THE BATTLE AGAINST DRUGS

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The northern states of India — Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Rajasthan and the Union Territory of Chandigarh — have joined forces to fight what has been described in the international media as a crisis more deadly than the Sikh conflict of the 1980s: Punjab's drug problem. With its porous borders and proximity to international drug routes, Punjab is most vulnerable but other states are being affected now. This new joint strategy by the states and the recent regional conference on drugs to tackle the menace will have chief ministers of the states meet every six months, with nodal officers meeting more regularly to share intelligence and information on ground realities. Some of the major problems which need to be tackled are clear. One, criminalising drug addiction is not a strong enough deterrent [the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Act (NDPS Act), 1985], and two, the best solution is effective rehabilitation facilities for addicts to recover and re-enter society, through what's known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. This is what the new 'Central/Common Secretariat', set up in Panchkula, Haryana, should aim to establish in all the affected states. According to a survey titled 'Epidemiology of substance use and dependence in the state of Punjab, India' conducted by the department of Psychiatry, Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education & Research (PGIMER), 1 in 6 persons residing in the state have been dependent on any substance (with opioids being the most commonly used illicit drug) in their lifetime. Most victims of addiction tend to be between the ages of 16 and 35. This could quickly spread.

This joint strategy could be a game-changer for the states, with the government, police forces and experts from all states working together. But drug abuse is far more insidious than we think. We must understand that many of these drugs, with chemically addictive properties, leave the victims hopelessly dependent. Over a prolonged period, addicts lose cognitive control over their addiction. And since they get caught at impressionable ages, it leaves them extremely vulnerable. The solution has to be both preventive and reformatory. As a preventive, the need for an anti-drug environment is important across borders: addressing the drug problem in schools through initiatives and awareness campaigns. The Himachal Pradesh High Court recently laid down broad parameters to create mass awareness about the effects of drugs in the school curriculum. Addicts also need a conducive environment to reach out for help.

So far, the de-addiction centres which have been set up have had little impact. When an HT team visited a new de-addiction centre in Punjab, it was reported that it lacked basic medical facilities, and that government and private centres are at loggerheads. Awareness and employment drives are the only ways to ensure a long-term solution and the joint effort is a good start in what will be a long and painful fight against addiction.

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