

ON THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE TRAIL IN KERALA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

A rehabilitation centre for drug and alcohol addicts near Kochi. | Photo Credit: Thulasi Kakkat

On a rainy day in July 2019, 19-year-old Arjun went missing from his home in Kumbalam, a picturesque suburb of Kochi. His [body was recovered from a nearby swamp](#) eight days later. Inquiries revealed that Arjun had been murdered by a gang of four men in an act of 'cold-blooded' revenge for the death of a youngster in an accident for which they believed Arjun was responsible. The youngster killed in the accident was the brother of one of the members of the gang. The accused reportedly consumed drugs before they drugged the victim, too, to numb his defences. Then, they bludgeoned him to death, buried a dead dog close to the body to mask the stench, and hurled his mobile phone into an inter-State truck to give the impression that he was travelling.

In August 2022, the [body of a 23-year-old man, with injury marks, was found](#) wrapped in a sheet and shoved into the duct of a 16th floor apartment near Kakkanad, Kochi's IT hub. The police found that the apartment, taken on rent by bachelors, was a hub for substance abuse and trade. A dispute over a drug-related cash transaction of 50,000 allegedly led to the murder.

Between these two murders committed under the influence of drugs, the narcotics scene in Kerala has taken a turn for the worse. Ganja, or cannabis, is no longer the most sought-after dope, say excise officers. It has been replaced by synthetic and psychoactive drugs like MDMA (methylenedioxy-methamphetamine) and LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide). More expensive substances like cocaine have also made their way in from Bengaluru and Goa or from abroad. Worryingly, there are indications that the consumption of drugs has increased. On November 10, 75 gm of MDMA was seized in the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border taluk of Neyyattinkara, from an engineering diploma graduate who was on a bus from Bengaluru. This is just the latest in a string of incidents pointing to the spread of synthetic drugs and the involvement of young people.

"Narcotic substances eliminate all inhibitions and embolden people to commit gruesome crimes. The surge in narcotic use has led to a spike in crimes. We have now prioritised going up the supply chain to the source of narcotics rather than stopping with the peddlers," says C.H. Nagaraju, Inspector General of Police and District Police Chief, Kochi City.

But this is easier said than done, as drug cartels are reported to have become even more innovative and technology-savvy with their methods. In March this year, the Kerala Excise Department seized 31 LSD stamps in two separate parcels at the Kochi-based International Mail Centre of the postal department from the Netherlands and Qatar. The intended recipients were arrested and raids at their houses led to more seizures. Later, four more such parcels carrying LSD stamps and MDMA, which had been despatched from diverse destinations including the U.S., the Netherlands and Poland, were seized over four months. The orders for these had been placed on the Dark Web and paid for in cryptocurrency. With little technological wherewithal, the enforcement agencies were largely clueless.

The extent of the use of LSD in Kerala came to official attention in 2017 when a Facebook post promised a '12-hour non-stop ride with Mother Nature'. It mentioned a date for Facebook group members to meet in the "dark organic forest for a galactic experience with full night music". The location was a farmhouse on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. Undercover officers had infiltrated the group, which was also on WhatsApp. Slowly, the officers won the group's confidence. They soon learned that the leaders of the Facebook group had the hallucinogenic in the form of

stamp-shaped absorbent paper that users could ingest through the sublingual route (placing it on or beneath the tongue). The undercover officers persuaded the suspects to sell them a 'stamp'. Eventually, the police busted the rave party and arrests followed. The suspects had sourced 100 LSD stamps for 600 each from a peddler in Madiwala in Bengaluru. They hoped to sell them at the rave party for 1,200 apiece. Investigators say micro doses of LSD are cheaper than branded liquor and offer a more "enduring high".

"It is impossible to quantify the actual drug dealings happening over the Dark Web. There are even automated bots in applications like Telegram to identify potential clients and link them with human suppliers. Digital currency transactions also take place over a multitude of third-party applications facilitating the creation of private wallets. While transactions over these applications may be monitored, their purpose cannot be established. They don't have any evidential value," says Nandakishore Harikumar, a cyber security expert based in Kochi.

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Equally alarming is the surge in MDMA seizures across Kerala. For instance, [in Ernakulam district](#) alone, the quantum seized increased from 9.40 gms in 2019 to 600.72 gms in 2020 to 6.58 kg in 2021 and 1.94 kg till June this year.

In October, excise officials who netted [two drug peddlers with MDMA in Thrissur district](#) were in for a rude jolt. Among the 800-odd regular customers, on a list complete with transaction details and dues recovered from the peddlers, were about 250 schoolchildren. "From offering these children toffees laced with drugs to enlisting vulnerable students to introduce drugs in their peer groups, racketeers deploy various methods to expand their clientele. Drugs are given for free initially. Once the targets get hooked, they are made to pay for it. To find the money, they are forced into peddling. And the vicious cycle continues," explains an officer.

Sunny (name changed), 24, has been consuming sedative hypnotic drugs mixed with alcohol since his teens. At the height of the second wave of COVID-19 in 2021, he was escorted to a de-addiction centre in Ernakulam district. Though he was frisked and stripped of his possessions, during his counselling session, he pulled out a blade, which he had hidden between his two masks, and began lacerating himself. Sunny, who had been restless until then, suddenly began to regain his composure. Self-harm and the sight and "smell" of blood, as he describes it, helped Sunny rein in his impulsive behaviour when on a high. Sunny had a complicated childhood: his father was a chronic alcoholic. Sunny started smoking when he was 11, gradually progressed to alcohol, and then sedative hypnotic drugs and ganja.

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"Even those with an aversion to addictive substances owing to their childhood experiences may at some point veer towards these. This could be due to factors such as peer influence, the media, or cinema. First, there is a change in attitude towards drugs. This is followed by experiments with drugs out of curiosity. Soon, children start using them sporadically before turning regulars. The next stage is abuse followed by dependence and then addiction," explains Afra Shajahan, a counsellor at Nirmal Niketan Mukthi Sadan, Integrated Rehabilitation Centre for Addiction.

One of the dangers less discussed is of deadly drug cocktails being made by local peddlers to maximise profits and ensure that drugs are more 'affordable'. "While most drugs have textbook after-effects, addicts are now reporting non-uniform after-effects. For instance, while consumption of certain drugs in certain quantities alone leads to death, there have been

instances of users dying after consuming far less,” says Mohan Roy, who is with the Psychiatry Department, Government Medical College, Thiruvananthapuram.

With young children also in the narcotics business, enforcement agencies are on their toes. They suspect that juvenile delinquents are being used by drug carriers, especially in Kerala’s northern districts, where traders are trying out new methods. “We are carrying out a silent operation in which we are tracking the call records of students who are in touch with frequent offenders of drug trafficking. The contact list of some students is shocking,” says a senior police officer of the Narcotics Cell. The legal protection offered to students, especially minors in conflict with the law, is being leveraged by the mafia, he adds.

In 2010, 60 teenagers were arrested from Kozhikode city on charges of serial thefts and substance abuse, revealing how children are entrapped by drug rackets in the Malabar region. The police have actively conducted a State-level intervention project, ‘Our Responsibility to Children’, to arrest the phenomenon.

A Deputy Superintendent of Police working with the State-level Anti-Narcotics Special Action Force says the eagerness of junkies to retain contact with frequent offenders can be discerned from their social media chats, which the police retrieved recently from their mobile phones.

The total number of in-patient admissions in various [Vimukti de-addiction centres in Kerala](#) in the last five years was 6,392. A major share of them were students. Over 8,400 students sought direct or telephonic counselling for de-addiction during this period, according to figures available with the district de-addiction centres.

The Kerala Excise Department alone registered 31,607 cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in the last five years. In 2020, 5,674 people were arrested in drug-related cases; this number grew to 6,704 in 2021. Until October this year, 18,743 people were booked in cases under the NDPS Act. In the first nine months of this year, 1,364.49 kg of ganja, 7.7 kg of MDMA and 23.73 kg of hashish oil were seized. “Even if the high rate of seizure is taken as an outcome of heightened vigil, this is a distressing figure. The involvement of the youth in most of these cases was unmistakable,” says an official.

Kerala Excise Commissioner S. Ananthakrishnan says the strategy is “to consider drug addiction among youngsters as a disease and try to end the social stigma with proper curative intervention from the beginning.” As enforcement squads have practical difficulties in keeping a tab on the discreet activities of young people on social media, there are “options such as making direct interventions through peer groups,” he says. “What we do now is to track the social media connections and contacts of the suspects who have been in custody at some point of time, for follow-up action. We have also activated cyber patrol to keep an eye on suspicious profiles.” The department is also conducting a study to gauge the impact of substance abuse among the youth, he says.

Also read | [Call for public intervention to check drug abuse among children](#)

Ananthakrishnan also emphasises that parents and teachers have the primary responsibility of acting on time instead of removing their children from schools or colleges. But not all families are supportive. “In fact, the probability of an addict breaking free is proportionate to the support he/she receives from the family. Even those families who support their children in the beginning gradually give up if and when a relapse sets in,” says Shajahan.

The recent seizure by the Narcotics Control Bureau, of 200 kg of Afghan-origin heroin from an Iranian vessel off the Kochi coast, also points to the use of the Kerala coast as a transit by

international drug cartels. With the problem of drug abuse growing in scale and nature, the State has now rolled out a month-long multi-pronged campaign to sensitise the younger population to the dangers of drug abuse. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan highlighted the issue in the State Assembly.

In October, the State government also initiated preventive incarceration of habitual drug offenders. As law enforcers rarely use the provision in the Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, which provides for imprisonment without trial for up to two years, the government has ordered the police and excise enforcers to apply the law doggedly. It has also ordered for charge sheets in drug peddling cases to include the previous offences of the suspect to ensure successful prosecution.

With the 'No to Drugs' campaign entering its second phase from November 14, a high-level meeting chaired by Vijayan decided to cash in on the football World Cup fever in the State to organise a 'two crore goal challenge' in government offices, educational institutions, IT parks, public spaces, and bus stands. The Social Justice Department has been asked to set up more de-addiction centres, and local bodies have been directed to ensure that local stores put up boards declaring that they do not sell addictive substances. The police and excise officials have been instructed to intensify combing operations and make the details available to the public.

While the government campaign seems comprehensive, problems persist. A mother of a teenager at a school in Alappuzha has been desperately looking for ways to save her son, who had been peddling drugs. With the school authorities doing little to help, she approached the police. But they did not help either. The battle for families like hers, as well as for the government and the victims, could be long-drawn and enervating.

With inputs from G. Anand

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