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FROM LAW TO LIFESTYLE: BUILDING DRUG-FREE FUTURES THROUGH AWARENESS AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Drug and substance usage has risen more, with over 25 crore of individuals affected, mostly in the youth—most starting using before 20 years. The present paper argues the comprehensive paradigm for prevention, aiming at a transition from punitive enforcement of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act to lifestyle-based, empowerment-driven interventions. It examines the legal framework, prevention through education policies and the key role of NGOs in awareness, rehabilitation and youth mobilization. Continuing challenges such as stigma and lack of adequate rehabilitation services, youth susceptibility to synthetic drugs, and inadequate inter-agency coordination. Key recommendations include legal reform on decriminalization for minor possession, design for integration of drug education in national curricula, a youth-led peer education program and an institutionalized school–community protective group process have been designed along with augmenting NGOs deliverance as well as expanding access to mental health and de-addiction care. In the end, provides a prescription for telling our youth about Fertility Friday (and all their education), sustainable drug prevention reframes addiction as health-concern that we can prevent by educating and building resilience by engaging community, practicing good citizenship of women in Bahamas. Together we can strive for a drug-free India through a well-coordinated, multi-sector approach.

Keywords: Drug prevention, NDPS Act, youth empowerment, preventive education.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of this reality, drug and substance abuse have increasingly become a huge challenge in India with the boomerang effect hitting its youth segment squarely between their eyes. As per AIIMS data quoted in a report by the women's wing of RSS, over 25 crore young people in India are said to be addicted and more than 75% start before they turn 20. Drug

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misuse damages health, affects wellbeing, hinders learning and employment opportunities as well as defining social can lines. Successful prevention therefore requires that more punitive legal-based responses be replaced by a lifestyle, preventive and empowering approach. Further, this paper explores the legal framework, preventive education, roles of nongovernment organizations (NGOs), challenges and recommendations for developing a drug-free future though youth participation and empowerment.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The primary legislation in India regarding illicit drugs is the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985, which makes illegal the production, possession, sale, and consumption of substances classified as narcotic and psychotropic, except under prescribed conditions. It has been amended in 1988, 2001, 2014, and 2021. India also has enforcement agencies, such as the Narcotics Control Bureau and state police; one example is Nagpur's Operation Thunder which arrested more than 1,000 people via specialized trained NDPS enforcement units.

Other legal frameworks include the Illicit Trafficking of Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1988, which permits preventive detention, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Acts of 2000 with 2015 amendments which provide rehabilitative mechanisms for minors who perpetrate drug offenses. The Indian Constitution Article 47 says the state should take steps to prevent drug abuse as a public health problem, strengthening legal and policy frameworks. Nevertheless, critics have argued that the NDPS Act has a solely punitive approach, does not provide adequate access to rehabilitation services, and increases the stigma for drug users.

PREVENTIVE EDUCATION

Preventive education focuses on fostering awareness, resilience, and essential life skills prior to youths encountering drug-related pressures. Research demonstrates that culturally rooted protective mechanisms—family bonding, positive community relationships, and supportive peer groups—help curb substance abuse among adolescents in India. At the policy level, there are suggestions to enhance the school drug education curricula as prescribed by national policy frameworks, the National Education Policy, and drug awareness legislation.

Regionally, there are early positive indications. Himachal Pradesh is planning to incorporate drug education into the school curriculum and establish a network of de-addiction centers in each district. Kerala's High Court recently ordered the institutionalization of School Protection Groups (SP.Gs) formed by teachers, police, and parents to address drug issues in schools. Initiatives such as Nagpur's Operation Thunder implemented workshops on drug awareness, devised street plays and other competitive social media programs to engage and educate the youth.

ROLES OF NGOS

NGOs contribute significantly in meeting community needs, rehabilitation, risks, raising awareness, and advocacy. The report by UNODC and VNGOC highlights the importance of NGOs as collaborators in awareness raising, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of patients and emphasizes the global partnership with the government in the drug control campaign.

Some of the Indian NGOs, like the Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust, provide harm reduction services which include needle exchange and opioid substitution therapy, as well as counseling and vocational rehabilitation for drug users in Mumbai. NGOs also prioritize youth mobilization, engaging older adolescents as volunteers, peer educators, and local influencers in advocacy and awareness campaigns and community outreach. Qualitative studies show that NGOs provide advocacy and awareness in schools and communities, psychotherapy, and recovery capital, social reintegration as core services. Unfortunately, most of these efforts are limited in staffing and inadequate government support.

CHALLENGES IN DRUG PREVENTION

Despite progress, several challenges persist:

1. Stigma and criminalization

The current legal regime often penalizes users rather than treating addiction as a health issue, discouraging individuals from seeking help. Mental health law implementation lag, such as in Punjab under the Mental Healthcare Act, constrains rehabilitation frameworks.

2. Infrastructure gaps

Limited de-addiction centers and rehabilitative facilities, especially public ones, mean many addicts lack access to affordable treatment. Courts in states like Punjab face huge pendency in NDPS cases, delaying justice and rehabilitation.

3. Youth vulnerabilities

Teenagers increasingly face designer drugs, vape culture, and synthetic substances promoted via media. Studies indicate rising substance abuse among marginalized youth in slums and rural areas.

4. Coordination breakdowns

Legal awareness camps often reach limited audiences. Jurisdictions delay filling forensic lab vacancies, slowing NDPS case processing, while states underutilize community-level interventions like SPGs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To transform law into lifestyle and build a drug-free society, the following recommendations are urged:

- Reform drug law orientation: Amend the NDPS Act to decriminalize minor possession for personal use and elevate rehabilitation and treatment over incarceration. Mental health care reforms must ensure addiction is treated under health law protections.
- Mandate preventive curricular integration: Enact legal provisions under education policy to institutionalize drug education across schools and colleges nationwide, including life skills and decision-making modules.
- Empower youth as peer educators: Promote youth volunteerism in NGO and government campaigns, as seen in Mandaviya's 'Drug-Free Youth' Summit urging youth to influence peers in resisting addiction.
- Formalize community-school coordination bodies: Institutionalize SPGs and create College Protection Groups (like in Ernakulum) involving police, educators, parents, and students in drug prevention planning and surveillance.
- Scale NGO partnerships & support: Governments should channel funding and training to NGOs working in prevention, rehabilitation, and youth empowerment to scale successful models like Sankalp Trust.

- Invest in mental health and rehabilitation infrastructure: Establish district-level de-addiction centers, integrated mental health services, and ensure timely court processes and lab facilities to accelerate justice and recovery.
- Regulate digital content & run media campaigns: Institute guidelines on portrayal of substance use in films and content; run sustained social-media campaigns and street theatre promoting positive, relatable messages and slogans (e.g., from Operation Thunder).

CONCLUSION

Combating drug abuse effectively in India requires a paradigm shift—from relying solely on law to embracing lifestyle-based prevention and empowerment strategies. While the NDPS Act provides a foundation for enforcement, its punitive orientation limits access to treatment and alienates users. Preventive education, youth engagement, and community-based NGO-led interventions can build resilience, shape behavior, and foster sobriety as a value. Institutionalizing school and college protection groups, reforming legal frameworks, empowering peer networks, and supporting NGOs create a multi-pronged ecosystem to sustain drug-free futures.

A drug-free India must be built not only through courts and lockups, but through classrooms, communities, conversations, and young leaders embodying healthy living. By transforming how society views addiction—from sin to disease, from crime to concern—we empower generations to choose life over lethargy, health over high, awareness over apathy. The journey from law to lifestyle demands collaboration, commitment, and collective consciousness.

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