

one such academy in Cheema, a small town, in Sangrur district of Punjab. He subsequently took up a vocational course in music and is completing his studies simultaneously.

A school called hope

Jagjit Singh, who manages 30-odd youth from Punjab at the academy in Himachal Pradesh's Sirmaur district, says many children stay back to work with the trust while some prefer to return to their villages.

The problem of narcotics is not limited to the youth, he stresses: over 50 percent of the administrative staff at the Sirmaur academy was once addicted to drugs.

"The police claim they seize large quantity of drugs each year but a large amount of it still finds its way to these children," he rues.

About the Akal Academy, Singh says it started with just five students and a single room in 1986 and today has established a chain of schools in rural Punjab. Though they all are established in villages, the schools, Singh says, offer quality education at par with the best schools in the vicinity.

So far, 129 schools have already been established across the villages in the state, of which 19 are senior secondary, 40 are till class VI or more, and 70 are primary and pre-primary-level institutions. In all, about 60,000 students are enrolled in these 129 schools, with the number increasing each year. They are taught by about 4,650 teachers and other supporting staff.

Kalgidhar Trust opens schools till class II to maintain the minimum quality requirements of the CBSE. Every year, each school graduates to the next class, with the required classrooms, laboratories and other infrastructure needs added accordingly.

All this is done without any financial support from the government, say officials from the Trust.

The academy has 25 percent of students from families hailing from marginalised sections of the society with an annual income less than ₹80,000 – these students are admitted free of cost. This is a practice followed much before the Right to Education Act was implemented in the state. The

How big is the menace?

- ✓ 67% rural households in Punjab have at least one drug addict
- ✓ Household survey conducted by International Classification of Diseases of the UN (ICD) indicates there is at least one drug addict in 65% families in Majha (comprising districts Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Tarn Taran) and Doaba regions (Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala)
- ✓ 64% families in Malwa region (including Bathinda, Mansa, Muktsar, Patiala, Sangrur districts) have one addict each
- ✓ 3 out of 10 girls have abused one or the other drug
- ✓ 66% school students consume gutka or tobacco
- ✓ Nearly 7 out of every 10 college students abuse drugs in some form or the other
- ✓ A key reason is the easy availability of drugs in Punjab
- ✓ The state's proximity to the nations in the 'golden crescent' (Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have a long history of opium production) has made it a transit point for entry of drugs in the country. The problem spreads to rest of Punjab from the border districts
- ✓ Till a few years back only the border areas were affected by drugs but now it has spread to other districts as well

Source: State govt's affidavit submitted to Punjab and Haryana high court in 2009



An academy in Cheema in Sangrur district where drug rehabs study with 'other' children.

trust, officials say, is now working to increase intake and admit another 25 percent children from economically weaker sections.

The trust, officials say, now has its eyes set on opening a total of 500 such academies in villages of Punjab.

The organisation, Kalgidhar, was founded by Teja Singh, a social activist who returned to India after completing his education from Harvard University in 1963 with an aim to provide education to village students. It was registered as a trust in 1982.

Such is the significant role these academies have played in bringing social change in villages that many now want the trust to start such institutions in their villages and are willing to provide land and other support.

Lessons against drugs

Besides playing a key role in helping children and the youth to quit drugs, these academies are also motivating them to inspire other family members to say no to all kinds of addiction.

Take Kangandeep Kaur, for instance. The class VI student at the academy in Cheema says she used to be scared of her father, who often returned home drunk and took "some form" of drugs. As a result, she had never interacted with him.

"We are taught (at school) that drugs and alcohol make us handicapped; we cannot think for our families and the society. I have been part of anti-drug rallies and street theatre conducted by the school. But at home I used to see my father drinking every day and getting violent. I was scared of him and would never talk with him," she says.

But one day, at dinner, Kangandeep refused to share the table with her father and that changed the life of her family forever. "My mother had pleaded umpteen times for him to quit drugs and alcohol, but to no avail. I did not know how to tell him. Two years back, I decided to boycott him, and that really affected him," she says. "Next day, he came to me and promised that he would quit alcohol and drugs forever. I could not believe it, he was an addict for more than 10 years! But he kept his promise."

Giving all credit to the young girl, Kangandeep's father, a smalltime businessman, says: "Many people had urged me but I could never quit. These children are given value-based education (at Akal academy) and it's because of her that I could come out of it."

There are many private schools nearby but none really focus on value-based education, says Gagandeep Singh, another student at the academy. He also blames the government for not doing enough to get rid of this menace.

"Liquor and drugs are openly

Punjab's de-addiction centres

- ✓ 5 categories of de-addiction centres run in Punjab: licensed centres (approximately 35), centres run by medical colleges, psychiatric hospitals, centres run by Red Cross and illegal centres (in thousands).
- ✓ The authority to license de-addiction centres was set up only two years ago – after reports of patients dying of physical torture.
- ✓ Dr Col Rajinder Singh, who runs a licensed de-addiction centre at Cheema Sahib, Sangrur, says most illegal centres give only custodial care where patients are often beaten or are given substitutes of drugs they are addicted to.

distributed to swing votes during elections and a whole generation has succumbed to this," says Gagandeep, who lost his father because of drugs and alcohol. "In fact, the sarpanch or the panchayat of some villages get

commission on sale of liquor."

Manjeet Kaur, principal of the academy at Cheema, which has over 1,700 children, says though many states face the problem, consumption is high mainly because the state has the problem of plenty. "People have a lot of money here (in Punjab). And with education having long taken a back-seat along with high unemployment, the youth get easily attracted to drugs accessible in the state," she said.

At another village, Fategarh Gaudan in Sangrur district, Rajveer Singh says he moved his children from a private school to the Akal Academy two years ago. The reason, he says, was the increasing drug problem among schoolchildren. "Students sell drugs outside their schools, and you cannot keep eye on your children 24 hours. There are many private schools in and around our village but the kind of education and social environment this academy is providing our children is not available anywhere.

"In return, they hardly charge anything."

Harvinder Singh, the village sarpanch, says 40 percent of the 600 households in the village are affected by drugs at one point. "Drugs like heroin and smack aren't the only problem. A large number of people get their daily fix from medicine shops as well. People often say that two things open early in Punjab – liquor shops and medicine shops."

Illegal chemist shops in Punjab have been raided regularly but most end up reopening within a few weeks.

Stressing that the academy has helped saving many children from taking the drugs route, sarpanch Harvinder Singh says: "Families in Punjab are now looking hard for quick-fix solutions for their children to come out of drugs. And when we are unable to see the political will to address this menace, academies run by the trust are proving to be a savior for many. It would, however, be a long time before we can call Punjab a drugs-free state."

Till then, the Akal academies are taking nano-steps to do the needful – in whatever small way. ■

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