

A line of rural academies is tackling the narcotics and alcohol menace in Punjab – a state where nearly 70 percent households have at least one member addicted to drugs



After drugs, hooked to books!



Jasleen Kaur

The national media, and as a corollary the nation, woke up to the narcotic menace prevalent in Punjab when Congress leader Rahul Gandhi highlighted the issue a year ago. Addressing a rally in Sangrur, Punjab, in October last year, Gandhi, now the party's vice-president, said seven out of 10 youths in the state suffer from drug problem.

Suddenly, the lid was off. But what everyone missed in the hullabaloo was the simple yet stark fact that the can was always full of worms

– at least it has been over the last few decades. Or so it seems.

Ask Jagtar Singh, for instance. Now 17 and off addiction, Jagtar had barely stepped into his teens when he started consuming 'bhukki', a residue of opium, a very popular mode of addiction that was easily available in his village – Kakrala Bhaike in Patiala district – like it is in most villages of the state. From heroin and cocaine to pharmaceutical drugs – the boy took them all in the next three years or so.

A rich landlord, Jagtar's father was one of the most prosperous men of Kakrala Bhaike. Money, thus, was never a problem. But graduating from bhukki to other substances (throw in alcohol to the list), and it drills a big hole in your pocket – Jagtar admits stealing money from home and, at one point, spending as much as ₹1,000 a day on drugs and alcohol.

Later, Jagtar says, he started getting

commission on sale of drugs to other young children in the village: "If I could add 10 children, I could get a day's dose for free." So where did it all start? Shockingly enough, at the government school in his village, where he studied till class VI. "No one in our school told us that drugs are harmful. In fact, most of our teachers were on heroin, alcohol and tobacco."

Not all such addicts come from affluent families, though. Gagandeep Singh, for instance, left studies in class V to work at a tea stall for the money he needed to buy drugs. Having caught the addiction at the age of 12, for the next five years he consumed anything he could afford – bhukki, zarda, opium and any capsule they can manage to lay their hands on, he says.

It was not difficult to get them, says the youth from Dhaula village in Barnala district. "There are known drug peddlers in my village, and you can



Jagtar Singh (left) and Gagandeep Singh (right) were among thousands of Punjab's youth who get hooked to drugs while barely into their teens.

get over the counter capsules even at medical stores," he says. "Shopkeepers earlier sold prescription drugs and capsules but now give it only to regular buyers."

In Punjab, Jagtar and Gagandeep's story is as common as mustard fields portrayal of the state for Hindi films. The record books say a staggering 70 percent of the youth is hooked to drugs, as Rahul Gandhi said in October 2012 citing an affidavit submitted by the state government to the Punjab and Haryana high court in 2009.

You name a drug and its use is rampant in Punjab. And the problem cuts through the caste and class barriers – as Jagtar and Gagandeep's cases highlight. So while the rich get high on heroin and cocaine, the poor depend more on bhukki, pharmaceutical drugs and injections. Many get their daily dose from cough syrups like Corex, Phensedyl or tablets like Proxyvon – available over the counter.

According to a government estimate, over 7,000 patients undergo treatment at government and private drug de-addiction centres in the state every year. The success rate is barely 30 percent. After the treatment, experts say, most patients either go back to drugs or get addicted to pharmaceutical drugs they are treated with (there are cases of people getting hooked to even Iodex).



"De-addiction centres are not the solution for children like Jagtar (an addict who kicked the habit). A

whole generation has been destroyed because of drugs but we can save the children by treating them, and also bringing them on the path of value-based education."

Jagjit Singh of Akal Academy in Sirmaur who monitors rehabilitation of children and youth addicted to drugs

Bypassing de-addiction centres

So what did Jagtar and Gagandeep do differently? Unlike many others, these boys did not take the de-addiction centre route. Instead, they returned to school, attending classes and also undergoing vocational training to stay away from narcotics.

"Many of my friends went to de-addiction centres, where they were kept for six months. But only one of

them left drugs and started working with his father. Others got back (to addiction) after leaving the centre," Jagtar says.

Jagtar says his father put him in Akal Academy in Sirmaur district of Himachal, run by the Kalgidhar trust, that has several such branches in rural Punjab to help such children and their families quit drugs through value-based education. The academy, he says, is even providing them skills to take up jobs once they leave the institutions.

In less than a year's time, Jagtar says he has changed "completely" – a change that he would not have experienced had he taken the de-addiction centre route. "It is not easy to quit drugs," clarifies Jagtar, now studying the bridge course to appear for regular class X examination as also doing a vocational course in management system to improve his job prospects.

"I ruined precious years of my life and till I didn't know whether I have a future," now baptized, Jagtar says he is studying free of cost.

"De-addiction centres are not the solution for children like Jagtar," says Jagjit Singh, who monitors rehabilitation of children and youth addicted to drugs at the academy in Sirmaur. "A whole generation has been destroyed because of drugs but we can save the children by treating them, and also bringing them on the path of value-based education."

Calling de-addiction centres a growing business in Punjab, he says value-based education is "not just helping them (drug addicts/victims) but also inspiring elders in their family."

He says it was not easy for the academy to bring Jagtar out of drugs: "He would find reasons to go to the hospital in the academy and would steal medicines to use as an alternative to drugs. But we believe these children recover faster when they study with other children."

Gagandeep was also able to get rid of drugs earlier this year with the help of