

The Menace of Drug Addiction and Alcoholism amongst Sikh Youths in Punjab

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The papers read at the International Sikh Confederation (ISC) conference held in April 2006 in Chandigarh and published in the Abstracts of Sikh Studies, July – September 2006 (Vol, VIII, Issue 3) were very interesting and contain a good deal of information and suggestions which I found myself nodding in agreement with all the way through. The Institute of Sikh Studies is to be congratulated for organising this conference so successfully.

The papers dealing with education were most lucid and helpful. S S Johan's paper on the Socio-Economic Status of Sikhs has given a clear penetrating analysis of school education in Punjab and misuse of alcohol and drugs amongst Sikh youths.

S S Johal states that “the disturbing aspect that needs serious consideration is the menace of drug addiction and alcoholism that is eating into the very vitals of the community, especially in the rural areas”.

What we see and read in the media is that the consumption of alcohol and other drugs is becoming a serious problem in Punjab. There is hardly any social function in Punjab where alcohol is not served. The per capita alcohol consumption in Punjab is considered one of the highest in the world and every indicator of alcohol-related harm has shown a substantial increase. Use of illegal drugs is also increasing among teenagers and the use of ‘smack’ and alcohol in high schools is increasing at an alarming rate. Even Punjab teenagers are seen celebrating various occasions with beer and champagne (The Tribune, December 12, 2005). The survey conducted by the Institute for Development and Communications based in Chandigarh in 2003 found that every third male and every 10th female student in the state has had drugs on some pretext or on one occasion or the other.

Young people are also regarded as vulnerable by the print media in Punjab. Their alcohol and drug misuse has become the focus of public concern. It is not a small minority of young people who are involved but, a fairly large proportion. This certainly needs to be taken seriously by our Sikh community leaders. But how can we minimise or eliminate the problem of alcohol and drug misuse?

Having taught health and safety education and promotion to undergraduate and post-graduate student teachers in the University of Reading for a number of years and seen health education being taught as part of personal, social and health education in British schools, as well as being involved in the evaluation of school health education programmes, I am of the opinion that this problem of alcohol and other drugs misuse needs to be solved through education in schools and at home and mass media communications. We have to find out what derive the youths in Punjab to take up such substances.

Education is the most powerful instrument to meet the challenge of alcohol and drug misuse. Education is not only concerned with equipping students with knowledge and skills they need to earn a living. It must also help our young people to: have respect for other people, other cultures and other beliefs; become good citizens; use leisure time creatively; think things out for themselves; pursue a healthy and safer life-style; and, not least, value themselves and their achievements. It should develop an appreciation of the richness of our cultural heritage and of the spiritual and moral dimensions of life.

For education to be effective, it is necessary to have some understanding why young people drink and why they take psychoactive substances and in what way. This will be a useful first step in forming policy, development and practice aimed at reversing the worsening trends highlighted in the media. A credible starting point is to explore the motivations, values and meaning that young people ascribe to such drinking and drug taking behaviour. Our Sikh youths need guidance and we need to involve them in finding ways to minimise the harm from this risky life style of drinking and drug use, and to develop teaching and learning materials for use in schools.

If young people are to be able to make informed decisions about alcohol- and drug-related issues they will need information on all aspects of their misuse. There is thus an urgent need that young people are given information about the harmful effects of over-indulgence in drug and alcohol upon themselves, parents and community. The SGPC has a very important role to play to keep our youngsters away from alcohol abuse.

“Upon the education of the people of this country, the future of this country depends.”

Benjamin Disraeli, the prime minister of Britain spoke these words in 1874 when Britain was at height of its economic power. These words can equally be applied to the people of Punjab. It is even more so today for the state of Punjab. In a highly competitive world there is nowhere to hide.

In conclusion, I endorse whole heartedly S S Johal’s statement that “education and health are the two basic determinants of economic well-being of an individual”, and the Sikh community leaders in India and abroad should take this acute problem seriously.

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