

Drugs Abuse as an Issue in Electoral Politics of Punjab: A Study of General Parliamentary Election of 2014

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Abstract

In democracies, Political parties and candidates aggregate the interests of voters and contest elections. These interests broadly become the political issues of a particular election. For political parties and candidates, apart from political ideology, these issues are very important in respective elections. Most of the issues are changing in nature and impact the electoral politics of a particular era. Drug abuse as a social problem is not new in Punjab. But it became a very prominent election issue in the general parliamentary election of 2014. This issue influenced the voting behaviour of the people. It is interesting to study in these elections that comparatively a new political party, i.e. Aam Admi Party, emerged in the arena of electoral politics of Punjab and became a challenge in competitive politics for traditionally established political parties like the Indian national congress and Shiromani Akali Dal. The present paper is a humble attempt to understand the phenomena that how a social problem like drug abuse becomes an important issue and changes the surface of the electoral politics of Punjab.

Keywords: Aam Admi Party, Addict, Corruption, Public opinion, Voter.

Introduction

Narcotics¹ drugs and psychotropic substances have been used by mankind for a period before recorded history. In the olden ages, man started living in groups or clans and

¹ The narcotic word was originated from old French word “narcotique” or Greek word “narkotikos”. Narcotic drug encompassed the ones which induce drowsiness, sleep or anesthesia and affect the mind.

later found human societies. During that period, he also learned the use of certain herbs or plants. Sometimes he used these substances to heal injuries and ailments. Man cannot live without food and at that time there were not so many sources of food. The life of man depended upon such types of herbs and plants. Such plants were eaten as food. But now there are some allied properties of such plants which were narcotic in character and induced addiction. Government legislate Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act² after that a normal social problem was converted into a complex legal challenge and nowadays it is a prominent issue of electoral politics in Punjab. The spurt in the demand for narcotic drugs grew over the past few decades. A drug may be defined as any chemical that modifies the function of living tissue resulting in psychological or behavioural change. Although we have not counted or added alcohol or tobacco as drugs in the morality of society, the logical framework for a drug must include both of these substances. Now in our society, both are major addictive problems³. The present study is based on both qualitative and quantitative data that emerged from various national and international reports. Social media has emerged as the biggest opinion-making force. The spread of information about election issues becomes faster and more approachable to all. It is observed that people articulate and express their opinion fearlessly. The response of the general public to a political leader on drug issues is analysed carefully. Data gathered by interaction with the electorate of Punjab over drug issues makes this study more scientific and authentic.

² Under section 2 (I) of Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS) 1985 addict means a person who has dependence on any narcotic drug or psychotropic substances. Under section 2(VIII a) of NDPS Act 1985, "illicit traffic", in relation to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, means-(i) cultivating any coca plant or gathering any portion of coca plant; (ii) cultivating the opium poppy or any cannabis plant; (iii) engaging in the production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transportation, warehousing, concealment, use or consumption, import inter-State, export inter-State, import into India, export from India or transshipment, of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances; (iv) dealing in any activities in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances other than those referred to in sub-clauses (i) to (iii); or (v) handling or letting out any premises for the carrying on of any of the activities referred to in sub-clauses (i) to (iv), other than those permitted under this Act, or any rule or order made or any condition of any license, term or authorization issued, there under, and includes-(1) financing, directly or indirectly, any of the aforementioned activities; (2) abetting or conspiring in the furtherance of or in support of doing any of the aforementioned activities; and (3) harboring persons engaged in any of the aforementioned activities;]

³ The world Health Organization (WHO) defines drug addiction: a) Overpowering desire or need b) Tendency to increase c) Psychic and some time physical dependence on the effects of the drugs. The world drug report 2005.

Impact of drug abuse on society

The most affected strata of society by drug abuse are children and women who lost their fathers and husbands due to drug abuse. Schools are full of children who lost their parents to drug abuse. “The problem is prevalent in middle-class enclaves, where some users are hooked on heroin. One impoverished neighbourhood of Amritsar, called Maqboolpura, is known as the Village of Widows — because so many young men have died of drug abuse”.⁴

AIDS is growing in Punjab rapidly. This is happening because of the use of HIV-affected needles by drug addicts. Drug abuse was also associated with an increased risk of other diseases like HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In India, among Injecting Drug Users (IDUs), HIV sero-prevalence was as high as 8.71%⁵. Many other diseases are spreading because of the virus contained in the blood. “As many as 76% reported sharing injection equipment on the last occasion of injecting. The drugs that were commonly injected in Amritsar were Buprenorphine and to a lesser extent Pentazocine. More than half of the sample reported sex with sex workers and barely about 10% reported consistent use of condoms. More worryingly, more than a third reported not having heard of AIDS. An important aspect of the rapid assessment survey was that it documented injecting drug use and associated risk behaviours in Amritsar. Thus, the early warning signs regarding the impending IDU epidemic were visible as early as the 1990s. Many key informants also reported the reasons behind the rising phenomena of injecting drug use, particularly in Punjab. Since there already was an established pattern of opioid use, many dependent users were forced to switch to injecting route when the raw opium (used orally) or heroin (used by smoking or chasing) was in short supply. This finding also gains credence from the fact that most IDUs in Punjab and Haryana report having used drugs by other routes before switching to injecting”⁶.

Further adding, drug abuse is a big cause of infertility among the young generation which is the victim of drug abuse. Most of them are suffering from less sperm count in their semen. Now every small or big town has an IVF centre. “Our study was done in Punjabi males as the drug menace in Punjab is achieving alarming dimensions. Impotence or erectile dysfunction was once considered a deadly nightmare. But now the negative effects are becoming so serious that even WHO has revealed that widespread abuse of alcohol, opium, narcotics and other intoxicants has led to a drastic fall in the average level of sperm count of Punjabis. The average sperm count

⁴ Yardley, Jim. (2012, April 18). “Indian State Finds Itself in Tight Grip of Addiction”. *The New York Times: New York*

⁵ Vikram Kumar Gupta, Paramjeet Kaur, Gurmeet Singh, Priya Bansal , B. S. Sidhu, Comprehensive Evaluation of Drug De-addiction Centres (DDCs) in Punjab (Northern India, *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research*. 2014 Mar, Vol-8(3): 52-55

⁶ http://www.unodc.org/documents/southasia/publications/research-studies/PunjabHaryana_Study_Gaps-Barriers-Book_03-08-12.pdf

of Punjabis has fallen from 60 million to 15 million. This drastic fall of sperm count has further led to the prevalence of male infertility among Punjabi youth⁷. Young people use drugs for enhancing sexual capacity, however, that enhancement is short-lived and the sexual and reproductive consequences of long-term drug use and drug addiction set in.

Drug abuse is the root cause of crime in society. The addicts are involved in criminal activities like chain snatching to murder. Reports are full of this type of incident where some drug addicts' loot people, steal things from home, and indulged in bloody fights like gangsters. The addict first makes links with the supplier and then they start to supply it to a newcomer who becomes an addict of drugs. This chain badly effects up all the villages and cities of Punjab.

Drug abusers in Punjab are destroying the social set-up and cultural richness and familial system. The divorce rate is rapidly growing in society. The addicted person loses land and other source for earning, then family and finally their life. "For once Rahul Gandhi uttered the right words when he stated an indigestible fact that the human resource potential of Punjab in the north west of India is being destroyed because seven out of every 10 young men are addicted to drugs"⁸. People were very upset with the drug problem. To attain field-level notes when I was asked an old person about election issues, he pointed to a cremation ground and said with a lot of disappointment that people of this village cremated two or three Young men in a month who died by consuming drugs. An old lady told a different story. She said that marriageable girls are not found a suitable match because boys are indulging in drug consumption. She further said that girls prefer to live as bachelors instead of marrying drug addicts. It is a truth that drug addicts also indulge in domestic violence. They steal money and other valuable things such as the ornaments of their wives. They are unable to take the responsibility which generally society expects from a married man.

How drugs became an issue in the election?

Widespread addiction to drugs and alcohol as well as blatant use of such intoxicants to lure voters has become one of the issues that is not only being debated but has provided enough material for political leaders to pin down their opponents in the ongoing campaign for the 16th Lok Sabha elections. While the unearthing of two major networks for trafficking heroin and synthetic drugs, operated through an international web had hit headlines last year, the secretariat of Punjab's Chief Electoral Officer said that the authorities had made major seizures of a wide variety of

⁷ Deepinder Kaur, Jaswinder Singh, Seema, Anupama Mahajan, Gurdarshan Kaur. "Andrological Problems in Drug Addicts." *Indian Journal of Fundamental and Applied Life Sciences*. Online International Journal Available at <http://www.cibtech.org/jls.htm>, Vol. 1, No.4 October-December 2011, pp.167-171

⁸ http://atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NJ31Df01.html

intoxicants ever since the model code of conduct was enforced.⁹ The state missionary tries to manage the legal implication of these seizures. What will be the logical conclusion is depend on who is steering the wheel of power. “The market value of the seized items is estimated at around Rs. 600 crores. They include 130 quintals of poppy husk known as *bhukki* in local parlance, 135 kg of heroin, 65 kg of opium, 1.6 kg of smack, 27 kgs of “dry powder,” nearly one lakh capsules and 1.63 lakh tablets of intoxicants, 1.28 lakh liters of illicit liquor, 43,737 bottles of country liquor and 24 quintals of '*lahan*' (molasses) used to make illicit liquor”¹⁰. The Congress and Aam Admi Party have gone on the offensive on the issue, accusing the Akali Dal-BJP government of not only turning a blind eye to the problem but patronizing the trafficking of intoxicants that jeopardized an entire generation in the State. The AAP chief, Arvind Kejriwal, during the ongoing road shows in support of his party candidates, pointed out that the name of the State's Revenue minister, Bikram Singh Majithia¹¹ had figured in the synthetic drugs case busted by the Patiala district police. He charged that the dirty money was being used to subvert democracy, especially the elections. Ever since he entered the fray at Amritsar, former Chief Minister, Amarinder Singh has raised the issue at almost every public rally or press conference. He has charged the entire clan of Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal as well as their minister relative, Mr. Majithia of patronizing drug trafficking. “I understand your greed for robbing the State by grabbing the mining, liquor, transport or cable trade but at least spare our youth and don't indulge in the drug trade and trafficking,” Capt. Singh addressed the ruling family through one of his statements. Capt. Singh has also refused to accept the ploy adopted by the Chief Minister to shift the blame to the failure of the central agencies, especially the Border Security Force (BSF) to prevent international smuggling. He pointed out that the name of Mr. Badal's relative had figured in a racket where synthetic drugs were manufactured in pharmaceutical facilities in the State and neighbouring areas. He pointed out that many of those arrested could be linked to other Akali leaders as well.

The AAP candidate from Sangrur, Bhagwant Mann, who is a comedian and satirist, highlights the issue at his public meetings. One of the videos of his meeting that went viral online shows an old lady requesting an audience with the Chief Minister, as her son had turned an addict after he received free liquor during the campaigns for previous elections. A Ludhiana-based organization, “Belan Brigade” which has the rolling pin used in the kitchen as its symbol, has taken upon itself to fight the problem. Led by the founder, Anita Sharma, who is an architect by profession, the brigade's activists have been spreading information as well as trying to motivate women to stand up and oppose the use of drugs and other intoxicants to lure their men folk for electoral gains.

⁹ Pandher, Sarbjit. (2014, April13). Drugs a key issue in Punjab polls”. *The Hindu: Chandigarh*.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Tribune News Service. (2014, January 07). Bholu names Minister Majithia. *The Tribune: Chandigarh*.

Why do laws fail to check drug abuse?

The opposition had targeted Sukhbir's brother-in-law Bikram Singh Majithia for alleged links to drug smugglers, and the SAD spent much of its campaign defending him. Majithia was named by international racketeer Jagdish Bhola in a statement to the enforcement directorate. Though Bhola was arrested by the Punjab police, the ED got into the case to investigate hawala transactions. Bhola also named Damanvir Singh, son of then jails minister Sarwan Singh Phillaur, as being involved in the racket. The government's response has been to increase subsidies for farmers, which has pushed the state's finances into the red, leading to declining investments in education, health and industry. While their earnings have declined, the levels of aspiration among people have not. The more insidious connection between drugs and Punjab's political system came to light in January when a police officer-turned-drug lord named Jagdish Singh Bhola was arrested in a synthetic drugs haul case. Bhola alleged that Akali Dal leader Bikram Singh Majithia was the kingpin of the business. Majithia is the state's revenue minister and the brother-in-law of deputy chief minister Sukhbir Badal. The police have arrested 55 people in the case, including Akali Dal politicians Jagjit Singh Chahal and Maninder Singh Aulakh. The Hindu reported that their interrogation revealed that "they had frequently used government vehicles to smuggle drugs...Chahal has three pharmaceutical units in Himachal Pradesh, from where precursor chemicals were being diverted to make party drugs Ice and Ecstasy." Bhola threatened to reveal more names of politicians if the case was handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation. The police personnel themselves indulge in the drug trade. Because of the failure of neo-liberal policies, the state as well as the center have no alternative to cultivate the potential of the youth of Punjab. The money and muscle power and police–mafia–politician tripartite alliance is a big reason for the unchecked drug trade in Punjab.

After Election Scenario in Punjab

Just after the election results, the Punjab government started action against the drug adductors as well as the drug mafia who control the business of drug trafficking. Chief Minister removed Sarwan Singh Phillaur from the cabinet because his son was named among the drug mafia. Further, they repeatedly target the central government because of the loose border and the inability of the Border Security Force to check the smuggling from the border. The state governments also announce the formation of the narcotics prevention and control board and rehabilitation centers for drug addicts. BJP constitute the Tondon committee regarding the disappointing result of the Lok Sabha poll. The report of the Tondon committee¹² confirmed that widespread drug trafficking in the state was the root cause of poor performance in the elections. "Speaking to The Tribune, the Chief Minister said his government had gone all out to break the drug supply chain by taking action against those who were part of the

¹² Nibber, Gurpreet Singh. (2014, June 26). "Akali-BJP Panel to work on Tondon Report". *Hindustan Times: Chandigarh*.

distribution network. Drug addicts had been arrested in large numbers. Drug lords such Bhola, Gaba and others, had been arrested. A narcotics bureau and a drug de-addiction and rehabilitation board had been set up¹³. The opposition parties are not happy with the steps taken by the state government for the prevention of drug abuse because they want action against revenue minister Bikram Singh Majitha. "Amritsar MP Captain Amrinder Singh questioned the logic behind constituting the Narcotics Prevention and Control Board when the Narcotics Control Bureau was already doing its job. The former CM expressed apprehensions that the board to be headed by Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Badal will only shield and protect those Akalis who are producing, promoting and peddling drugs"¹⁴. The drug issue is one of the phenomena which will disturb the ruling alliance in future. Aam Admi Party Successfully captures this issue. "Among the issues raised, the party focused specifically on the widespread menace of drugs, blaming the political leadership of the state cutting across the party line as well as the successive governments for criminally conniving with the drug mafia and systematically ruining the youth of the state. That the drug menace has been glaring for almost a decade now but none of the parties' leadership had made it an electoral issue so far allowing the AAP leadership to put the blame squarely on both the Congress and the SAD-BJP combine for the menace in the state and gain electorally even as the Congress also tried feebly to capitalize on the issue taking a clue"¹⁵.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This is a positive sign that drug abuse became an issue in the 16th Lok Sabha election. The people from all strata of society in the state openly oppose politicians who are indulging in this fatal trade. In fact, the people have played a great role in the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse in the election and elect the candidate who is openly against this problem. The government of India has taken many steps to eradicate problems like drug abuse and drug trafficking. The parliament has enacted the NDPS 1985. There are specific provisions to prosecute the criminals. The central bureau commission has been appointed by the government. Social welfare societies also play a great role to abolish this problem from its roots. NGOs are also working by way of awareness building, counseling and guiding, treatment, follow-up and rehabilitation of drug addicts through voluntary organizations. The main purpose of these organizations and welfare societies is to eradicate this large-scale problem not only from Punjab but throughout India. There should be some psychological efforts to

¹³ Dhaliwal, S.S. (2014, June 26). "Will make state drug-free in two years, Says Badal". *The Tribune: Chandigarh*.

¹⁴ Tribune News Service. (2014, June27). "Setting up state narcotics bureau a farce, says Capt". *The Tribune: Chandigarh*.

¹⁵ Asutosh Kumar. "Parliamentary Elections in Punjab: Explaining the Electoral Success of Aam Aadmi Party". *Journal of Punjab Studies*. Vol. 21, Number 1. 2014, pp 113-124.

resolve the person from this addiction. The theatre groups, media and *Panchayats* should play a crucial role to motivate the people. There should be speedy trials to prosecute drug cases and punish the accused strictly.