

Rehabilitation key to Drug abuse

The news about Maninder Singh getting arrested for possessing 1.5 grams of cocaine should certainly force us to re-look at drugs legislation in the country. But unfortunately the mainstream media has chosen to sensationalize the issue and not look beyond. Maninder Singh who played for the Indian cricket team in the 80's and was once considered as Bishan Singh Bedi's successor as a prolific left-arm spinner was arrested on Tuesday by the Delhi Police's Anti-Narcotics division for the illegal possession of cocaine. However, subsequently he was released on bail on account of the quantity of drug being small.

Had this not been Maninder Singh and some other ordinary Joe then I doubt whether this issue would have even made news. But I am glad that it did because it gives us another chance at looking at drug laws afresh. Maninder Singh was not a drug trafficker; he was taking cocaine for personal use. Reports indicate that he claimed to have taken to the drug under immense stress due to problems in his personal life. If convicted he could be facing a jail term of anything between six to two years or a hefty fine or both. However, a subsequent drug test on Maninder came up negative in which case he might be serving a minor sentence or be subjected to a simple fine.

But the question to be asked here is that is this the right approach to tackling drugs in the country? Due to changing lifestyles drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy, LSD etc are fast becoming popular party drugs. The consumption of relatively 'soft' substances such as marijuana and hashish are also on the rise. In such circumstances the government seriously needs to revamp the existing laws and formulate a more concrete policy to tackle the situation.

Designing any educated drug policy begins with first categorizing the drugs as 'soft' and 'hard' based on the kind of effect it has (both physical and mental) on the consumer. Studies have shown that drugs such as marijuana and hashish do not have adverse physical and mental effects comparable to other more harmful drugs. Although increased usage of the same could lead to lethargy, excessive drowsiness and loss of willingness to work, it is not as addictive as other drugs and it is relatively easier for addicts to quit. Plus it does not produce the kind of violent reactions that some of the other drugs do. In fact medical circles in many European countries and in many states in the US subscribe marijuana as an effective pain reliever. Its effect on the consumer is much less harmful as compared to some of the other pain killers out there.

Therefore, in case of such soft drugs a light handed approach can be taken. In fact I do not see how we cannot treat marijuana like cigarettes. Studies have shown cigarettes to be much more harmful and yet there is no talk of banning them. Instead the establishment chooses to ban cigarette advertisements, print statutory warnings in 25 different languages and make it illegal for consumption under the age of 18. If the establishment is content to legally sell cigarettes and follow a policy of promoting awareness and education, then why not marijuana? It is much less harmful, its effects are far less worse and by legalising it we can keep it away from children, hit the black market trade and control its spread much more effectively. It is a solution the government might want to consider.

Now let's consider the case of hard drugs such as cocaine, crack, heroin, smack, crystal meths, ecstasy etc. It is an established fact that these drugs are far more addictive, far more destructive and have far more adverse effects on the minds and bodies of the consumers. It can cause serious physical damage, make you extremely irritable and violent and cause psychological diseases such

as schizophrenia. These drugs can really destroy lives and hence the government has a moral responsibility to protect its citizens from them.

However our current approach of tackling the situation is all wrong. As mentioned above under the present law, possession of drugs (mainly for personal consumption) could invite a maximum prison sentence of two years or a fine or both. But my question is what good will sending an addict to jail do? If he is addicted to something like cocaine or heroin, as soon as he is released he will get back to the habit. Plus keeping him in jail in such circumstances might lead to drastic withdrawal symptoms that might even kill him. What is required here is an enlightened approach. Sending a substance abuser of hard drugs to jail will solve absolutely nothing. He needs to be sent to rehabilitation.

It is only through rehabilitation can there be a solution to the problem. Of course that would mean setting up of integrated rehab facilities all over the country but it is an investment worth making, especially since such facilities are seriously lacking in our country. There is a wrong perception about rehab in our society. People think that by not sending the addict to jail and sending him to rehab will further promote substance abuse. This cannot be further from the truth. Rehab just doesn't mean curing the addict of his addiction and sending him on his way. It also means educating him so that he can serve as a live example of what drugs can do to you. If you really want to punish him then sentence him to a specific number of hours of community service where he could be working with NGOs to promote awareness about drugs among children and addicts. In this way he can become an instrument of change and truly make a difference.

However, I am not detracting from the present stance of the law that sentences drug traffickers to anything between 10 to 20 years of imprisonment. The only exception being the so called 'soft drugs' which I believe can be tackled better through legalisation. But in any case the present laws are seriously deficient and sorely need to be revamped if we are to make serious in-roads into the problem of substance abuse. We need to take an enlightened approach and establish rehabilitation as the norm instead of simply sending addicts to jail which is just wasteful and in the long run solves nothing.

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