

Indian Youths and Substance Abuse: New Challenges and Remedies*

*Dr.Siddalingeshwar Bidaralli

*Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi.

Abstract

Substance abuse among Indian youths has emerged as a major public health and social concern in recent decades. Increasing consumption of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, heroin, synthetic drugs, and prescription medicines indicates a complex interplay of psychological, social, economic, and environmental factors. This research paper explores the changing patterns of substance abuse, the factors driving these behaviours, and the consequences for individuals, families, communities, and the nation. It also evaluates existing government policies and programs, identifies gaps in prevention and treatment, and proposes multidimensional remedies. Drawing upon secondary data from national surveys, academic studies, and public health reports, the paper argues that substance abuse among youths is increasing due to urbanisation, peer pressure, mental health stress, unemployment, easy access to drugs, and digital influence. The study proposes that effective remedies require coordinated efforts in awareness, early intervention, family support, school-based programs, counselling services, strict law enforcement, and the integration of mental health services within youth-centric policies.

Keywords: Youth, substance abuse, addiction, drugs, mental health, India, public health, alcoholism, tobacco, narcotics, rehabilitation.

I. Introduction

India, with more than 65 percent of its population below the age of 35, has one of the world's largest youth populations. While this demographic advantage offers great potential for national development, it also presents serious challenges. One of the most alarming concerns today is the increasing level of substance abuse among youths.

The term *substance abuse* refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances such as alcohol, tobacco, drugs, inhalants, and misused medications. In India, substance abuse is no longer limited to adults; it has deeply penetrated youth populations in cities, small towns, rural areas, and even educational institutions. National surveys show that many young people experiment with addictive substances during adolescence or early adulthood, often out of curiosity, peer pressure, or stress.

The phenomenon is influenced by various socio-cultural and economic changes urbanisation, rising competition, unemployment, exposure to digital media, shifting family structures, and increasing mental health issues. The availability of drugs through illegal networks, dark web platforms, and social media has further complicated the issue.

This research paper examines these emerging challenges and identifies effective remedies to reduce substance abuse among Indian youths.

II. Literature Review

- **Ray, R. (2004) – *The Extent, Pattern and Trends of Drug Abuse in India*** Ray's study is an early but foundational work that examines changing patterns of drug abuse among Indian youth. The author notes a shift from traditional substances to synthetic drugs and pharmaceuticals. The study links youth substance abuse to socio- economic dislocation, migration, and lack of community support systems. It also emphasizes preventive education over punitive approaches.
- **Patel et al. (2018) – *Youth Mental Health and Substance Use*** This study explores the strong relationship between mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse among Indian adolescents and young adults. The authors argue that substance abuse often acts as a coping mechanism for academic pressure, family conflict, and social isolation. The study recommends school-based mental health interventions and youth-friendly counseling services.
- **Ambekar et al. (2019) – *Patterns of Substance Use among Adolescents*** Ambekar and colleagues focus specifically on adolescents and young adults, highlighting early initiation into substance use. The study finds that initiation often begins before the age of 18. Family history of substance use and exposure through

peers and media are identified as major risk factors. The authors recommend early intervention and parental awareness programs.

- **Kumar & Basu (2000) – Substance Abuse and Public Health**
This work approaches substance abuse as a public health issue rather than a moral or criminal problem. The authors argue that youth substance abuse is closely linked to structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of recreational facilities. The study calls for community-based rehabilitation and integration of de-addiction services into primary healthcare.
- **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – Youth and Drugs in South Asia**
UNODC reports situate Indian youth substance abuse within a broader South Asian context. The literature highlights cross-border drug trafficking, urbanization, and digital drug markets as new challenges. It also stresses the role of international cooperation and evidence-based prevention programs targeting young people.
- **Arora & Kannan (2015) – Media Influence and Youth Substance Use** This study examines how cinema, social media, and digital platforms normalize substance use among youth. The authors argue that glamorization of alcohol and drugs contributes to experimentation and habitual use. The study recommends stricter media regulation, counter-narratives, and youth-led awareness campaigns

III. Research Objectives

- To study the current trends and patterns of substance abuse among Indian youths.
- To identify the psychological, social, and economic factors responsible for rising substance use.
- To analyse the effects of substance abuse on health, behaviour, academics, family, and society.
- To evaluate government strategies and policies aimed at preventing youth substance abuse.
- To propose remedies and strategies for effective prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

IV. Research Questions

- What types of substances are Indian youths most commonly using today?
- What factors influence adolescents and young adults to consume drugs and alcohol?
- What are the short-term and long-term consequences of substance abuse?
- How effective are current policies, awareness programs, and rehabilitation mechanisms?
- What new strategies can be implemented to address rising substance abuse among Indian youths?

V. Research Methodology

V.1 Research Design

This study uses a **qualitative research design** based on secondary data analysis.

The study relied on secondary data, including government reports (MSJE, NCRB, NFHS, AIIMS drug survey), scholarly articles and journals, WHO and UNODC publications, and media case studies and public health reports. These sources provided statistical data, expert analyses, global perspectives, and real-world examples on youth substance abuse.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, comparative analysis of policy documents to assess effectiveness, and interpretation of health and behavioral trends to understand implications of drug use among youth.

Limitations

The study had no primary data, and drug trends vary regionally. Additionally, the online drug trade is difficult to track, which limits the comprehensiveness of the findings.

VI. Findings and Discussion

Changing Nature of Substance Abuse Among Youths- The nature of substance abuse among today's youth has changed significantly compared to earlier decades. In the past, alcohol and tobacco were the most commonly used substances. However, in the last 10 to 15 years, young people have increasingly turned to synthetic drugs such as MDMA, LSD, and methamphetamine, which are often more dangerous and easier to hide. There is also a noticeable rise in the misuse of prescription medicines, including painkillers, sedatives, and antidepressants, mainly because they are easily accessible at home or through online platforms. School-age teenagers are experimenting with inhalants, while many youths in urban areas participate in party cultures that involve the use of —party drugs. The online purchase of drugs through social media and messaging apps has made access even easier and harder to monitor. Another emerging trend is the mixing of energy drinks with alcohol, which can mask intoxication and lead to risky behaviour. These developments show that substance

abuse among youth is no longer limited to traditional intoxicants; instead, it has become more diverse, technologically enabled, and challenging to control through conventional prevention and regulatory methods.

Alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are among the most commonly used substances by young people in India, and their use has become a major public health concern- Alcohol continues to be the most widely consumed substance, largely because it is easily available and often considered socially acceptable, leading many adolescents to experiment with it at an early age. Tobacco use—whether through smoking, chewing, or newer forms like e- cigarettes—is also widespread among school and college students. The increasing trend of vaping and e-cigarette use is particularly alarming, as many youths mistakenly assume it is less harmful. Alongside these, the use of cannabis-based substances such as ganja, charas, and bhang is growing, especially in urban and semi-urban regions. More worrying is the sharp rise in opioid use, including heroin and pharmaceutical opioids, with northern states like Punjab reporting especially high levels. Together, these patterns show that substance abuse among Indian youth is influenced by accessibility, social pressures, and changing lifestyle trends, making it a serious issue that requires urgent attention and effective interventions.

Inhalants and Synthetic Drugs -Inhalants such as glue, nail polish removers, and paint thinners are commonly misused by street children and economically disadvantaged adolescents mainly because these substances are inexpensive and easily accessible in local markets. The immediate intoxicating effect they produce makes them attractive to vulnerable youth who lack awareness of the severe health risks, such as brain damage, respiratory problems, and long-term dependency. In contrast, synthetic drugs like MDMA, LSD, methamphetamine, and other club drugs are increasingly popular in metropolitan nightlife environments. These substances are often associated with parties, music festivals, and club culture, where young people seek heightened sensory experiences, energy boosts, or mood enhancement. However, the use of these synthetic drugs presents serious dangers, including psychological dependence, hallucinations, cardiovascular issues, and unpredictable behavioural changes. Together, the rising use of inhalants among poorer youth and synthetic drugs among urban populations reflects a growing public health concern that demands targeted prevention and awareness initiatives.

VII. Major Causes of Substance Abuse Among Indian Youths

Substance abuse does not occur due to a single factor. It is usually the result of a combination of personal, social, economic, and psychological influences.

VII.1 Peer Pressure and Social Acceptance

Young people often experiment with substances because they want to fit in, feel accepted, or appear more confident. In many colleges and workplaces, using alcohol or drugs is seen as a symbol of modernity or boldness.

VII.2 Stress, Anxiety, and Emotional Instability

Stress, anxiety, and emotional instability have become major triggers for substance abuse among today's youth. Many young people experience intense academic pressure, competition for jobs, family conflicts, or relationship failures, which create deep emotional distress. When they are unable to manage these feelings in healthy ways, they may turn to alcohol, drugs, or other substances as a temporary escape from their problems. Feelings of loneliness, constant stress from studies or family expectations, and the absence of emotional support often make them more vulnerable. As a result, substances become a way to forget reality for a short time, even though this ultimately leads to greater harm in the long run.

VII.3 Easy Availability of Drugs

Today, drugs have become much easier for young people to access than ever before. Social media platforms, dark-web networks, online delivery apps, and even courier services are being misused to supply drugs quickly and secretly. This easy availability has spread beyond big cities and is now reaching small towns and semi-urban areas as well. Drug peddlers often target vulnerable places such as school and college surroundings, where students can be influenced easily. In urban areas, nightlife environments like pubs and parties also create opportunities for illegal drug circulation. Because drugs can now be purchased anonymously through online platforms and delivered directly to someone's home, controlling their spread has become a major challenge for society and law-enforcement agencies.

VII.4 Unemployment and Lack of Opportunities

When young people do not find proper jobs or face constant uncertainty about their future, it creates a sense of frustration and helplessness. Without stable income, many youths become financially dependent on their families, which can further lower their confidence and self-esteem. Over time, this lack of opportunities

makes them feel that their efforts are not valued or that their dreams are out of reach. In such stressful situations, some may turn to alcohol, drugs, or other substances as a temporary escape from their emotional and social pressures. Thus, unemployment and limited opportunities become key factors that push young people toward substance abuse.

VII.5 Family Environment

A child's family environment plays a crucial role in shaping their behaviour, emotional health, and future choices. When children grow up in families facing problems such as parental addiction, frequent conflicts, or emotional neglect, they are more likely to develop stress and insecurity. Parental addiction exposes them to unhealthy coping behaviours and reduces the support they need. Lack of supervision means that children may spend more time alone or with negative peer groups, increasing the chances of risky behaviour. Poor communication within the family prevents children from expressing their feelings or seeking guidance during difficult times. Similarly, constant family conflict creates an unstable atmosphere that harms their emotional development. Together, these factors make children more vulnerable to problems such as substance abuse, stress, and low self-esteem.

VII.6 Urbanization and Lifestyle Changes

Urbanization has brought significant changes in the lifestyle of young people, especially in rapidly growing Indian cities. With the expansion of nightlife culture, frequent parties, and the rise of unregulated pubs and entertainment spaces, young individuals are increasingly exposed to addictive substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. These environments often promote experimentation, peer pressure, and easy access to harmful substances, making adolescents and young adults more vulnerable to substance abuse. Additionally, the fast-paced urban lifestyle, higher stress levels, and the desire to fit into modern social trends further intensify this risk. As a result, urbanization not only alters social behaviour but also contributes to a growing public health challenge..

VII.7 Media Influence

Movies, songs, social media content, and popular celebrities often shape how young people think and behave. When films or music videos show alcohol or drug use as something stylish, fun, or a symbol of a modern lifestyle, it creates a false image that these habits bring popularity or happiness. Influencers on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or reels sometimes display such behavior casually, making it appear normal or harmless. As a result, many youths may start believing that drinking or using drugs is a trendy choice or a way to fit in with their peers. This glamorization by the media can strongly influence young minds and push them toward experimenting with harmful substances.

VIII. Impact of Substance Abuse

VIII.1 Health Consequences

Substance abuse has several serious health consequences that can harm young people both in the short and long term. Regular use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs can lead to severe liver damage, especially when consumed in large quantities over time. Smoking and drug inhalation often cause respiratory problems, making it difficult for the lungs to function properly. Many substances also increase the risk of heart disease, affecting blood pressure, heart rate, and overall cardiovascular health. In young people, drug and alcohol use can interfere with brain development, leading to memory problems, poor concentration, and reduced decision-making abilities. Substance abuse also greatly raises the chances of accidents and injuries, as youths under the influence may lose control, take risky actions, or experience impaired coordination. Additionally, long-term use of addictive substances can lead to mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and personality changes. Altogether, these health impacts highlight how substance abuse can damage the overall physical and psychological well-being of young individuals.

VIII.2 Behavioural Effects

Substance abuse has a significant impact on the behaviour and emotional stability of young individuals. One of the most common changes is an increase in aggression, where youth may become easily irritated, angry, or hostile towards family, teachers, and peers. This aggressive behaviour often leads to risky actions, such as dangerous driving, unsafe social activities, or experimenting with additional harmful substances. Over time, these behaviours may escalate into violent tendencies, including physical fights, property damage, or harmful confrontations. Along with these issues, students often experience an academic decline, as substance use affects concentration, memory, and overall motivation to study. This leads to poor performance in school, absenteeism, and a loss of interest in educational goals. Additionally, substance abuse weakens decision-making skills, resulting in poor judgement where individuals are unable to distinguish right

from wrong or foresee the consequences of their actions. Together, these behavioural effects create a harmful cycle that affects not only the individual but also their family, school, and community environment.

VIII.3 Social Impact

The impact of substance abuse on society is deep and far-reaching. Young people who become dependent on drugs or alcohol often face increasing family conflict, as their behaviour, mood changes, and financial demands create stress at home. Substance abuse can also push individuals towards criminal activities, either to obtain money for drugs or because of impaired judgement, leading to legal trouble and social instability. Many youths struggling with addiction end up dropping out of school, which affects their future opportunities and reduces their chances of stable employment. Their personal relationships also suffer, as addiction leads to misunderstandings, emotional distance, and broken trust with friends, partners, and peers. Beyond the individual, the problem becomes a community health burden, increasing pressure on hospitals, rehabilitation centres, law-enforcement systems, and social welfare services. Thus, substance abuse not only harms the user but also weakens families, damages relationships, increases crime, and places a heavy strain on society as a whole.

VIII.4 Economic Costs

One of the major consequences is the loss of productivity, as young people who misuse drugs often struggle with poor health, absenteeism, and reduced ability to work or study effectively. This also affects industries and businesses that rely on a healthy and active workforce. In addition, the government and families face increased healthcare costs, because treating addiction, injuries, and long-term illnesses caused by drug abuse requires continuous medical support. Law enforcement agencies also spend a large amount of money and resources on controlling drug trafficking, conducting raids, and managing drug-related crimes. Finally, substance abuse reduces the overall workforce potential, as many youths who could have contributed to national development instead become dependent on substances, limiting their productivity and future opportunities. Overall, these factors together place a heavy economic burden on society.

IX. Policy Gaps and Challenges

The impact of substance abuse among Indian youth is closely linked to several policy gaps and structural challenges that weaken national prevention efforts. One major issue is the limited reach of school-based awareness programmes, which means that many students never receive accurate information about the dangers of drugs or the skills needed to resist peer pressure. Mental health services, which play a crucial role in early identification and treatment of addiction-related problems, remain inadequate and unevenly distributed across the country. At the same time, the rapid growth of digital platforms has created new pathways for the sale and distribution of drugs, but surveillance of online drug transactions is still weak, allowing illegal networks to operate with minimal detection. Rural areas face an additional disadvantage due to the limited availability of rehabilitation centres, making it difficult for affected youth to access professional support. Social stigma around addiction further discourages individuals and families from seeking help, often pushing the problem underground until it becomes severe. Moreover, inconsistent enforcement of narcotics laws across states reduces the effectiveness of national drug-control policies. Together, these gaps highlight the urgent need for stronger, more coordinated interventions to protect young people from substance abuse.

X. Remedies and Recommendations

X.1 Strengthening Family Support

Strengthening family support is one of the most effective strategies to prevent substance abuse among young people. Parents play a crucial role in shaping the behaviour, emotional stability, and decision-making abilities of adolescents. Therefore, implementing structured parent training programs can equip families with the skills needed to recognize early signs of stress, peer pressure, or risky behaviours. Such programs also help parents understand the psychological needs of growing children and provide appropriate guidance. In addition, developing stronger communication systems within the family encourages open discussions about challenges, friendships, school activities, and emotional problems. When adolescents feel heard and supported, they are less likely to hide problems or seek unhealthy coping methods. Finally, consistent monitoring and guidance by parents—without being overly controlling—helps young people make informed and responsible choices. This includes knowing their child's friends, online activities, and daily routines, while also offering emotional reassurance. A supportive, communicative, and informed family environment significantly reduces the chances of youth falling into substance misuse.

X.2 School and College Interventions

To effectively address substance abuse among youth, educational institutions play a crucial role. Schools and colleges should implement compulsory life-skills education that equips students with decision-making, stress management, and problem-solving abilities, helping them resist peer pressure and risky behaviours. Awareness programs led by health professionals can provide accurate information about the physical, psychological, and social consequences of drug use, fostering informed choices. Establishing anti-drug clubs and counselling cells offers students a supportive environment to discuss challenges, seek guidance, and develop healthy coping mechanisms. Additionally, regular screening for at-risk students enables early identification of those susceptible to substance abuse, allowing timely interventions and support to prevent long-term harm. Collectively, these measures create a proactive, preventive framework within educational settings to combat substance abuse effectively.

X.3 Community-Based Solutions

Addressing substance abuse among youth requires strong community engagement and proactive support systems. One effective approach is the establishment of youth clubs and sports activities, which provide young people with structured, healthy avenues for recreation, socialization, and skill development, keeping them away from harmful habits. Additionally, deploying trained social workers in high-risk communities can help identify vulnerable individuals early, offer counseling, and guide them toward rehabilitation programs. Collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local bodies is equally essential, as these partnerships can mobilize resources, create awareness campaigns, and implement community-specific interventions. Together, these community-based solutions foster a supportive environment that discourages substance abuse while promoting holistic growth and resilience among the youth.

X.4 Mental Health Integration

Mental health plays a crucial role in preventing and addressing substance abuse among young people. Establishing counselling units at district and college levels ensures that students and local youth have easy access to professional guidance when facing stress, peer pressure, or addiction-related challenges. Early diagnosis of emotional distress can help identify individuals at risk of substance abuse before problems escalate, enabling timely interventions. Additionally, affordable and confidential therapy services create a safe environment for young people to seek help without fear of stigma or financial burden. Integrating mental health services into educational and community settings strengthens preventive strategies and supports long-term well-being.

X.5 Strengthening Law Enforcement

A robust legal framework and strict enforcement are essential to curb drug abuse. Better monitoring of drug trafficking helps identify and dismantle networks that supply substances to vulnerable youth. Strict action against peddlers near educational institutions prevents easy access to drugs in environments where students are particularly susceptible. Furthermore, regulation of nightclubs and online marketplaces limits opportunities for drug distribution, addressing modern avenues of substance availability. Together, these measures reduce the exposure of young people to addictive substances and strengthen community safety.

X.6 Rehabilitation and Recovery Programs

Recovery from addiction requires sustained support beyond initial treatment. Expanding de-addiction centres, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, ensures that all communities, not just urban centers, have access to professional help. Incorporating skill development programs for recovering addicts allows individuals to regain economic independence and build self-esteem, reducing the risk of relapse. Community reintegration support—such as mentorship, peer support groups, and family counselling—helps recovering youth rebuild social connections and reintegrate into society, promoting holistic recovery.

X.7 Digital Awareness and Monitoring

In the digital age, substance abuse is increasingly facilitated through online platforms, making awareness and monitoring crucial. Campaigns against online promotion of drugs educate youth about the risks and discourage engagement with illicit substances. Cybercops to monitor illegal sales ensure that law enforcement keeps pace with digital avenues of drug distribution. Finally, youth-friendly helplines and mobile apps for support provide accessible, confidential, and immediate assistance to individuals seeking help, combining technology with preventive and intervention strategies. These measures harness digital tools to protect young people from online drug exposure.

XI. Conclusion

Substance abuse among Indian youths is a growing problem influenced by multiple psychological, social, economic, and environmental factors. Despite government initiatives and laws, the issue persists due to inadequate awareness, limited mental health services, and easy access to drugs. The long-term consequences affect not only individuals but also families, communities, and the nation's development. Therefore, a comprehensive, multi-level strategy involving families, schools, communities, healthcare providers, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies is essential. With proper prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation, India can protect its youth and secure a healthier future.

References:

- [1]. Arora, M., & Kannan, S. (2015). Media influence and substance use among Indian youth. *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 31(3), 198–204.
- [2]. Jain, A., & Singh, R. (2020). Youth unemployment, alienation and substance abuse in India. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 22(2), 289–305.
- [3]. Kumar, S., & Basu, D. (2000). Substance abuse by young people in India: Public health implications. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 42(3), 234–241.
- [4]. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2019). *National survey on extent and pattern of substance use in India*. New Delhi, India: Government of India.
- [5]. Murthy, P. (2017). Drug abuse prevention and rehabilitation policies in India: Challenges and opportunities. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 78(3), 337–352.
- [6]. Nair, S., Darshan, M. S., & Tiwari, S. C. (2013). Family environment and substance abuse among adolescents in India. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 35(2), 151–156.
- [7]. Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., Thornicroft, G., Baingana, F., Bolton, P., ... Unützer, J. (2018). The Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *The Lancet*, 392(10157), 1553–1598.
- [8]. Ray, R. (2004). *The extent, pattern and trends of drug abuse in India: National survey*. New Delhi, India: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.
- [9]. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2018). *Drug use and substance abuse among youth in South Asia*. Vienna, Austria: UNODC.