

# WHEN CUSTOMS START DETERIORATING OUR ROOTS:

## Role of Customs In Encouraging Addiction

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### ABSTRACT:

It is well settled principle that customs followed for a long time, without any interruption becomes law. Here “without interruption” means without complaint from people belonging to the same society which practice that particular custom. But there are few customs which are never complained still have serious impact on future. One among those is high prevalence of opium (*amal* in local language) in the western Rajasthan. People belonging to western part of Rajasthan include opium in all their sorrows and joy. They consider it crucial for social bonding hence include it in all their ritual since birth of a child to death ( *16 sanskars*). The article in its length points out how this tradition is making youth addicts as the blind faith in traditions left no way to say NO to *manwar* (one requesting another to join them). It discusses the horrifying data which reflects that the problem is as serious as Punjab. Lastly, suggests some socio-legal measures to control the dark situation.

**KEY WORDS:** Opium, *amal*, *amal Dastur*, young addicts, addiction.

### INTRODUCTION:

While the world is coming together to find better ways in protecting childhood and youth from any health evil, especially addiction, we have some so called customs to drag our youth into darkness. Studies reveal that Rajasthan alone has the highest opium addicts in the world.

The prospective cohort study was conducted at Mahatma Gandhi Hospital, Jodhpur, between December 2004 and February 2006 and included cohorts of 71 opium addict and 50 non-addict patients admitted in various surgical wards. The results revealed majority (97.2%) of the patients was from rural areas of western Rajasthan, predominately elderly males with a history of opium addiction lasting well over 16 years (39.4%); longest duration was 50 years. The youngest addict was 33 years old and the oldest was 80 years of age. **Approx 62% were initiated into opium addiction by social customs prevalent**; 26.8% got addicted to it seeking relief from some form of pain while 9.9% took to addiction for suppression of chronic cough. Associated tobacco (smoking/chewing) and/or alcohol addiction was also noted in over 60% of patients (60.6%).<sup>2</sup> This study depicts the real picture. Although majority was adults in the above survey, they admitted initiation of opium into their adolescence. They consider it a valid excuse that the addictives have prevalence in their family since ages, they are part of culture. They have seen their elders, role models doing the same and therefore they follow without thinking about the consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> Ajay\_Malviya, Nitin\_Negi, Manish\_Mandora, and J. K. Yadav, “Perioperative Status and Complications in Opium Addicts in Western Rajasthan”, *Indian J Surg.* 2011 Oct; 73(5): 346–351., Published online 2011 Jun 11. doi: 10.1007/s12262-011-0324-4

### OPIUM AS A PART OF CUSTOM:

Although illegal, opium consumption has become a daily community ritual in western Rajasthan. Every morning, the menfolk congregate for the ceremony which is known as *reyan*. A respected village elder sits in the middle and grinds bits of dried black opium into powder, mixes it with water, strains it through a fine wooden funnel and then pours the golden yellow liquid into the cup of his palm. Each villager then respectfully bows down to sip it. The entire ceremony has complete social sanction and is, indeed, even quite majestic. The menfolk come in their traditional costumes and colourful turbans and it is considered an insult if anyone refuses to accept opium at the *reyan*. Through the years it became a ritual in every house and today the villagers hunger for any excuse to organise a *reyan*: marriages, births, deaths.

Dr Devraj Purohit, a reader in psychiatry, Medical College, Jodhpur, observed that addicts took to opium for four reasons - to honour a social custom, to work more, relieve tension and enhance sexual performance. Most feel they will die if they leave the old habit.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1 PREPRATION OF OPIUM AS WELCOME DRINK

The opium ceremony, where the drug is taken in small doses, is a necessary ingredient of any social occasion — be it a birth, a wedding or a funeral — in this part of the country. Tripti Pandey, who has authored several books on Rajasthan, said: “*The exact origins of the opium ceremony are difficult to ascertain as it has been in practice for years. But it is mainly conducted to forge a bond between two people. One can call it opium communion or friendship, where the host asks the guest to lick a small dose of opium dissolved in water from his palm, thus cementing their bond.*” The ritual is mostly followed by the Bishnoi and the Rajput communities in the Jodhpur belt and by royals, especially during weddings, according to Pandey. Small doses of opium are also administered to babies, from the time they are born till they are two to three years old. It is said to keep them in good health. It is also believed that Roop Kanwar, the 18-year-old sati from Rajasthan’s Deorala village, is believed to be drugged with opium while she walked to her husband’s pyre in 1987.

The opium ceremony, or *riyan*, is an elaborate one, with a large number of people preparing the concoction. The drug is dissolved in water and then strained, ground and mixed with jaggery, sugar, saffron and milk in a wooden

<sup>3</sup> “Thousands of villagers in western Rajasthan get addicted to opium, but there's hope yet”, India Today, India Today , Issue Date 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, Updated on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 2014.

pot. The ceremony is also referred to as *Amal Ka Dastoor*, where *amal* means opium. “Not partaking of the opium at a social function is considered an insult to the host. Opium *tika* is also offered sometimes,” Pandey said.

During elections, candidates host opium ceremonies, where attendance means ensuring his or her vote.

Tour groups advertise the ceremony as an important part of the Rajasthan experience, especially in the western part of the state. According to sources in Jaisalmer, opium is found in almost every house in the region but women usually refrain from taking it.

The drug, however, is not a symbol of celebration for all. Rajya Sabha MP Narayan Singh Manak Lao, who runs an opium de-addiction centre near Jodhpur, calls it a “big problem”.

“Opium addiction is a big problem in western Rajasthan as it is easily available in the region. Although the price of the opium milk is as high as Rs 50,000 per kg, those who are addicted buy it.” Jaisalmer and Barmer districts in Rajasthan are easy transit points for drug traffickers from Pakistan. Lao’s centre, which gets about 60 addicts a month, has had patients ranging from six to 60-year-olds.<sup>4</sup>

Till recently, opium poppy and poppy husk, commonly referred to as Doda Post in local parlance, was produced and sold in large quantities in Rajasthan. It was also channelized into border areas of Punjab in trafficking through humans and animals. It was also produced legally for medicinal purposes with cultivation in several parts, including Udaipur, Pratapgarh, Chittorgarh and Bhilwara. But increased vigil meant that production of opium was curbed to a large extent. This led to drug addicts heavily relying on supplies from Pakistan via Punjab or smuggled directly into Rajasthan through the international border. Opium, considered to be lesser of the evils in many areas, is still the most widely used. An estimated 60 to 70 % of drug addicts in Rajasthan consume opium.<sup>5</sup>

#### **FACTORS CONSIDERING THIS CUSTOM DANGEROUS:**

India is a country rich with heritage and culture. No doubt we all are very proud of our rich heritage but we cannot be negligent about our future for the cost of our past. It is beautiful to follow culture but escaping the dangers are important. Following are the reasons for considering customs dangerous which encourage addiction or health effects-

1. **Unstoppable-** if there is something which prevails with customs or religious beliefs than it is impossible to stop it ever. Therefore, it is needed to be controlled.
2. **Misguiding-** a young mind follows whom he admires. If the elders of family are seen engaged in these sort of activities, the young ones of family will definitely follow it without noticing the associated harms.
3. **Financial burden-** opium is an expensive thing and especially in areas where people are already facing problems like gender inequality, poverty, lack of resources etc, these customs definitely create financial burden on person serving it.
4. **Addiction-** once a person develops a habit, he cannot resist without it. The need of substance even compels him to commit crimes even without his wish. The addiction deprives him the capacity to think about his own well being, his family or the resources he is wasting.
5. **Others-** the addict becomes aggressive, harm himself or others, he promote crimes, he disturb lives and more over this he sets another example for yet another person to get indulged in addiction.

There have been a number of incidents wherein high-profile people and custodians of democracy could not dare to ignore this age-old tradition of consuming and serving opium at their ceremonies. A few of them are also facing

<sup>4</sup> Rakhee Roy Talukdar, “Opium communion, long before Jaswant”, The Telegraph (Online Edition), Jaipur, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Dev Ankur Wadhwan, “How Rajasthan could soon rival Punjab as one of the India’s drug capital”, Mail Online India, 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2016.

legal proceedings due to political rivalry. A case was registered against former foreign minister Jaswant Singh and nine others under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act for allegedly serving/consuming opium at a family function in his ancestral village. Jaswant Singh was alleged to have personally served opium drink to guests, which is a local ritual.

Every time, the government announces that it's running massive de-addiction campaign in the region and it won't renew the permits to promote the consumption. The state government is under immense pressure from the Centre and the UN to shut down the poppy husk shops. The Union government, on the basis of UN guidelines, has asked Rajasthan to close all poppy husk shops. <sup>6</sup>

### CONCLUSION:

From all available data, it is visible that the problem is reaching a high level. The number of addicts is increasing day by day and no one can help it out because everything is happening in the name of so called customs. We need to understand that it is not only the addict but the entire family suffers when a person lose himself due to addiction. It is also clear now that not everyone is happy with such practices; there are people who are suffering just because at any cost they wish to remain a member of a particular community. They follow majority practices to be accepted by a particular group as they fear of future like who will marry their kids, who will stand in their tough times etc.

People are not encouraging practices like *reyan* but they are helpless as they cannot say NO. It is also found that the areas with such traditions have comparative lower education or literacy ratio. They are still living in era 100 years back and following things without knowing the logics behind. It is concluded that being a social problem, only societal efforts can fix it back. Few socio-legal measures are suggested here in after.

### SUGGESTED SOCIO-LEGAL MEASURES:

In reality, it is very difficult to control something which is prevalent in society for such a long time but keeping few measures as precaution can definitely help in lightening the burden. Following are few measures which could help in overcoming this problem-

1. It is a societal custom therefore a mutual decision of all can help in suppressing this. The influential members from society should demand to avoid such rituals as much as possible.
2. The people already suffering from such customs should come forward and discuss problems faced by them due to addiction. The discussion should be made between all members of that society to make them understand the consequences.
3. The elders of family must come forward to set examples for their young ones. The elders should boycott any dangerous substance because even though consumed in small quantity it will definitely affect adversely.
4. Societal norms and guidelines should be formulated. As it also true that people do majority things just for societal acceptance and respect.
5. The government should keep a check and make stringent provisions for people encouraging addiction through name of rituals or customs.

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<sup>6</sup> Abhishek Gaur, "R'sthan in a bind over tradition, addiction", Deccan Herald, Jaipur, Published on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2014, Updated on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

<https://www.deccanherald.com/content/435541/rsthan-bind-over-tradition-addiction.html>