The good guy

This piece aims to humanise and bring to life one crusader of the drug and alcohol crisis in Rural North India. It also aims to provide a 'life lesson' or takeaway from the featured individual, to inspire the reader.

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Himachal Pradesh or ‘the land of snowy slopes’ is a populous Northern Indian state made up of hundreds of small villages divided into 12 districts. Dharamshala is the centre of the Kangra district and one of two capital cities of the state. Buried in the foothills of the Himalayas and steeped in a unique blend of culture, Dharamshala effortlessly marries the Tibetan and Indian ways of life. The city is widely known as home to his Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, and for boasting the world’s highest cricket stadium perched at over 1457 metres above sea level. However, concealed under this breathtaking scenery is a region grappling with a growing alcohol and drug problem that has permeated through its rural agricultural villages.

In 2019, a national report was published on the Prevalence and Extent of Substance Use in India. This report compiled data collected from hundreds of thousands of surveys conducted in representative samples across all 36 States and Union Territories. The survey utilised the validated World Health Organisation ASSIST tool to identify harmful use or dependence in the individuals surveyed. It found that nationally, 19% of individuals who consumed alcohol did so in a harmful pattern, meeting the ‘dependence’ threshold that warranted treatment.[1] Men made up the overwhelming majority of these individuals, and the substances most commonly used in included alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis.[1] Alarmingly, the report also placed the prevalence of alcohol use in children aged 10-17 at 1.3% and cannabis-use at 0.9%.[1]

It is worth noting that the true extent of substance abuse in rural India is extremely difficult to quantify as individuals may be reluctant to disclose their usage in government-led surveys due to a fear of authority and the negative repercussions that may follow.[1] Additionally, the significant culturally-rooted stigma associated with psychiatric illness including substance abuse also prevents many people in rural India from reporting the true extent of their use, as they may fear a loss of reputation within their small communities.[2] Thus, the data which has been reported is likely to be an underestimation.[1]

In these small communities, the lack of any meaningful enforcement of alcohol legislation means that there are few barriers to the sale of alcohol even to minors as young as five. Sadly, some of these children grow up witnessing and subject to alcohol fuelled domestic violence. This in turn significantly detracts from their social wellbeing, affecting their educational attainment and subsequently facilitating their own entry into the vicious cycle of substance abuse.[3] It takes immense willpower to navigate these unique challenges, and government high schools remain a crucial point of education for these taboo issues. Among this vulnerable group, science-based prevention strategies aimed at delaying the initiation of substance use and those which involve families, schools and communities have consistently been identified as
amongst the most effective.\[1\]

In December 2019, I was fortunate to be one of seven medical students from Monash University’s TeamMED India who travelled to Himachal Pradesh to deliver a school based health promotion program in conjunction with a local non-government organisation, The Chinmaya Organisation for Rural Development (CORD). Our aim was to educate young adolescents about alcohol and drugs, and equip them with skills and strategies they could employ when faced with common drivers of substance use such as peer pressure and anxiety. We also travelled with the organisation to different rural villages to gauge the extent of substance abuse by speaking to members of the community, and in doing so, identify those groups or individuals who may need further support from CORD. I met Mr. Saab\# during one of these community visits.

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It is a sunny day in Tang, a rural village near Dharamshala, situated beneath the jewel of Kangra - the Dauladhar mountain range. Streaks of dark green and crimson red uniform scurry down the pathway as the clanging of the lunch bell fills our ears. We pass a group of labourers who begin stacking rows of terracotta bricks on their heads. Their bodies are lean from the heavy lifting, and their faces are awash with fatigue. It begs the question; how do these people carry this burden on their head and continue to function effectively? I wonder, perhaps it is because their minds are occupied elsewhere.

By all measures, Mr Saab is a man who leads a simple life. A delicately embroidered Himachali crown adorns his glistening forehead as he fiddles around in the sun with what appears to be an old dismantled radio. “Aao Aao,” he says, as his grease covered hands welcome our army of 12 into his humble home. It is striking how welcoming members of these communities are, even to complete strangers. In true Indian spirit, Mr Saab makes us feel as though God himself has stumbled upon his doorstep. Despite this warm welcome, it doesn’t take long for us to realise that his kind eyes have seen many a struggle. Mr Saab has lived in a community consumed by a pervasive substance abuse problem since he was a boy. He pensively describes gradually coming to the realisation that his father was more frequently intoxicated than not, leaving a young Saab to witness first-hand the inescapable and destructive nature of alcohol. His eyes begin to well up with tears as he looks into the distance, poignantly recounting how his father would violently unleash his feelings of inadequacy on the very people he should nurture and care for. In bearing witness to this chaos, Mr Saab quickly learnt to distance himself from Sharab (alcohol), and the people who drank it, sometimes even fleeing the family home and the callous father it contained.

On those occasions where he could not physically escape, he began to find refuge in the vast ocean of Indian music. Entranced by the mellifluous tones he quickly discovered that music left him far more intoxicated than any drug ever could. And so began his powerful jour-
ney of self-actualisation. A self-taught flautist, singer, dancer, and actor, Mr Saab taps into the age-old tradition of passing on important lessons through folk song, dance, and drama. He discovered the power of music to hold our every pain and joy, and evoke emotion even in those numbed by years of substance abuse. Armed with his angelic voice, he travels from village to village singing about drugs of abuse and the perils of intoxication, encouraging his fellow brothers and sisters to give up the habit, or better yet, never start.

From Mr Saab we learn the importance of keeping oneself occupied. Perhaps he was not tempted down the pathway of intoxication because he felt that he always had something better to do, whether it was preparing a new composition, becoming engrossed in a new art form, or tinkering with household items. Slowly but surely, he carved out a greater purpose for himself. He, just like the bricklayers, demonstrated that you are better equipped with strength to handle the challenges life throws at you if you keep your mind occupied. He blossomed from his adversity to become stronger, wiser, and kinder. In doing so, he embodies the very essence of rural India - resilient, insightful, and humble.

Mr Saab is a good guy. From his lived experience, it becomes clear that perhaps the most important asset in a community riddled by alcohol and drugs is a few good people, doing a few good things. In the end, it is a collection of small ripples that eventually culminates in a tide.

Shimla is the other Capital City of Himachal Pradesh.

This is a pseudonym.

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None declared

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References

