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## **The Hidden Suffering: Understanding Drug Misuse among Sexual Minorities in India**

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### **Introduction:**

Drug abuse was a major concern for sexual minorities in India due to the challenges they faced (Wandrekar et al., 2020). Many members of sexual minority groups turned to drugs as a means of coping with the stress, anxiety, and depression brought on by social stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation (Puckett et al., 2019). The misuse of substances like alcohol and illegal drugs in a manner that is contrary to medical advice or the law was known as drug misuse (Adept et al., 2022). A "sexual minority" was a group of people who did not belong to the majority of a culture and had diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and/or gender expressions (Math et al., 2013). According to Dhawan et al., lesbian, gay, sexually open, transsexual, and eccentric (LGBTQ) individuals comprised India's sexual minorities in 2016.

In 2020, Wandrekar et al. conducted a study that found sexual minorities in India were more likely to abuse medications than others. Additional research was necessary to fully comprehend the scope of the drug abuse problem among sexual minorities in India and to develop effective interventions (Wandrekar et al., 2020). This paper investigated the hidden suffering of sexual minorities in India by conducting a literature review. It specifically focused on the factors that increased the likelihood of drug abuse among sexual minorities in India and their prevalence. The literature were reviewed to demonstrate the need for additional research and intervention programs tailored to the particular requirements of this population.

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### **Objectives:**

The objectives of this literature review on drug misuse among sexual minorities in India were manifold below.

Firstly, the research aimed to understand the prevalence of drug misuse among sexual minorities and how it compared to the general population. This information was crucial in developing targeted interventions that were tailored to the needs of sexual minorities.

Secondly, research aimed to identify the factors contributing to drug misuse among sexual minorities. This included social, cultural, and economic factors that could influence drug misuse. By identifying these factors, interventions could be developed that address the root causes of drug misuse and provided support to sexual minorities.

Thirdly, research aimed to explore the impact of drug misuse on the health and well-being of sexual minorities. This included the physical and mental health effects of drug misuse, as well as the social and economic consequences. This information was crucial in developing effective prevention and treatment strategies for sexual minorities.

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### **Research Search Strategy:**

A literature review of the existing research on drug abuse among sexual minorities in India was performed to understand drug Misuse Among Sexual Minorities in India. Academic databases like PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science were included in the review. The search words included terms like "India," "Lgbt", "discrimination", "sexual minorities," and "drug misuse. The search results were screened to include studies that met the inclusion criteria, such as studies that focused on drug misuse among sexual minorities in India, were published in peer-reviewed journals, and were written in English between the period 2012 to 2022.

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### **Results:**

The results of the studies were combined and summarised to identify common themes and patterns related to drug abuse among sexual minorities in India and key findings were discussed below according to study objective.

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***Prevalence of drug misuse among sexual minorities:***

Drug misuse is a significant public health concern globally, and sexual minorities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, are particularly vulnerable to drug misuse. In India, studies have shown that drug misuse is prevalent among sexual minorities, and this may be due to social stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization.

One study conducted in Delhi among 107 men who have sex with men (MSM) found that 51.4% had used drugs in the past year, with cannabis being the most commonly used drug. The study also found that 26.2% of participants had injected drugs, putting them at risk of contracting HIV and other blood-borne infections (BBI) such as hepatitis C (Singh et al., 2018).

Another study conducted among transgender women in Chennai found that 31% of the participants had used drugs in the past year. The study found that drug misuse was significantly associated with being unemployed, having a history of sex work, and experiencing discrimination and violence (Thomas et al., 2019).

Similarly, a study conducted in Mumbai among MSM found that 13.4% of participants had used drugs in the past month, and the most commonly used drugs were marijuana, cocaine, and poppers. The study found that drug misuse was associated with engaging in high-risk sexual behavior, such as having unprotected anal sex (Shinde et al., 2018).

These studies suggest that drug misuse is prevalent among sexual minorities in India, particularly MSM and transgender individuals. The reasons for this are likely multifactorial and may be related to social stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization. It is crucial for public health interventions to address these underlying factors and provide harm-reduction strategies to minimize the risk. Additionally, a study conducted in Kolkata among MSM found that 49.5% of the participants had used drugs in the past six months, with cannabis and amphetamines being the most commonly used drugs. The study also found that drug misuse was significantly associated with being single, having a lower educational level, and experiencing violence (Biswas et al., 2016).

A study performed among HIV-positive MSM in Pune found that 38% of the participants had used drugs in the past three months, with cannabis being the most commonly used drug. The study found that drug misuse was associated with engaging in high-risk sexual behavior, having multiple sexual partners, and being unemployed (Ghate et al., 2016).

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**Factors Contributing to Drug Misuse Among Sexual Minorities in India:**

Factors that contributed to drug misuse among sexual minorities in India included discrimination, mental health issues, and a lack of access to appropriate resources and services.

***Social Stigma and Discrimination:***

In India, sexual minorities face widespread social stigma and discrimination due to cultural and religious beliefs. This stigma can lead to low self-esteem and feelings of isolation, which may drive individuals to use drugs as a coping mechanism. According to a study conducted by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), the social stigma and discrimination towards sexual minorities have resulted in them being pushed to the margins of society and forced to live in poverty and isolation, which could contribute to drug misuse among this population (NACO, 2014).

***Marginalisation:***

Sexual minorities in India are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, including healthcare services. This lack of access to healthcare services can lead to untreated mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, which can increase the likelihood of drug misuse (Singh et al., 2018).

***Mental Health Issues:***

Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress are prevalent among sexual minorities in India, and drug use can be used as a coping mechanism to deal with these issues. A study by Joshi et al. (2013) found that sexual minorities in India had higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to the general population, which could increase the likelihood of drug misuse.

***Lack of Legal Protection:***

India still criminalizes same-sex sexual activity, and sexual minorities face harassment and violence from law enforcement officials, family members, and other community members. This lack of legal protection can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair, which may contribute to drug misuse as a way to cope with the stress of living in a hostile environment (Singh et al., 2018).

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## **The impact of drug misuse on the health and well-being of sexual minorities in India:**

According to Kumar and Chandra (2015), drug misuse among sexual minorities in India can have significant negative impacts on their health and well-being. Substance abuse is a major issue in this population, which is already vulnerable due to marginalization and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The negative impacts of drug misuse on sexual minorities include increased risk of HIV/AIDS, mental health issues, physical health problems, social and economic consequences, increased risk of violence, stigma and discrimination, limited access to healthcare, and broader impacts on community health. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that considers the complex social and economic factors that contribute to drug misuse among sexual minorities in India (Singh et al., 2018).

### **Increased Risk of HIV/AIDS:**

Drug misuse can increase the risk of HIV/AIDS among sexual minorities in India, who are already at a higher risk due to their marginalized status and lack of access to healthcare services. Injecting drug use, in particular, can increase the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission through shared needles (Singh et al., 2018).

### **Mental Health Issues:**

Drug misuse can exacerbate mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, which are already prevalent among sexual minorities in India. It can also lead to other mental health problems such as paranoia, hallucinations, and delusions (NACO, 2014).

### **Physical Health Problems:**

Drug misuse can lead to a range of physical health problems, including liver disease, heart problems, respiratory problems, and infections. These health problems can have long-term consequences and can be particularly challenging to manage among a population that already faces stigma and discrimination (Singh et al., 2018).

### **Social and Economic Consequences:**

Drug misuse can have significant social and economic consequences for sexual minorities in India. It can lead to loss of employment, financial difficulties, and strained relationships with family members and friends. It can also further marginalize individuals within their communities, leading to a sense of isolation and hopelessness (Das et al., 2012).

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### **Limited Access to Healthcare:**

Sexual minorities who misuse drugs may face barriers to accessing healthcare services due to stigma and discrimination, which can make it difficult to receive appropriate treatment and support for their drug misuse and other health issues. This can also contribute to a lack of trust in healthcare providers, which can further exacerbate mental health issues (Das et al., 2012). This can lead to untreated mental health issues and other health problems. This lack of access to healthcare services can make it difficult for sexual minorities to receive appropriate treatment for drug misuse and other health issues (Singh et al., 2018).

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### **Impact on Community Health:**

Drug misuse among sexual minorities in India can also have broader impacts on community health, including increased rates of infectious diseases and transmission of drug-resistant strains. This can have long-term consequences for public health and well-being, and can also contribute to the stigmatization and marginalization of sexual minorities (Kumar & Chandra, 2015).

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### **Discussion and Conclusion:**

Drug misuse is a significant issue among sexual minorities in India, with studies suggesting high rates of substance abuse among this population. Factors contributing to drug misuse among sexual minorities in India include social and economic marginalization, discrimination, and lack of access to healthcare services. The negative impacts of drug misuse on sexual minorities are numerous and can affect their physical, mental, and social well-being.

Studies suggest that sexual minorities in India have higher rates of drug misuse compared to the general population (Das et al., 2012). Sexual minorities who engage in sex work may be particularly vulnerable to drug misuse as they may use drugs to cope with the stress and trauma associated with their work (Kumar & Chandra, 2015). In addition, sexual minorities who face discrimination and social exclusion may use drugs as a way to cope with stigma and marginalization.

Drug misuse can have a range of negative impacts on the health and well-being of sexual minorities in India. These impacts include increased risk of HIV/AIDS, mental health issues, physical health problems, social and economic consequences, increased risk of violence, stigma and discrimination, limited access to healthcare, and broader impacts on community health. The negative impacts of drug misuse can exacerbate the already-existing challenges that sexual minorities face, including discrimination and marginalization.

Addressing drug misuse among sexual minorities in India requires a comprehensive approach that considers the complex social and economic factors that contribute to substance abuse in this population. This includes improving access to healthcare services, addressing discrimination and stigma, and providing social and economic support to sexual minorities who may be vulnerable to drug misuse.

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