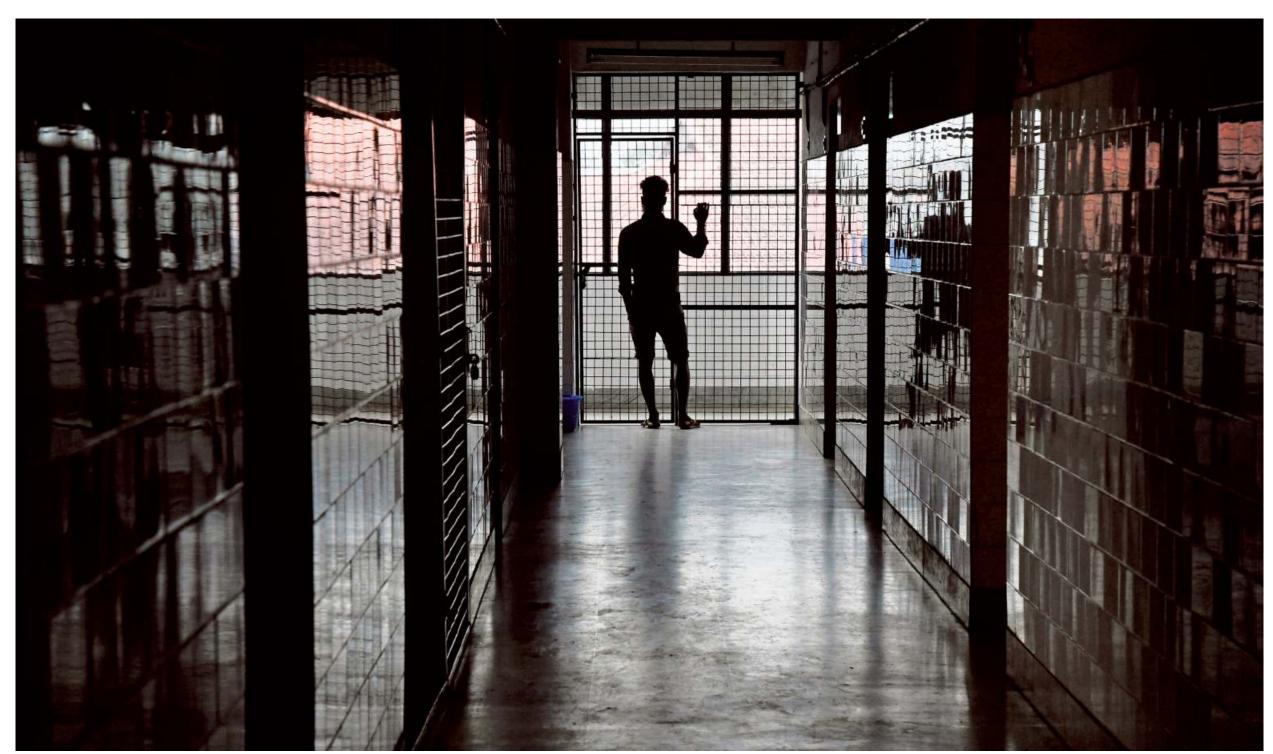
Ecstasy and the agony

The small town of Aluva in Kerala is emerging as a hub for narcotic traffic and use. The State is stepping up its efforts to curb the problem, but easy availability and access to drugs is spurring the trade, reports M.P. Praveen



"Stringent laws and severe punishment do not seem to have worked as a deterrent for peddlers." • THULASI KAKKAT

ressed in a grey shirt and black trousers, Amal*, 21, walks into the room with a big smile. No one would be able to guess that he was locked up in a drug rehabilitation centre in Muvattupuzha in eastern Ernakulam for over a fortnight. Amal was acquainted with drugs when he was just 13 years old. He was in danger of "losing his mind", he says, before he controlled his impulses in order to get his life back on track. Gentle prodding by the excise officials who had nabbed him as well as his mother's tears paved the way for his rehabilitation.

Amal looks composed. "It feels like waking up from a nightmare," he says. "Earlier, I could not smile, enjoy jokes, or have a normal conversation. I was in a different world. I could beat anyone to pulp and feel nothing about it. I feel more human now."

While his little hamlet Manjali in Ernakulam district is famous for its halwa and biryani, it was ganja that Amal fell in love with as a teenager, influenced by his peers. "But I never got addicted to it. The ganja that we get here is of low quality. Once, during an online chat, a friend and I shared some pictures of the grass we smoked. And he snubbed me for savouring trash," he says.

Like several others, Amal went on to trade ganja for headier stuff, all because of a friend who was into "real stuff" and kept the source of his supply close to his chest. Soon, Amal was catapulted to a life of perpetual high, riding on a cocktail of meth, MDMA, and LSD

His family, comprising an indifferent father, clueless mother and a younger brother, had known that something was amiss with him. But it took his mother

time to find out what was going on. Vishal*, 19, was on the verge of depression at 15 when his learning disability isolated him from his competitive peers. At his school in suburban Ernakulam, neither his teachers nor his peers came to his rescue. His aloofness, however, attracted the attention of a peddler who introduced him to ganja. By the time his dependence on drugs was detected by the family, Vishal had become an addict. He went through a deaddiction routine, which proved futile. But four years since his first experience with ganja, Vishal is slowly piecing together his life. A bad accident which confined him to bed for about three months was what finally pulled him away from the clutch of drugs.

An emerging hub for narcotics

It is hardly a coincidence that Amal and Vishal hail from places near Aluva, which is to the north of Kochi in Kerala. Located on the banks of the Periyar river, the town is in the news almost every other day for its unenviable profile as an emerging hub for narcotics traffic and KERALA Aluva

The theory for long has been that youngsters with emotional problems and from dysfunctional families are most vulnerable to drugs. Now youngsters from perfectly normal families are also turning to drugs solely for recreational purposes.

use. Easy availability of drugs, peer patronage, mobile phone-aided access to dope networks, and lack of care from family or society are egging on the trade. The users are mostly students who are barely out of school and college.

"It was after considering the vulnerability of these students that we began two enforcement drives in Aluva: Operation Holiday with a focus on students who stayed back in hostels during the summer vacation, and Operation Monsoon to sensitise newcomers at the start of the new academic year," says K. Chandrapalan, Deputy Excise Commissioner, Ernakulam district.

'Sniffer Sheikh', a well-known supplier of Nitrazepam tablets to the students of a college in Aluva, was caught during Operation Holiday. Nitrazepam is a psychotropic drug prescribed for anxiety and insomnia, but is a hit among the youth.

"He had thick, lustrous hair and a feminine face. He used to cleverly use that to enter girls' hostels too. He ran a wellentrenched network assisted by four aides for the State-wide supply of Nitrazepam tablets which he sourced in bulk from neighbouring States," says N.D. Tomy, a Civil Excise Officer who was part of the drive and was awarded by the Excise Minister for exemplary enforcement work.

Two months into Operation Monsoon, excise officials conducted an awareness session at a school in Aluva when a section of students tipped them off about an ice-cream vendor who sold toffees to senior students. The sleuths sent a student to purchase toffee, sold in the range of ₹30 to ₹50. The toffee turned out to be ganja parcelled in wrappers. The seller had purchased the wrappers in bulk from Tamil Nadu. "Aluva is perhaps ideally located for transporting, storing and supplying the contraband across the district," says To-

From Aluva, the shadowy network has cast its spell over Kochi. Former Excise Commissioner Rishi Raj Singh had warned a few years ago that Kochi would become home to the second biggest community of drug addicts after Amritsar. He wasn't completely off the

Despite the spike in demand for designer drugs, ganja continues to have a stranglehold over drug abusers - perhaps because it is cheap and readily available. "Ganja largely comes from the Naxal-infested areas of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. This is where a few ganja farmers from Idukki district have migrated and it is from these places it is smuggled in via Namakkal, Cumbum and Theni in Tamil Nadu. A colony named Uthamapuram, located between Namakkal and Cumbum, is notorious for ganja trade but remains out of bounds for enforcement agencies," says T.A. Ashok Kumar, Assistant Excise Commissioner (Enforcement).

The business model for ganja is simple. A couple of kilograms for a few thousand rupees are smuggled in, split into numerous small packets, and marketed under the brand name, Idukki Gold, to leverage the popular perception that ganja from Idukki is the best,

says Kumar. Vying with ganja in terms of volume are the Nitrazepam tablets. These are smuggled from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka where they can be bought from medical shops without a prescription. A strip of Nitrazepam tablets bought for around ₹40 is sold for as high as ₹500 making it a highly lucrative business proposition, Kumar says.

There are other types of drugs too. Early this year, an excise squad in Ernakulam made arguably the biggest-ever haul of hashish in Kerala. Over six kilos of hashish valued at ₹13 crore in the market were seized from a man who used to smuggle the substance from Nepal via Uttar Pradesh.

In September last, 30 kg of MDMA, also known as Ecstasy, worth around ₹200 crore, was seized after it landed at a courier company in Kochi from Chennai while on way to Malaysia. Aluva is

transforming into a transit point, a cog in the wider scheme of international drug cartels.

The anti-narcotics squads have also noticed a unique but disturbing trend in the State where abusers double up as carriers. And this is forcing the squads to keep a tab on youngsters commuting between Kochi and places like Bengaluru and Goa. "A sense of adventure gets the better of many youngsters when they are away from home. They try out drugs thinking it's going to be a onetime thing, but soon find themselves linked to the rackets as the trade fetches easy money," says a squad member.

Spike in cases

The number of narcotic cases registered in Kerala by the Excise Department alone spiked from 2.033 in 2016 to 5.946 in 2017 and 7,573 (nearly 1,000 in Ernakulam district alone) in 2018. In the first five months of 2019, 3,316 cases were registered, of which Ernakulam accounts for 421. The figure has already surpassed the total number of cases for the whole of 2016.

The police registered 6,501 narcotic cases in 2016, 9,359 cases in 2017, 9,521 in 2018, and 3,970 cases till May this year. The volume of ganja seized by the Excise Department for the corresponding periods stood at 502 kg, 1,333 kg, 1,885 kg, and 1,365 kg. Seizure of hashish dropped from 10.79 kg in 2016 to 1.98 kg in 2017 before soaring to 65.94 kg in 2018 and 40 kg till May this year.

The most perceptible rise was in the seizure of Nitrazepam tablets – from 1,500 tablets in 2016, it rose to 7,800 in

2017, 10,700 in 2018, and 3,100 in 2019. "The seizures account for just a fraction of the drugs smuggled in," says Sam Christy Daniel, State Additional Excise Commissioner (Enforcement). "The apex court decree that the informant and the investigation officer should not be the same person has further dented the enforcement drive of the Excise Department which is already affected by manpower shortage. The enforcement wing of the Excise Department is restricted to 58 circle inspectors and 14 Deputy Excise Commissioners for 138 ex-

cise range offices across the State." While contraband drugs always had their presence in the State, the proliferation of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substance cases is attributed by large sections to the previous government's decision to close down bar hotels below the four-star category towards the end of its term in 2015.

Constitutional expert Sebastian Paul thinks that the growing menace of drugs is a fallout of the liquor ban. "Enforcing prohibition without laying the groundwork will not only lead to its failure but give rise to other more serious societal problems. History is replete with evidence to that effect. The advent of bootlegging and consequential law and order problems in America in the aftermath of prohibition is a classic case," he says.

By the time the decision to close down bars was reversed by the new government in 2016, drug peddlers had spread their tentacles far and wide.

A long journey to de-addiction

At the rehabilitation centres, counsellors have a tough time dealing with the addicts. "In most cases involving ganja, the users gather a lot of wrong information on the perceived benefits of cannabis. Ganja is found to be the most common gateway to synthetic drugs and intravenous (IV) drug abuse using stuff like Buprenorphine. Once people reach that stage, chances of recovery are very remote," says Faris Basheer, Medical Officer at the Vimukthi de-addiction centre run by the Excise Department at Muvattupuzha.

Set up six months ago, the centre has so far treated 462 outpatients and 62 inpatients. The Vimukthi de-addiction centres are manned by a psychiatristsocial worker, a medical officer, a psychologist, a counsellor and three nursing and security staff each. The centres follow a protocol starting with detoxification of victims, a personality study and motivational sessions leading to eventual rehabilitation and mainstreaming during a three-week-long stay, free of cost.

Psychiatrist C.J. John, who has over the years dealt with several drug abuse victims from all age groups and family backgrounds, says that there is a new trend among the youth. "The theory for long has been that youngsters with emotional problems and from dysfunctional families are most vulnerable to drugs. While that theory still holds water, a new tendency seems to be on the rise where youngsters from perfectly normal families are turning to drugs solely for recreational purposes. As we focus more on treatment and rehabilitation, the most critical area of early detection is often overlooked," he says. He says there is a need for an enforcement protocol in dealing with the youth caught in drug trade so that they are not stigmatised for the rest of their lives.

Stringent laws and severe punishment do not seem to have worked as a deterrent for peddlers. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act has two schedules dealing with narcotics drugs and psychotropic substances. The punishment varies with the kind of drug and the quantity of seizure. "It is only in the case of contraband drugs like ganja that less than one kg is treated as a small quantity and bail is granted. As for psychotropic drugs, even a few milligrams are considered the commerEarlier, I could not smile, enjoy jokes, or have a normal conversation. I was in a different world. I could beat anyone to pulp and feel nothing about it. I feel more

human now (after rehab).

cial quantity, and anyone found pos sessing that much even inadvertently or out of ignorance lands up behind the bars for years," says M. Revi Krishnan, a lawyer in the Kerala High Court. "The statute is rigorous. With the judiciary also taking a serious note of the drug menace, even procedural lapses are not taken as a ground for bail," he adds.

State-led initiatives

Efforts are under way at various levels to deal with the crisis. Student Police Cadet, a novel initiative of the Kerala police, has emerged as an effective tool in countering the problem. There are about 60,000 student police cadets across school campuses in the State and one of their major tasks is to ensure that the immediate vicinity of their schools is tobacco-free. These cadets also pass on information about substance abuse among their peers to teachers to ensure

timely, corrective intervention. Besides, a campaign named Our Responsibility to Children, run by the State Police and the Women and Child Development Department, is under way for early detection of children vulnerable to drugs. Under the programme, 15,000 teachers have been trained to detect potential victims early on, intervene where correction is needed, and ensure their integration into the mainstream. Over 100 psychiatrists and psychologists and 2,000-odd social mentors are also associated with the programme.

Then there is Hope, a programme introduced a couple of years ago, which is aimed at extending academic and career support to students who failed to clear the 10th standard exam. "You can imagine the state of mind of these students. They are the most vulnerable as they crave for acceptance. This makes them perfect targets for anti-social elements and drug networks," says P. Vijayan, Inspector General of Police (Ad-

ministration), Police Headquarters. School Protection Groups operated jointly by the Education, Police and Excise departments and ward-level Vimukthi Senas with five volunteers each are some of the other initiatives being tried out by the State to keep its younger

generation away from drugs. The number of addicts and seizure of drugs shows that it requires sustained

efforts to curb the new scourge.

*Names have been changed to protect identities